

## Supporting Work for Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders

By James Emmett, Chris Simler,  
& Karen Steffan

The number of individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) is a rapidly growing, and yet dramatically underutilized section of the workforce. These workers bring a variety of exemplary skills to the workplace, which may include strong visual memory, focus on detail, logical problem solving, and a drive for completion of projects.

### Workplace Barriers

However, research and practice has shown that individuals with ASD may also experience a variety of workplace barriers. For example, work problems may arise when the job is not specific enough or the expectations are not clear. Clarity in terms of expectations and job descriptions is critical to supporting individuals with autism.

Another key aspect for many persons with autism is what Dr. Temple Grandin calls, “*the sins of the system*” — in other words, recognizing the informal rules of the workplace. (**Editor’s note:** Grandin is perhaps the most accomplished adult with autism in the world.)

The concept of teamwork is another area that many employees with ASD may struggle with. In many cases, it can be a difficult adjustment for a worker with autism if the individual is set in his/her work pattern and is then asked to be part of a new team. This is because the social nuances of forming teams can be very challenging for persons with ASD.

Moreover, another problem that we often see in individuals with ASD involves the ability to ask for help in a correct manner. It is important to define specific people to go to for help, but

again, this issue can get complicated when a clear line of management is *not* in place.

In addition, many individuals with ASD have difficulty coping with unexpected changes in their work routine such as a fire alarm, a birthday party, a half-day off, etc. Often, the best way to counteract this issue is to prepare them *ahead of time* for the change.

### Visual Works Better than Verbal

A key point to remember is that individuals with ASD often struggle with styles of supervision that are “verbally” oriented. Visual cues that present changes in work routines will usually be more effective than verbal cues. Persons with autism often have different reactions to sensory stimulation. Some individuals are very sensitive to background noises, some to florescent lights, and still others to vibrations. It is critical for a job placement counselor to be aware of a person’s need for sensory supports.

### Workplace Supports

There are a variety of workplace supports that may be effective for individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASD):

**Gradually introduce an employee with ASD into the work situation.** It is probably better to teach portions of the job and build up to teaching the entire job in the first two weeks. As much as possible, individuals with ASD need to be provided with clear, and specific job descriptions. Companies will often use pictorial flow charts or organizational charts. This is a visual representation of the “chain of command” and can be useful for a worker with ASD who will better understand who to ask for help.

☑ **It's important for supervisors to understand that, initially, it is critical to provide immediate, clear, and open feedback for individuals with ASD.** A worker with ASD may try to establish a work routine for a given task right away. If the routine is positive and productive, it will lead to success. If it *isn't* positive, it should be discontinued as quickly as possible. When a supervisor lets a routine that isn't working continue for several days, it will prove very difficult to re-teach a given task. We ask supervisors to use more front-end supervision for workers with ASD. Establishing good work routines immediately benefits everyone in the workplace.

☑ **It often helps to offer education about ASD for co-workers and supervisors — if the individual with ASD is OK with talking about his/her disability and if this person is OK with other people in the workplace knowing and understanding the disability.** Involving supervisors and co-workers as natural supports for the employee with ASD helps reduce dependence on the job coach and promotes social inclusion. If the employee with ASD is open to talking about his/her disability with others, co-workers begin to understand how they can be social mentors to help navigate the social politics of the workplace.

☑ **Improve workplace supports by providing a clear line of management and by using visual checklists.** Having explicit rules is another useful support. Dr. Grandin points out that individuals with autism may value several areas that the mainstream population may not — complete honesty, for instance. In terms of the workplace, we often see supervisors who don't want to confront workers and tell them what they are doing wrong. They couch their supervision and say, “*Well, you tried really hard this time,*” or “*You worked really hard on this, but we didn't completely get the outcome we wanted.*” Most individuals with ASD want to know what they did wrong and they want this information as honestly and concretely as possible.

☑ **Dr. Grandin also reports that many individuals with autism value silence.** Silence can do a variety of things in terms of supporting an individual with ASD. A period of silence can help bring sensory systems back into check or it can help them process verbal information that was just presented to them. Many times, we try to fill in silence in meetings and in work situations. However, a period of delayed silence can be a very beneficial support for job coaches and co-workers who support individuals with ASD.

☑ **It's critical to look in terms of not just matching the worker with ASD to the job but also to the work environment.** Basically, the individual's sensitivities and motivators need to align with the sensory stimuli and reinforcers in the work environment. It is crucial for vocational rehabilitation counselors and job placement specialists to understand something about the work environment and the worker with autism. This environmental match is key. If the person fits into the social and the sensory milieu of a workplace, the chances of success increase dramatically for a worker with ASD.

☑ **Considering what an individual with ASD values most is critical to job satisfaction and retention.** We often see people with autism either quitting or losing their jobs due to issues related to motivation and workplace values. Basically, they just weren't happy in that specific environment. It is important to assess interests and work values by asking the individual and his/her family questions, examining hobbies and how free time is spent, and by observing behavior.

### Summary

Social coaching is an added skill for employment specialists. It takes training to be able to assess not only the social requirements of the workplace, but also an individual's social skills and barriers. More and more businesses are recognizing the immense talent pool that exists in the autism community, and it often just takes a little creativity to implement supports needed to tap into these amazing talents. ■

*The authors of this article are creating a complete manual entitled Career Development for Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder. For more information, visit [www.integratedbehavioralsystems.com](http://www.integratedbehavioralsystems.com). **Editor's note:** “Temple Grandin” - portrayed by Clare Danes, was the subject of a recent movie on HBO. It is also referred to in this month's editor's notebook in JTPR.*