

## Improving employment outcomes among people with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Riches, V. C., Riches, T. N., Taylor, D. & Müller, A. (2019).

There is an increasing number of jobseekers with a primary disability of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) accessing Australian Department of Social Services (DSS) Disability Employment Service (DES) programs. Among these programs the DES-Employment Support Service (DES-ESS), a program that provides assistance to jobseekers with permanent disability who require regular, ongoing support to find and keep a job, has become a key service for jobseekers with ASD. However, many youth and adults with ASD do not seek to enter the workforce, and for those who do, employment outcomes are generally accepted to be worse than those achieved by other disability groups. Concern has been raised about the variability in outcomes being achieved among DES-ESS providers for this group of jobseekers, and the need to better understand the facilitators and barriers to jobseekers with ASD gaining positive employment outcomes.

The Centre for Disability Studies (CDS), affiliated with The University of Sydney, Faculty of Medicine and Health was commissioned by NOVA Employment Inc (NOVA) to investigate employment outcomes, barriers and facilitators and identify best practices, processes and support strategies to improve outcomes among jobseekers with ASD.

The study used an action research model to enable researchers and practitioners to work collaboratively as partners, plan for cycles of action, take action, and use reflection and reflexivity as findings were examined for significant meaning and relevance. A mixed method design enabled both qualitative and quantitative data to be collected and analysed, involving analysis of National DES-ESS employment outcome data and survey and interview data with a purposive sample of 30 Disability Employment Service providers, job coaches and specialists and a convenience sample of 10 people with ASD. Relevant international literature on employment outcomes for people with ASD and innovative and exemplar programs were examined, and relevant barriers and facilitators identified. Ethics approval for the study was gained through the University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee.

International and national studies revealed significant unemployment and underemployment among people with ASD resulting in financial strain on individuals and their families, high levels of dissatisfaction with job roles and work tasks resulting in “rust out” and impacts on physical and mental health.

Barriers to employment included difficulties related to the core characteristics of ASD as well as lack of understanding and support from employers and staff, lack of specific vocational support services, use of traditional job application and interviewing processes, limited workplace accommodations, and miscommunication and misperceptions between employees with ASD and employers around the need for/lack of ongoing supervision or support, the type of workplace supports required, unrealistic job expectations and productivity requirements.

Nevertheless, specific programs are proving that given the right support, youth and adults with ASD can be successfully employed and make significant contributions in their workplaces. The CRC Autism at Work network, for example, showcases some innovative programs, often using internships. Within the DSS-ESS program 2016-2017, specific DES providers supporting people with ASD attained higher employment outcomes comparative to all disability types, with December 2017 outcome data revealing average employment outcomes rates for participants whose primary disability is ASD were 42.5% at job placement (4 weeks), 47.2% at 13 weeks and 42.5% at 26 weeks. However, DES-ESS providers varied widely in number of people with ASD supported and in employment placement rates (from 24% to 68.5% at 4 weeks) and maintenance rates (from 28.4% to 65.3% at 13 weeks and 28.4% to 63.6% at 26 weeks).

Facilitators included strategies to present the business case to employers for hiring workers with disabilities and to market the talents and abilities of people with ASD, such as increased attention to detail, good work ethic and quality of work, similar productivity, a high degree of accuracy in visual perception, precise technical abilities, increased concentration for long periods of time and a high tolerance for repetitive tasks etc. Other clear facilitators were adjustments to recruitment and interviewing, use of the place and train model of employment, prior realistic person-centred preparation and work experience, job matching, job customization and provision of job coaching and ongoing support as needed, enabling workplace adjustments and accommodations and communication, social and instructional supports. High performing DES-ESS providers recognized and used a positive strength-based approach and supported jobseekers to identify and achieve their employment goals using a range of these strategies.

A number of emerging and evidence-based practices applicable to gaining and sustaining employment among people with ASD emerged that can be aligned with the DES-ESS stages and processes that had also been identified in an earlier study on enhancing employment outcomes for people with disability by Riches and MacDonald (2016). These include person-centred career preparation and planning; structured work experience; job matching practices aligned with the person's goals and capabilities; job search techniques for successful job placement in a job suited to the individual; marketing the strengths and talents of jobseekers to employers; job coaching support or mentorship to ensure industry standards are reached and maintained; clear instructions, mentoring and support strategies to ensure additional skills, competencies and social connections are in place for living and working; and ongoing post placement support to ensure the individual remains successful in the workplace and/or progresses in their career.

Good professional development and training in relevant and best practices supporting people with ASD is crucial.

Youth and adults with ASD can make excellent employees, given the right supports to find and sustain employment.

This research project has recommended:

1. Design engagement strategies to raise employment expectations among youth and adults with ASD and their families
2. Market the talents and abilities of people with ASD to employers.
3. Provide targeted staff training to DES-ESS staff and providers regarding working with and supporting jobseekers with ASD and using evidence-based practices.
4. Develop and evaluate a prototype program for jobseekers with ASD using the results of this study and the emerging and evidence-based practices.