Supported Employment For Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders:

By:  
S. Michael Chapman, Director  
Supported Employment  
Division TEACCH

General Philosophy of the Program:

As individuals with Autism and Asperger’s Syndrome grow into adolescence and adulthood, developing skills relevant to their abilities and interests, and that allow them to participate successfully in an appropriate vocational setting, becomes a priority. Following the guidelines of the general philosophy of the TEACCH program, the mission of the Supported Employment Program is to provide a stable and predictable work environment whereby the person with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) can, as independently as possible, be a contributing member of the work force. These contributions allow the persons with ASD to increase their sense of self-worth, and at the same time, help to increase awareness and educate the public about Autism Spectrum Disorders. TEACCH firmly believes persons with ASD benefit from Supported Employment’s ability to provide an individually tailored work environment.

The Division TEACCH Supported Employment Program has placed more than 300 individuals with ASD in jobs throughout North Carolina. The average number of hours worked each week for the person with ASD is 22.5 with an average salary of $6.67 per hour. Supported Employment has placed people with Autism and Asperger’s Syndrome in such areas as Manufacturing, warehouses, food service, office or clerical, janitorial, landscaping, grocery and libraries. TEACCH staff rely on several key factors in the selection of appropriate vocational settings, including: jobs that are predictable and have potential for clearly defined work tasks, jobs which can be adapted to the individual’s need for structure, employers and coworkers who are receptive to training and who are willing to create an environment where an individual is more likely to succeed, and job settings in which there is potential to utilize individual strengths.

Assessment:

To determine whether a person with developmental disabilities is ready for employment, many programs have a standard assessment or set of criteria that they apply to every individual that seeks competitive employment. With individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders, we have found that that the assessment process should be individualized to each person. This assessment should pursue the individual’s need for structure, employers and coworkers who are receptive to training and who are willing to create an environment where an individual is more likely to succeed, and job settings in which there is potential to utilize individual strengths.

Assessment:

To determine whether a person with developmental disabilities is ready for employment, many programs have a standard assessment or set of criteria that they apply to every individual that seeks competitive employment. With individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders, we have found that that the assessment process should be individualized to each person. This assessment should pursue the individual’s need for structure, employers and coworkers who are receptive to training and who are willing to create an environment where an individual is more likely to succeed, and job settings in which there is potential to utilize individual strengths.

During the assessment process, we spend from 40-60 hours over a period of 6-12 weeks looking at the various skills, the characteristics of autism and how the characteristics of autism will impact the individual’s ability to obtain and maintain competitive employment. The assessment is spread out over such a long period of time for two reasons: one, so that we do not overwhelm the individual with continuous assessment of skills over a one week period (which could cause us to collect inaccurate data) and two so that we gather valuable information about whether the individual exhibits cycling performance issues over time. Throughout the assessment process, the individual with ASD is taken to actual job sites within the community to identify those skills that the individual is able to use at a level that is marketable within the work force.

Though the vocational skills mastered by the individual are important to determine, it is the characteristics of autism and how they impact the ability to use those skills independently and with what level of support that are more important. We have identified the areas associated to Autism Spectrum Disorders that are most important
Communication, Interpersonal Skills, Vocational Behaviors, Independent Functioning, Environmental Factors and Teaching Strategies) and the various assessment issues to be noted in each of these areas that most impact the employment process. It is often the case that we can find a job that will match the skills of the person with ASD, yet it may also contain certain components that do not suit the characteristics of autism associated with a specific individual and thus we eliminate it from consideration. An example of such a situation could be an individual who has incredible clerical skills, yet struggles in the Interpersonal and Communication areas. This could eliminate jobs that would require them to answer a telephone or potentially many small office settings with fewer employees, where there are often times more social demands or situations.

During the assessment process, it is important to use a variety of structured teaching principles (that are designed to capitalize on the individual’s with ASD strong visual learning style) to determine the type of teaching strategies that should be used during the initial training phase of the vocational placement. (Although we do not have space in this article to cover all of the principles of structured teaching, such as physical structure, the use of visual schedules, work systems and checklists, information on these topics can be found in articles and at the TEACCH website: www.TEACCH.com) By identifying the correct structured teaching techniques and using them through out the assessment process, we can assist the individual with ASD to access more complex skills, minimize training time and increase independence, thus minimizing the amount of supports necessary for continued successful employment.

**Job Development:**

Job Development is the hardest and most difficult part of the employment process for both Division TEACCH and the individual with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. This process typically relies heavily upon social and communication skills in order to sell yourself to a potential employer. As these are the two most difficult areas for individuals with ASD, you can see how this would make this process next to impossible for those individuals to do without a significant amount of assistance. Even for our most independent individuals, we find that we still have to do or be involved in 75% to 90% of all aspects of the Job Development process. Due to fact that we are so heavily involved in this part of the process, we find that we have had to develop strategies for approaching employers. Typically the individuals we are helping have fewer marketable skills, and poor to non existent work history. As such, simply filling out applications is not enough and we find that we have to market not just the person with autism, but ourselves and our program as well. By giving the employer the information about our services, how they are delivered, what they can expect, the quality of services and most importantly the quality of the employee they are willing to hire. By providing this information up front, we can help alleviate any misgivings they may have about employing someone with autism.

**Introduction to the four Models of Support:**

In an effort to provide each individual with ASD the greatest chance of obtaining and maintaining, successful, competitive employment, the TEACCH Supported Employment Program utilizes four different models: the standard placement, the group shared support, the mobile crew, and the one-to-one placement. These four models differ only in the amount and type of support offered to each individual with ASD. How that support differs will be discussed later as we look at examples of each model.

Each of these models incorporates the use of a “job coach,” a trained professional, employed by Division TEACCH, who provides on-going support for the person or persons with ASD. The job coach uses structured teaching principles to teach the individual with ASD the necessary vocational and social skills required in the employment setting. They also educate coworkers and supervisors about ASD, and act as a liaison between the individual with ASD and his/her employer.

**The 1:1 model:**

The one to one model of supported employment consists of one job coach, employed by Division TEACCH, and one person with ASD. A company in the community employs the individual with ASD and the Job Coach is
located on-site throughout the entire workday. Because the individual has a job coach who works solely with them, we are able to find employment opportunities that maximize the individual’s strengths and interests.

The biggest difference between this model and the others is that the individual with ASD requires more support. As a result, the job coach is there to continuously adapt and modify structure to meet the individual’s needs. This may include setting up or changing schedules and visual cues in the work environment throughout the day, to help the individual work as independently as possible. Also, people with ASD who work in this model tend to have poorer communication skills and coping strategies, therefore, the job coach spends time acting as a liaison between the person with ASD and the employer. This ensures everyone clearly understands each other’s expectations, opinions, and ideas.

The job coach is also available to assist the individual with completing tasks, accommodate for fluctuating job performance, and to help insure the accuracy and quality of completed work. When the individual with ASD becomes overwhelmed or frustrated, the job coach assists the individual in completion of relaxation strategies. These strategies help the individual with ASD remain calm and focused, thereby allowing them to better attend to their responsibilities.

**The Mobile Crew Model:**

For those individuals who require less intensive support than the one to one model, there is the Mobile Crew. The Mobile Crew Model of supported employment consists of one job coach, employed by Division TEACCH, and 2 to 3 persons with ASD. The job coach remains with the mobile crew throughout the entire workday. The mobile crew team travels by car from place to place providing services to paying customers in the community. These customers hire Division TEACCH, which in turn, hires the individuals with ASD to work on the mobile crew. The types of services the mobile crews provide include home cleaning and landscaping.

As with the one to one model, the job coach is available to assist the individual with completing tasks, accommodate for fluctuating job performance, insure the accuracy and quality of the individual’s completed work, and assist the individual in completion of relaxation strategies. However, one of the advantages of the Mobile Crew model is its ability to accommodate each of the individual’s needs. The Job Coach can develop work schedules that take into account the length of day a person can work and the amount of breaks they need to complete the work without becoming frustrated or overwhelmed. The mobile crew gives the job coach the option of assigning tasks based upon each member of the mobile crew’s strengths and interests. The biggest advantage of the mobile crew model is to provide a unique training site, where the individual with ASD can strive to develop or improve their work skills toward gaining competitive employment with less intensive support, while at the same time, working and earning a paycheck.

**The Group Shared Support Model:**

For those individuals who have developed the necessary work skills, but still need on-going, intermittent support, there is the Group Shared Support Model. This model of supported employment consists of one job coach, employed by Division TEACCH, and between 2 and 4 persons with ASD working in a centralized location. The people with an Autism Spectrum Disorder are employed directly by the company where they work. Each individual who works in the Shared Support Model is hired to do a different job within the company. As such, the individual with ASD must be able to complete most, if not all, aspects of the position. The TEACCH Supported Employment Program has developed Shared Support Sites in Bakeries, Food Services, Grocery Stores, Warehouses, Manufacturing and Laboratories.

As with the One to One and Mobile Crew models, the job coach is available to assist the individual with completing tasks, accommodate for fluctuating job performance, insure the accuracy and quality of the individual’s completed work, and assists the individual with completion of relaxation strategies. Individuals who work in this model benefit from having a job coach available on-site for either part of, or all of, the
workday. The job coach typically splits their time between the different persons with ASD, focusing their attention on the person or situation needing it most at any one time.

**Intro to the Standard Placement Model:**

For those individuals with a lesser need for support and the greatest amount of independent work skills, there is the Standard Placement Model. This Model consists of one job coach employed by Division TEACCH and between 15 to 20 persons with ASD who work independently at their respective places of employment. The job coach travels from job site to job site providing support to each individual and his/her respective employer.

As the individuals in this model have the least need for support, they are able to find employment opportunities that maximize their strengths and interests. In this model, individuals typically receive support from a job coach from 1 to 6 hours each week, depending on the person’s needs, the employer’s needs, and the nature of the issues needing support. This support may increase or decrease within a given time period depending upon any issues that may arise during the course of one’s employment within a company. By providing the necessary amount of support each week, the job coach is able to minimize, or even prevent, issues from ever arising by effectively communicating with the individual with ASD, their supervisors, and co-workers.

**Long-term Support:**

The most important factor contributing to the success of Division TEACCH’s Supported Employment Program is its emphasis on long-term support services. Each of the models listed above is a method in which we deliver long-term support services for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders. These services involve frequent contact with the employee, the employer, and the family/caregiver to coordinate whole life support for the individual with ASD. The vocational, residential, and social aspects of a person with ASD are complexly intertwined; therefore, TEACCH’s assistance with the coordination of these areas is needed to help the individual with ASD maintain the consistency and predictability they need in order to maintain successful employment. In addition, long-term support services provide ongoing assessment and training of the employee at the job site, and support the employer. Other facets of long-term support include assistance to the family/caregiver with government benefits which are affected by work, consultation with supported living services, and social and community skills training through individual and group counseling and activities.

**Conclusions:**

As you can see, many people with Autism Spectrum Disorders can be successful in obtaining and maintaining competitive employment with the right supports. By insuring that we utilize assessment techniques that look at not only skills but also how much ASD impacts the ability of the individual to access those skills in a variety of vocational settings, we can help develop job opportunities that meet the individual’s maximum potential. With staff that is educated in the understanding of Autism Spectrum Disorders and correct structured teaching strategies, we guarantee the individual receives training in how to complete their job responsibilities through the methods that capitalize on their unique learning style. Then by providing appropriate long-term support strategies through one of the four support models, we can assist the individual to maintain employment and be a valuable, contributing member of the work force.