

Case Study: Establishing Work Opportunities for Someone with ASD



Penny Gill, August 2012

“My son is not one of the “stars” amongst adults with autism”

My son is not one of the “stars” amongst adults with autism. His computer skills are fine, but not extraordinary. He has no special scientific aptitude. His math skills meet the needs of daily life, not the demands of technical or commercial endeavors. Yet he is happily engaged in a variety of jobs – some volunteer, others remunerative – that give structure to his life week after week. Because of them, he is a contributing, well-known, and accepted adult in our community.

How did this happen? Some pieces of the puzzle fell into place by luck, others by design. His story may give readers who are trying to establish satisfying lives for adolescents and adults on the spectrum some ideas they can use or adapt.

It may seem off-topic to mention that I prefer shopping in smaller venues. I did not realize that my preference would ultimately help my son get work, but it did just that. I buy all my books from a couple of independent booksellers. When it occurred to me that my son’s interest in keeping his own books in good order might translate into working in a bookstore, it was much easier to broach this idea with the owner of the small bookstore where I was known as a faithful customer, a “regular”, than it would have been to approach an anonymous manager in the branch of a large chain.

My son now works in the secondhand book portion of the store, keeping the stock alphabetized by author within each section. Secondhand bookstores are an excellent venue for people on the spectrum who like keeping things in order. It’s not just that these stores often badly need their collections organized, it is also that they tend to be quiet and not overly crowded, making them user-friendly settings for people on the spectrum.

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employee. Some people dismiss volunteer work at a commercial entity as exploitation. I am not of that view. Many potential employers are reluctant to hire someone on the spectrum without seeing how things work out first. Firing someone is an employer's biggest headache and most of them will have genuine uncertainty about whether or not hiring someone with autism will end in dismissal. Given the common media portrayal of those on the spectrum, this is hardly surprising.

If you recognize this fact and incorporate it into how you approach employers, you will accomplish more. My standard method is to suggest that they give things a try to see how they work out. I explicitly assure them that if the arrangement does not unfold to their satisfaction, there will be no hard feelings: we won't pressure them to continue with a situation that is not satisfactory to them. This assurance is often enough to lead employers to try things out.

If things do transpire well, some employers will initiate a hiring – as happened in my son's secondhand bookstore job. If that doesn't occur, you may want to ask the employer to consider turning the position into a remunerative one.

Some will agree, others will not. Faced with a refusal, individual circumstances – both of the employer and of the person on the spectrum – will figure in your decision whether or not to have the individual with autism stay on as a volunteer. Will walking away from the activity make for a day with nothing for the person to do? Is that preferable to volunteering? If he or she stays in the position, can you build on the experience to find other work? The range of issues to consider will vary from one individual situation to another. My son began volunteering at our local public library as a shelf-checker through the co-operative work placement program at his high school. The co-op program functioned best when I suggested various work possibilities that might exist in particular settings, and then school personnel approached those settings to start the process for my son.

Correcting errors made by people re-shelving books (whether members of the public or library employees) can be a tedious task, but my son loved the precision and predictability of the job. Going through the books one by one, shelf by shelf, aisle by aisle would be a mind-numbing nightmare of a job for many. Not for him. By addressing this task, he gave librarians and library assistants time to do other work, such as answering patrons' queries or teaching them how to use the computer terminals or automated check-out – work involving social interaction skills beyond my son's mastery.

“I went back to the librarian to ask if he could continue doing the work as a volunteer.”

After he had been there a spell, I made a point of thanking the librarian for giving him this opportunity and sharing with her how much he enjoyed the work. He kept that co-op position throughout high school, and when he finished school I went back to the librarian to ask if he could continue doing the work as a volunteer. I was delighted that she accepted. To this day, he visits the local library twice a week to shelf-check – no longer just fiction, but also the large-print collection and the DVDs.

I have never asked that this position be other than voluntary. I am well aware that the library’s budget has been severely cut year after year. It has reduced the number of positions, not increased them. Besides, he not only loves the work, it gives shape to his days there, gives the public a chance to get to know him, and opened the door to an altogether different job that became remunerative.

Right after high school ended, my son began volunteering in a law firm library. That opening came about as many positions for people on the spectrum do – through a good-will ambassador. Our ambassador did not work at that office, but knew lawyers who did, and approached them with the proposal of finding some work for my son. That his resume included volunteering at the public library gave him the entrance he needed. They had library work that needed doing. It was different than the work in the public library, but his experience there gave him the much-needed credibility to land the position.

His job at the law library is to update the “current servers”. Current servers are hard-covered, ringed binders that give the most up-to-date accounts of different legal issues. Law book publishers regularly issue packages of printed sheets to insert in those current servers to keep them up to date. The instructions of which pages are outdated and need to be removed, and where the new sheets are to be inserted are easy to follow.

I describe this job in some detail simply because it is a perfect fit for so many people on the spectrum. Every medium- to large-sized law firm has a library, and every law library has current servers that need to be kept up to date.

After the bookstore began to pay for my son’s work I decided to ask the law firm to pay as well. They agreed. This is an excellent job – one that needs to be done, is often neglected at law firms because everyone is so busy, and one that others on the spectrum could find satisfying.

“Be cautious about looking down your nose at certain jobs.”

Another high school co-op job for my son was at the local grocery store. His first task was to put carts and baskets back in place and to load groceries into customers' cars. A friend, whose son on the autism spectrum is every bit as capable as mine, not realizing that my son had started doing this work, once said that she would never allow her son to round up shopping carts. However, doing this job was an important stepping-stone to other responsibilities for my son at the grocery store. Once employees there got to know him, he was offered the chance to do shelf-stocking, to remove groceries past the freshness date from the display, to face-up (pulling stock to the front of the shelves), to operate the cardboard crushing machine in the recycling program, to keep produce sections well-stocked, to re-shelve groceries customers abandoned or left in the wrong place, to check prices for cashiers, and on and on. There are a multitude of jobs in grocery stores that many people on the spectrum can perform well. For my son, the starting point was helping out with returning carts to their storage positions, a job he still does.

My friend's son has had very few jobs over the course of his life, though he clearly has the skill-set for many positions. There may be a lesson in that. Be cautious about looking down your nose at certain jobs. They may suit perfectly the individual you are helping and could well lead to other opportunities.

My son's very first job was delivering the community newspaper. It was an important start. Hearing that he had an interview for that job first prompted the high school to put him in the co-op program. The paper delivery work increased greatly the number of people in our community who knew my son. He kept the route until shortly after high school. Eight years later the paper telephoned to see if he would consider doing a route again. When I asked him, his response was an unequivocal "Sure!" The first time back on the route an old customer charged out of her door and down her front walk to greet him. "I thought it was you I saw through my window," she said smiling. "I'm so glad you're back! I always thought you were wonderful!" Though he is paid a rather paltry sum for his paper deliveries, clearly the rewards of the job go far beyond the rate of compensation.

A summary of some strategies that guided us in establishing an active, engaged work-life for my son follows:

- Any work experience, no matter how humble, helps to build a resumé, and

may lead to expanded job opportunities

- Volunteer work gives structure to the day, allows others to get to know someone on the spectrum, and may ultimately lead to remuneration, either in that job setting or in others
- Goodwill ambassadors who know people inside an organization can help find work opportunities for persons with autism
- A faithful patron of a business or other organization may be able to perform the goodwill-ambassador role there
- Some potential employers, who have fears about hiring someone with autism, may be willing to offer a position, if those fears are acknowledged and addressed
- An assortment of part-time jobs and volunteer positions can give structure to a week just as effectively as a full-time job
- Be alert to tasks suitable for someone with autism in every setting you visit, whether that is the bowling alley or the golf club, the movie cinema or the museum, the garage or the zoo, the bakery or the fitness centre, the florist or the pharmacy
- Enhance co-operative work placement programs by suggesting particular settings and tasks suitable for persons on the spectrum
- After someone has started to work in a position, whoever is ultimately responsible for this person (whether a parent, guardian or director of a supported-living arrangement) should visit the workplace to express thanks for the opportunity and to share accounts of whatever satisfaction has been gained from the work thus far

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