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ASD Summer Employment

JOINING THE WORKFORCE IS AN IMPORTANT PART OF THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD.

by Busi Ncube, Sheila Konanur and James Bebko, York University

HAVING A JOB gives young adults the opportunity to gain financial independence from their parents and contribute to society. Many people enjoy having a job and find it rewarding to receive compensation for their contributions. For individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), this period of transition can be particularly difficult to navigate. Students with disabilities are able to get academic support and accommodations from their college or university. However, upon graduation, when expected to find and obtain employment, they are often on their own. Limited or no employment experience during school creates added barriers to students with ASD when attempting to enter the workforce. A lack of support following school can make it even more difficult for these students to demonstrate and apply their academic knowledge and skills.

Although students with ASD may face difficulties negotiating the interpersonal demands and changes in routine associated with an employment setting, research indicates that capitalizing on the unique strengths of individuals with ASD can result in very successful employment experiences. The goals of the ASD Summer Employment Program (ASEP) were developed through a joint initiative among Jewish Vocational Services Toronto (JVS) as lead, the ASD/Asperger Mentorship Program at York University, and Autism Ontario, in collaboration with Kerry's Place Autism Services, and Geneva Centre for Autism. For the past three years, these organizations have worked together to address a gap in clinical services targeting the employability of students with ASD following graduation from post-secondary education. In the spring/summer of 2014, the ASEP was funded through grants from the Ontario Ministry of



About the authors: Busi Ncube and Sheila Konanur are graduate students at York University, Toronto. They serve as mentors in the ASD Mentorship Program to support students attending York who have an ASD, and they led this evaluation of the ASD Summer Employment Program. Dr. James Bebko is a Professor in the Department of Psychology at York University. He initiated the ASD Mentorship Program at York, and he coordinates York's role in the ASEP community partnership.

Community and Social Services and the Doug Flutie Foundation.

Students were recruited through advertisements sent to community organizations and university/college counselors or groups offering support services to individuals with ASD. Students who participated in the program were 10 males ranging in age from 18 to 22, living in Toronto, York, Durham and Simcoe regions. During the academic year, they were enrolled in various post-secondary institutions including Centennial College, Ryerson University, University of Ontario Institute of Technology and York University. The students were working towards degrees in the Arts – tourism and travel, marketing, engineering, animation and technology. The majority of the students lived with their families, and one lived on campus. All identified English as their first language, and second languages included Portuguese, Cantonese, and Bengali. The ASEP employed two workforce specialists to provide group workshops for the students on topics ranging from employee rights and responsibilities to social interactions in the workplace. The program began with two

weeks of full-day workshops focused on pre-employment knowledge and skill development. Job retention workshops occurred throughout the remainder of the summer after the students had obtained jobs. The workforce specialists also provide one-on-one support to the students in the form of employment knowledge and skills that will help the students find jobs based upon their respective interests and experience. In addition to teaching “hard” skills, such as résumé writing, the workforce specialists supported the students in developing “soft” skills, such as providing advice about social relationships at work. The workforce specialists provided further moral support to the students throughout the program.

All 10 students involved in the ASEP last summer received vocational placements. Nine of those were paid employment positions and one student received a volunteer placement. For the nine students who had obtained employment, job retention was 100 percent for the duration of the program. The students reported a significant increase in their job-related knowledge and skills at the end of the program. Specifically, they identified significant improvements in

knowledge about their long- and short-term employment goals, employee rights and responsibilities, job-seeking skills, interview skills, on-the-job communication and job-related confidence. Two students continued with part-time jobs during the school year, and one student secured an employment position for the following summer.

Several challenges were identified by students and staff upon the completion of the ASEP. First, there was difficulty finding a mutually convenient meeting location for the job retention workshops offered after the students had obtained employment. Second, the workforce specialists and students indicated that starting the program well in advance of the end of the academic year would have facilitated efforts to obtain employment. It was further noted that job development done by the stakeholders would support appropriate placement of the students in workplaces able to accommodate the needs of employees with ASD. Finally, some students requested that workforce specialists spend more time assisting them in preparing for interviews (e.g., role playing) and physically attending interviews with them to provide moral support and feedback on their performance.

The ASEP demonstrates that, with support, students with ASD are able to be successful in their vocational pursuits. The students appreciated the program and the experience they gained from the jobs they obtained. These findings are highly promising and demonstrate that, with suitable support, young adults with ASD can have successful work experiences.

The community stakeholders hope to repeat the ASEP in the spring/summer of 2015, but funding is a yearly challenge. We are grateful for the support provided by MCSS and the Flutie Foundation in 2014. For additional information, please contact the ASD Mentoring program at York University (asmentor@yorku.ca) or JVS (asemployment@gmail.com or 416-649-1619). ■

The students rated their satisfaction with the ASEP highly. Here are some of their comments:

- “One particular situation where this support was demonstrated excellently came during the interview with a potential employer. A support person was present and that boosted my confidence significantly in the interview.”
- “The workforce specialists were available and helped me find jobs. They provided excellent coaching before interviews. They helped me find a placement in a retirement home.”
- “I have gained an increased confidence in my abilities to interact with co-workers on the job, and I feel better equipped to handle myself under stressful situations. I am more aware of my needs as well as my strengths, and I feel that I am better able to describe them to prospective employer.”
- “I did think the course was useful in teaching me how to approach employers and conduct myself on the job. A wide variety of topics were covered which accounted for all types of situations we could encounter in the workplace, and how to deal with them. My only suggestion would be to implement more ways to practice the skills we have learned. The mock interviews were a very good idea, as they not only taught us what to do but challenged us by forcing us to apply our knowledge.”
- “I learned how to rise up the corporate ladder.”