

# Transition to Work

## Tips for Individuals with Autism/Asperger's and their Parents, Teachers, and Employers

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### Foreward

Most individuals with autism have difficulty finding employment. One large national study reported that only 10% of adults with autism are employed, and another large national study reported similar percentages for those with Asperger's, half of whom had college degrees.

The purpose of this article is to provide some basic advice for individuals with autism and their parents, teachers, and employers, along with references for more information. Our hope is that this information will help individuals with autism find meaningful employment and begin the path of self sufficiency.

*"Everyone with autism can lead a successful life" – Jerry Newport, author and adult with autism*

### Middle School

Middle school (or earlier) can be a great time to learn job skills at home by doing household chores. Simple chores can include washing dishes, setting the table, and emptying the garbage. More complex chores could involve cleaning a floor or doing laundry. Very complex tasks could involve shopping for food, cooking food, and cleaning up after cooking.

One option is to create a visual checklist for these chores, so that the person knows what is expected of them each day. They can check off the task when they complete it. At the end of each day or week they can total the points they received, and receive a prize such as TV or computer time or cash. A visual checklist provides clear expectations, so that individuals know clearly what is expected of them.

Initially each chore will need to be taught and supervised, but the goal is to slowly fade that supervision, so that eventually the person can do simple and then more complex chores independently. Eventually the checklist can replace the need for prompting to start or finish a task. When simple chores are mastered, then one can move on to more complex tasks.

These household chores can provide valuable practice of basic skills, including learning to follow directions, stay on task, complete a task, and interact appropriately with parents/supervisors. An occupational therapist (OT) may be able to help guide and support these basic skills.

### High School

For individuals with autism/Asperger's who plan on starting work after high school, it is important to start transitioning to work planning and preparation early in high school (or before). Some high schools have "work programs" that may provide some pre-job training and placement in volunteer or even paid positions.

Families should also apply for Vocational Rehabilitation services (see section below) at least 6-12 months prior to graduation, if they want assistance. VR Transition Counselors can open a case as early as age 15. They cannot pay for services prior to age 18, but they can be part of the planning, career exploration, and development of goals.

Rather than focus on a single job, it may be better to try exposure to several types of work opportunities, so that students have more knowledge about the types of career opportunities available to them, and can determine what they want to do.

It may be useful to start with simple jobs at the school. The goal is to learn some basic social and job skills that are needed for many jobs. These include:

- Following directions (possibly with visual supports)
- Learning to ask for help if needed
- Staying on task
- Learning to tell their supervisor when work is done
- Appropriate interactions with supervisor and co-workers

After mastering the above job skills, it may be time to explore off-campus work, possibly with the support of vocational programs at the high-school.

The WRONG way to do a work program is to take someone to start a job without any idea of what is expected of them.

A BETTER way is to use a gradual approach to introduce people to the job. This may include:

- Job Shadowing: spending several hours “shadowing” workers, to learn what is involved in their job. This is also a good time to check for sensory sensitivities, and to consider if accommodations may be needed.
- Pre-training: After job shadowing to learn what work skills are needed, then practice the work skills at the school. For example, rather than starting to bag groceries in a grocery store, instead practice bagging at the school. The goal is for the individual to have the work skills needed to be successful when they start their job.
- Job Coach: When starting work, have a job coach present to provide guidance on how to do the job. Constant supervision may be needed initially, but the goal is to transition to less support. Visual cue checklists or other supports may help this transition to independence.
- Peer Worksite Mentor: A “Peer Worksite Mentor” is a co-worker who has been asked to provide limited mentoring for individuals with special needs. This might involve initially explaining the job to them, helping them if there is a problem, and introducing them to other employees. Whereas job coaches are limited in how much time they can spend on site, and they have only limited knowledge of the workplace and the workers, a current employee knows the work and the other workers, and can be immediately available if a problem arises. They can be a very cost-effective way to help people transition into a new job.

It may help to provide guidance on Social Thinking, to help people with autism better understand social issues. Social Stories may also help provide specific examples of social situations and how to understand and respond to them.

## **Young Adult Transitional Training Program**

DDD offers the Young Adult Transition Training Program for clients 14 through 22 who are Arizona Long Term Care (ALTCS) eligible and still in school. This teaches many of the skills students will need to get and keep a job in their community. DDD has developed a set of 21 modules to be used by qualified DDD provider agencies. The Division is looking forward to expanding the number of agencies offering this service to eligible students and young adults.

## **Transition to Employment (TTE)**

In 2015 DDD started a new service to help members get ready for a job called Transition to Employment (TTE). If you are at least 16 years old and ALTCS eligible, you may want to talk with your Support Coordinator about this service.

With TTE you develop work skills, abilities, and behaviors. Skills may include community safety and good work habits. You can learn how to get along with a boss and the other workers. It can also include doing a resume, learning how to apply for jobs and learning how to get to and from work. You may get help to be able to volunteer to learn about jobs you might like.

The program also provides information on how much you can earn and continue to get cash and healthcare benefits. The Disability Benefits 101 website not only provides a wealth of information about how employment impacts benefits, but it is a calculator that allows individuals to enter their specific information and determine how their different benefits would be affected by employment wages.

For more information about the program, ask to speak to your District Employment Services Specialist.

## **Post-Secondary Education: Vocational Training and College**

The major challenge with vocational training and college is usually not the coursework. Rather, the major challenge is developing the social skills so that after graduation they can be employed. Individuals with autism/Asperger's may have the academic skills to be successful, but often have trouble making friends and developing extra-curricular activities. When they graduate and look for a job, it is often the "soft" social skills that make a large difference in the ability to find a job and to keep it.

**I have seen far too many examples of students with ASD graduate successfully from college and then be unable to find a job, due to lack of interviewing/people skills and lack of work experience.**

I strongly recommend starting part-time internships while in school. This can help with:

- 1) Helping the person ensure that they like the career they are preparing for
- 2) Developing work experience that is very valuable on a resume
- 3) Developing good recommendations
- 4) Developing job contacts, both with the company you work for and others – 70% of jobs are usually found by networking, but that is very hard for most adults with ASD since they have challenges with social networking.

One option is to encourage post-secondary schools to develop peer friendship programs, like the Best Buddy programs that exist in many high schools (and a few colleges). The goal of

these programs is to pair an individual with developmental disabilities with a typically-developing student for one academic year or longer. The idea is for the pairs to do some social activities together, and to also participate in Best Buddy group activities that involve multiple pairs, such as dances or parties. These individual and group activities can help individuals with autism/Asperger's learn social skills and social understanding, and also help them develop meaningful friendships with their Buddy and with other peers.

### **Interviewing and Alternatives to Interviews**

Standard job hiring processes generally involve multiple interviews, and first impressions are often made in the first 30 seconds based primarily on social skills. Adult with ASD are often poor at interviewing, and interviews can be very frustrating for them. Practice can help, but in many cases I think it is better to instead work with a job coach who first contacts the employer and explains the strengths of their client, as well as their challenges.

### **Resumes and Portfolios**

Although resumes are standard for many job applications, they may not convey someone's abilities very clearly. Temple Grandin, a famous adult with autism, explains that she obtained her jobs by showing her portfolio, including everything from her hand-embroidered shirts when she was young to pictures and drawings of the cattle handling facilities she designed as an adult.

So, I recommend taking pictures of the client at different jobs, and pictures of the work they have accomplished, and compiling them into a short portfolio with a brief explanation of each picture. This can allow the person to demonstrate their capabilities in a very compelling manner, and help them obtain a job.

### **Work Options**

As mentioned in the high school section, it is important to learn what type of work the individual wants to do. This may require exploring more possible jobs, including job shadowing. Pre-training of skills needed for a particular position may be needed.

After finishing high school or post-secondary education, there are several types of employment options, including Center-Based, Group-Supported, Volunteer Work, and Supported Employment (see Vocational Rehabilitation in the next section). The Division of Developmental Disabilities (DDD) provides funding for some of these options.

### **Department of Developmental Disabilities**

Center-Based Employment Options: Individuals with limited abilities and limited job experience may want to start with positions in a center-based environment. These are work environments that are heavily supervised, and where basic job skills and social skills will be taught. There may be little or no salary, but the goal is to provide meaningful work in a positive and supportive environment. It is hoped that some individuals who start in these areas may eventually learn enough job skills and social skills to allow them to transition to other employment opportunities.

In the Phoenix area, some examples include:

- Gompers: Based in Glendale, Gompers Vocational Program offers a range of work opportunities and training for people with disabilities— see full description below.
- The Center for Habilitation (TCH) in Tempe: <http://www.tch-az.com/>
- MARC Center in Mesa- [www.marccenter.com/](http://www.marccenter.com/)
- Michael’s Garden in Phoenix: [www.michaelsgarden.org](http://www.michaelsgarden.org) (this group is actually a day training agency providing experiences with arts/crafts)
- Valley Life – <http://www.valleylifeaz.org>

Group Supported Employment: Group Supported Employment in the community is often more beneficial to clients. It gives them the opportunity to do real work in the real world, with real workers serving as role models. Several of the agencies listed above also offer Group Supported Employment.

Community service (volunteer) sites are a great place to learn and practice soft skills needed for employment without some of the stress and demands of paid employment. It is also a valuable way to experience different fields and build a network of references.

Another avenue is employment with small startups. Often startup companies can offer flexibility in ways that traditional employers cannot. The small and intimate nature of startup companies also means that there is less red tape associated with HR and more of a focus on skills during interviews.

There are some large national initiatives with large corporations (e.g., SAP, Microsoft, Walgreens, Sears/Kmart, AutoZone, etc.) that focus on hiring persons with disabilities, and in some cases, specifically persons with ASD.

Untapped Arizona is Arizona’s response to the national “Think Beyond the Label” initiatives. They are working with the Arizona Employment First core group, which includes representatives from the Dept of Education, DDD, RSA/VR, ADDPC, providers, parent/family support groups, and many others to promote integrated competitive employment options for individuals of working age with disabilities.

### **Vocational Rehabilitation**

Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) services are available to adults, but high school students can also apply. Each state has its own vocational rehabilitation services, whose goal is to provide training, support, and help in finding a job. Because they are designed to serve the general population, the counselors may have little or no understanding of autism/Asperger’s, and the agencies they contract with may or may not have experience with autism.

The following is a description of VR services from a VR support coordinator in Arizona. Note that VR can be very flexible with their funding if it will support job placement.

“VR is a very plan-driven program, meaning services are put in place to help individuals achieve a specific vocational goal. Although services to implement a vocational plan (e.g., job development and coaching, educational assistance) generally begin after the student has graduated from high school, some services could benefit students with

symptoms of autism/Asperger's while they are in high school. Two are Work Exploration, in which individuals explore different occupations with the help of a specialist hired by VR, and Work Adjustment Training (WAT), in which individuals work at a specific site in order to develop positive work habits.

As noted, a program of WAT is designed to help the individual develop "soft skills," e.g., showing up to work on time, attending to task, getting along with other employees. It is a service offered to VR consumers who have an Individualized Plan of Employment, that is, a vocational plan that specifies the individual's vocational goal and services to help her/him attain that goal. (Goals, it should be noted, are not set in stone; they can be amended.) Arranging a program of WAT for high school students will require the involvement and cooperation of the school, as the training will take place during the day. Transportation is a consideration, as individuals are responsible for getting themselves to and from the WAT site.

The VR agency can also provide evaluative services while students are in high school, including, as needed, psychological evaluations, vocational evaluations, and functional capacity evaluations. The purpose of psychological evaluations is often two-fold: to provide insight into the individual's psychological functioning and to gauge her/his cognitive and academic abilities. Cognitive and achievement testing is done using an adult scale (e.g., the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale); testing with adult scales is generally required by colleges if accommodations are sought through their Disability Resources offices).

In terms of transition services for students who will participate in post-secondary training, VR will provide funds for tuition and books (families must meet certain economic criteria if funds are to be provided for books) if that training is required for achievement of the individual's vocational goal. The Agency also provides assistive technology services, to include evaluations and the recommended AT items. Another potentially valuable service for individuals who will be enrolling in college is Supportive Education, in which assistance can be rendered to the student in helping her/him navigate the campus and enroll in courses."

In the greater Phoenix area, one agency that specializes in VR services for people with autism/Asperger's is SARRC. Southwest Autism Research and Resource Center provides a continuum of pre-vocational and vocational services utilizing ABA and interventions to ensure long term research-based success. SARRC holds several contracts with VR, including Vocational Evaluation, Rehabilitation Instructional Services and Disability-Related Employment Services. You can find more information about SARRC's services in the Appendix of this handout.

Other agencies that also provide employment services for adults with autism include Hacienda HealthCare, HOPE, and Gompers – see their descriptions below.

## **Summary**

I believe that most individuals with autism/Asperger's, including those with substantial challenges, are able to work productively if they are given appropriate supports and training. By exploring different career options via job shadowing, and then trying different work environments with appropriate supports and accommodations, they can find a job that they enjoy, succeed at, and are proud of. A job coach can be invaluable by helping navigate the hiring process, and explaining the candidate's strengths and capabilities directly to the employer. A picture portfolio can be powerful for demonstrating past successes and work experience.

### **Additional Resources**

- **Arizona Employment First**
- **SSA Ticket to Work**  
<http://www.chooseworkttw.net/>
- **Arizona Bridge to Independent Living**  
<http://www.abil.org/arizona-disability-benefits-101-az-db101/>
- **Untapped Arizona**  
<http://www.untappedarizona.com/>
- **DB101**  
<http://www.az.db101.org/>

## **Appendix:**

### **Hacienda Healthcare**

Hacienda Health Care has a 12-month training program for adults with ASD. The program involves a paid internship at its long-term care facility for medically fragile children and adults.

Interns do six-week rotations at different jobs, so that over 12 months they experience many different job options at Hacienda. Intern rotations include dietary, housekeeping, laundry, clerical, computer work, indoor maintenance, record maintenance, front desk and more.

Interns generally work M-F, 4-6 hours/day, although times can be tailored to the individual. Staff:intern ratios are generally 1:2, so that interns receive a high degree of personalized training and support. Interns should have minimal behavioral problems so that they are not disruptive to the nursing facility's mission.

The program is supported by DDD, but private-pay options are available. At the end of the internship, clients are expected to work in the general community.

Hacienda Health Care is located in south Phoenix, and van service is available to interns within 25 mile radius. The program currently has approximately 20 interns, and openings for 4 more.

In addition, some of the interns live at a 6-person residential home, as part of their ASD Training Home, to learn independent living and social/friendship skills. This is a 1-year training program. This program is also supported by DDD, but private-pay options are available.

For more information, call (602) 243-4231 or see [www.HaciendaHealthCare.org](http://www.HaciendaHealthCare.org)

### **HOPE Group's Vocational Programs**

HOPE Group's vocational rehabilitation program works with the individual to assist him or her in obtaining and maintaining meaningful and fulfilling employment by teaching the person the skills necessary to reach their vocation, community and social goals.

The vocational rehabilitation program at HOPE Group serves young adults and adults who are looking to pursue employment and who require assistance to do so. Services are provided in the environment most conducive to the learning of the individual: in the office, in the community, and encompassing Pima and Maricopa counties.

Program goals are developed to assist the individual in obtaining the necessary skills to secure employment, including but not limited to:

- Resume writing
- Interviewing skills
- Filling out applications
- Looking online for jobs of interest
- Setting up an email account if the individual does not already have one
- Interpersonal skills for on the job communication and during interviewing
- Assisting the person in obtaining employment
- Assisting the person in maintaining employment
- Assisting the person in being successful within his or her job placement

For more information, please call the corporate office at 480-610-6981.

## **Gompers Vocational Programs**

Gompers Habilitation Center has a 21,000 square foot facility in Glendale, AZ. They assist program participants looking to further their employability skills through the Vocational Training Center, Enclaves and Community Placement. Gompers offers individuals with a variety of disability levels the opportunity to explore their vocational interests in a supportive environment that encourages growth and mentorship all while being financially compensated for the work they complete.

The jobs learned at their facility include light assembly work making components for local businesses, packaging food and medical products, collating and assembling mailers, and running automatic wrapping lines for packaging purposes. Gompers facility is also able to ship most items directly to the end source. Gompers Vocational Center also operates a complete document imaging center. The imaging center offers a variety of employment opportunities and skill training levels. They range from learning how to prepare the documents for processing, training how to operate high speed scanning equipment and performing data entry tasks. A Safeway Training Center is scheduled to open in spring 2012. This partnership with Safeway allows them to train and prepare individuals to be courtesy clerks. By offering a wide array of jobs and job types, Gompers provides individuals the opportunity to develop a variety of skills.

Gompers has developed a Career Ramp, the accessible version of the professional Career Ladder. Depending on the strengths of the person served they can begin at any level. Each of these steps sets the stage for community placement. At each level Gompers offers individuals both skill-based training as well as paid work experience on a variety of jobs. The Job Club is an initial prevocational training that is usually two-four hours per week at the Vocational Center. The next step is Careers in Progress where individuals served at Gompers split 2-3 days at the Vocational Center and/or 2-3 days at the DTA. Next is Center Based Employment where the individual works five days per week at the Vocational Center. The next opportunity is Group Supported Employment that can be community based or center based depending on the level of skill. In many cases the supported position leads to community jobs. Individual Supported Employment is community based which is a community job with some staff support which is eventually faded as the individual successfully maintains their community job.

For more information about Gompers Vocational Program, please contact the Vocational Director, at (623) 215-0845, ext. 222.

## **Southwest Autism Research and Resource Center (SARRC)**

### **SARRC Services for Teens:**

SARRC offers Autism CommunityWorks®, a program that provides afterschool and weekend opportunities for teens with ASD and their typically developing peer mentors to engage in volunteer projects at local nonprofit organizations. As volunteers, they develop job skills, build their community service resumes, learn to socialize, and make lasting friendships.

The program helps teens make the transition to adulthood, higher education, and/or optimum employment. Autism CommunityWorks® includes LibraryWorks®, PowerWorks®, and GoodDeedWorks®.

### **SARRC Individual Services for All Ages:**

Home-Based Consultation and Parent Training: Based Consultation is available for individuals and families seeking intervention to develop a specific adaptive behavior (*employment, chores, hygiene, phone use*) or to address a particular problem behavior (*avoidance, aggression*). Following an initial interview with the parent and/or individual, a SARRC clinician, under the supervision of a BCBA, provides direct observation of the teen, conducts the appropriate behavioral assessments, and develops an intervention plan.

Comprehensive Behavioral Program: The Comprehensive Behavioral Program provides intensive, ABA intervention across environments to meet the needs of individuals with ASD and their families. Treatment is primarily implemented in an individual's home and community, and when applicable, coordinated with the individual's school. Families receive a weekly parent training session, several weekly 1:1 intervention sessions, program management, and supervision from a BCBA.

Individualized goals are developed in coordination with the individual and his/her family, and focus on language, social, adaptive behavior, leisure, cognitive development and independence.

Social Enterprise Businesses: SARRC's Beneficial Beans Café and Garden offer unpaid internship opportunities for adults to gain both hard and soft skills within a business environment.

Employment Network (EN) Social Security Ticket to Work Program: SARRC is an Employment Network (EN) with the Social Security Administration Ticket to Work Program. If an individual is receiving Social Security benefits, s/he may be eligible for TTW services.

### **Workforce Development Centers**

- [Arizona Workforce Connection](#)
- [MaricopaWorkforce Connection](#)

### **Employer/Employment Resources**

- [Untapped Arizona](#)
- [AZ Job Connection](#)
- [NETPA](#)

### **Benefits Assistance**

- [Disability Benefits 101](#)
- [Freedom to Work](#)