

# **Project Success: Connecting Young Adults with Aspergers with Meaningful Employment**

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February 2012

## **The Issue**

Young adults with Aspergers often demonstrate a high level of competency in an area of special interest to them, but many fail to thrive in job settings because they display a lower degree of social competency than adults without disabilities, lack sufficient supports within the workplace, and/or because there is poor fit with their skill sets and interests. As a result, it is difficult for them to independently secure—and maintain—employment.

Many young adults with Aspergers have “aged out” of structured educational programs, and have few opportunities to build upon their hard-earned skills. Innovative community programs can help higher functioning individuals on the autism spectrum to secure and retain work (Wehman, Targett and Young 2007).

## **The Pilot**

To address this need, JEVS Human Services created the "Project Success" pilot program in 2010, in partnership with Pennsylvania's Office for Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) and initial funding through the Recovery Act. The 9-month pilot program was designed to bolster key social and employment readiness skills among young adults aged 18-25 diagnosed with Aspergers and "Pervasive Developmental Disorder - Not Otherwise Specified" (for brevity, this article will refer to the cohort as young adults with Aspergers).

Project Success offers intense socialization and job readiness training, internship with a mentor, job placement and coaching. The goal of Project Success is to help young adults with Aspergers to ultimately obtain competitive employment in a work setting where most of the employees do not have significant disabilities, in a job that matches their skills and interests, and where they have good potential to be successful. To enhance their on-the-job communication and other job skills, program participants complete a 10-12 week internship, during which JEVS' job coaches and on-site mentors provide ongoing support and feedback.

Before choosing from a variety of available internships, participants first try out various jobs through "job sampling" at several worksites. This enables them to discover the types of work tasks they enjoy most, and to determine their preferred work environment.

# Summary of Pilot Year

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During the 9-month pilot, JEVS received referrals from Philadelphia-area public and charter schools, agencies serving individuals with disabilities, and self-referrals from families. By the end of 9 months, 20 young people enrolled, and 5 more enrolled within the next two months. Participants are grouped together for socialization classes and volunteer work sampling.

The project has the following key components:

- Individual vocational profiles, using assessment instruments that are appropriate for people on the autism spectrum, are created. JEVS' vocational assessment counselors work with individuals to determine their interests, work history, skills, capacity and temperament, and consider any perceived/experienced barriers to employment.
- In addition to paper and pencil assessments, participants complete situational assessments in which they perform work tasks in an actual work setting. JEVS staff assess their ability to perform tasks independently and follow directions, and identify strengths and skills that need to be honed.
- Employment readiness plans are developed for each individual, based on initial assessments, to help participants focus on specific areas of interest and

need, and delineate steps to becoming “job ready.”

- Participants have access to intensive, ongoing socialization job readiness classes. These classes emphasize nonverbal communication, conversation and interpersonal skills, and job search strategies and tools, including interviewing. Classes also address employee/employer expectations and appropriate workplace demeanor and attire.
- “Job sampling” allows participants to try out different work environments and roles. Project Success participants “sample” worksites as a group, along with their coaches.
- Participants complete internships lasting 10-12 weeks in community settings. Onsite mentors provide immediate feedback, and JEVS job coaches regularly visit worksites.
- Work portfolios, including resumes, summaries of work experiences and training, and progress made towards permanent job placements, are made.
- Job placement is secured for program participants.
- Job coaching on-the-job or offsite is provided once participants are placed.

## **Expected Results**

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In the pilot year, we measured completion of social skills and job-readiness training, number and quality of “job

sampling" and internship experiences, and permanent job placements. We are also interested in employment retention rates, employer feedback about the program's ability to meet their business needs and improvement in participants' communication skills.

## **Results After Year 1**

During the first 9 months, participants, families and staff saw remarkable growth in both communication skills and independence. The supportive network of peers and staff has proven to be a perfect catalyst for participants to identify areas they want to strengthen. There is open discussion about anxieties and difficulties interpreting social situations, and willingness to try communication "exercises" in the classroom, community, workplace and at home.

To date, all participants have remained in the program. Based on the first year of Project Success, the Pennsylvania OVR has agreed to fund the project as a fee-for-service program. We are currently working in the job development phase with the first group of participants and are seeking permanent job placements. Job placements are ongoing, and we cannot yet measure retention rates. But employer feedback has been positive; and on-site mentors have noted strong improvement in participants' communication skills, motivation and personal awareness, all translating into higher job readiness and functioning.

# Why Project Success is a Promising Innovation

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Project Success fills a significant, unmet need for school-to-work programs that help young adults with Aspergers to successfully integrate into their communities. By trying out various positions, participants can gain self-awareness about which work roles best suit their interests and skills, and explore areas that might have seemed unfamiliar or daunting. Coaching helps young adults with Aspergers to develop greater comfort and competency in the workplace.

There are insufficient school-to-work programs for young adults with Aspergers in the Philadelphia area. Most Project Success participants have experienced a sense of failure after leaving post-secondary programs. While some have started college or work, most felt they lacked adequate social supports and reported a hard time "fitting in" to their new environment. Others have been isolated, without meaningful community involvement and no peer group.

What has emerged during the Project Success pilot is that these young adults are clearly capable of doing the tasks of many jobs. But they need coaching to improve interpersonal skills, integrate lessons from the work world,

and to find the best fit with their particular skills and interests.

## **Components for Replication**

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Creating connections with employers to customize work opportunities – JEVS is a strong proponent of working with employers to “job carve” positions that enable people with disabilities to succeed in the workplace. Nationwide, customizing community-based work experiences is an increasingly recognized model for helping young adults with high-functioning autism to succeed (Grandin 1999). JEVS has strong connections with area employers, and in FY 10 our 28 job developers helped place 1,700 people into employment, many of them with disabilities. Many Philadelphia-area businesses, including nursing homes, hospitals, parks and libraries, are willing to help clients with disabilities “try out” work experiences.

Ongoing communication classes – Communication is the biggest barrier for people with Aspergers, and ongoing classes help participants practice verbal and nonverbal communication, better understand nuances, and honestly discuss obstacles. “Homework” may include walking into a store and asking for a job application, looking someone in the eye, practicing shaking hands, or calling another participant over the weekend to check in and say hello.

Onsite mentors – The Work Experience/Mentor model helps participants translate abstract classroom lessons about work readiness into real-life experience. Pairing of participants with the natural supports of on-the-job mentors ensures that each participant receives immediate feedback for both positive behavior and problematic interactions. This is especially important for individuals with nonverbal learning disabilities.

Consultation and training to non-disabled employees – The JEVS Job Coach works with non-disabled employees, who may be confused about how to behave with the young adult with Aspergers. Coaches answer questions, explain behaviors, and help integrate the young adult into the workforce, to build natural supports beyond the onsite mentor. The Coach facilitates a relationship among the program participant, supervisor, and coworkers so that problems are handled as they would be with any other employee at the company.

Building in family supports – Parents are important advocates and allies, and also need encouragement to let their young adult with Aspergers create new limits (i.e., taking public transportation to a new setting) and take on new roles.

### Challenges Going Forward

Job placement in a tough economy is hard, and especially for people with disabilities. Employers rightfully want to know “what’s in it for me?” in taking on a person with Aspergers. If there is the right fit between that person and

the job, the answer can be an extremely reliable, productive, enthusiastic and capable employee. Work sampling and job carving help create a goodness of fit, so that permanent placements of people with Aspergers can be successful from both ends. Another challenge is that funding for ongoing job coaching can be limited. While OVR is supporting Project Success, there is finite reimbursement for many services.

Research indicates that most people respond positively to businesses that hire people with disabilities. For that reason, hiring a person with a disability can positively impact an employer's bottom line. If that is surprising to some, it is helpful to consider that most people have a relative or know someone who is disabled. And with people remaining in the workplace longer, most adults in their 50s and beyond are mindful of the fact that may develop a disability, and may need to continue working into their 70s. Consequently, most people are very open to the concept of hiring people with disabilities, and that can work to an employer's advantage. But the "sell" to employers can be hard in this current economy. When employers have fewer slots they can afford to fill, they often want an employee with experience and a proven work history.

## **Needed Policy and Advocacy Supports**

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Government encouragement to hire people with disabilities is important. The U.S. Department of Labor is proposing a new rule that would require federal contractors and subcontractors to set a hiring goal that 7 percent of their workforces are people with disabilities (U.S. Department of Labor 2011). Comments are now being taken on this proposed rule, and advocates need to voice their support.

On a personal level, consumers should encourage retailers and other businesses to hire people with disabilities and to provide positive feedback when they do. In work settings, individuals can volunteer to be onsite mentors for people with disabilities. Our experience demonstrates that once the relationship starts, most employers and co-workers become strong natural supports. The abstract idea of a "person with a disability" transforms into a co-worker they know, and there is a natural, emotional pull to help them succeed.

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