

Bucking Trend, 9 In 10 With Autism Land Jobs After Training

by Michelle Diamant | March 14, 2017

Cody Rautanen, a Project SEARCH intern in Cherry Hill, N.J., inputs warranty and repair information into a computer as part of his duties. A new study suggests that when tailored to address the unique needs of people with autism, Project SEARCH can dramatically increase the odds that individuals on the spectrum will find and maintain employment. (Ed Hille/Philadelphia Inquirer/TNS)

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When given the right supports and training, a new study suggests that nearly all young people with autism who qualify for supported employment can learn to excel on the job.

Nine out of 10 transition-age youth with autism who participated in an intensive job training program were working part-time earning at least minimum wage three months after graduating high school. What's more, 87 percent were still working after 12 months.

By comparison, just 6 percent of their peers with autism who did not participate in the intervention were employed three months after graduation and only 12 percent were working after a year, according to findings [published](#) in the April issue of the journal Autism.

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“This study shows the clear-cut potential vocationally of youth with autism and also the receptivity of employers to hiring and retaining young people with autism,” said Paul Wehman of Virginia Commonwealth University who led the research.

For the study, researchers looked at 31 students on the spectrum ages 18 to 21 who participated in a program called Project SEARCH plus Autism Spectrum Disorder Supports. The experiences of these young people were then compared to 18 of their peers with autism who completed high school without this type of intensive workplace training. All of those studied were on track for a “special diploma” because they could not meet the academic requirements for a traditional diploma.

During the nine-month intervention, individuals spend their last year of high school rotating through internships at large community businesses like hospitals, government offices or banking centers where they receive support on the job and participate in classroom time. The program incorporates the use of applied behavior analysis techniques to best address the social and communication challenges of those on the spectrum.

The differences between those in the Project SEARCH group and the control group were striking, researchers indicated. Nearly everyone who received the job training was able to find and maintain employment after finishing school and saw increased hours and wages over time while those who did not participate struggled to find work and, when they did, earned less than a dollar per hour on average.

Beyond employment alone, researchers said that individuals in the intervention group were able to become less dependent on supports over time while their peers who did not participate in Project SEARCH plus Autism Spectrum Disorder Supports became more dependent.

“In many cases, we saw students with very high support needs significantly reduce their support needs,” said Carol Schall, an assistant professor at Virginia Commonwealth University who worked on the study.

“For example, one person required very frequent verbal prompting to demonstrate appropriate social interaction with his co-workers. Initially, he would giggle, stare inappropriately at co-workers and supervisors and walk by co-workers when they spoke to him. He required verbal prompting at least once a day for 30 minutes to 2 hours daily. By the end of the study, he required no support in this area at all.”

Wehman, Schall and their colleagues wrote in their findings that the intensive internships “acted as the vocational training equivalent of intensive early intervention” that has become standard treatment for young children on the spectrum.

Further evaluation of the employment training approach is underway and the researchers said they are working to standardize the program by developing a manual so that it can be replicated by schools across the country.

<https://www.disabilitycoop.com/2017/03/14/bucking-autism-jobs-training/23449/>