NARRATIVES OF AUTISM AND SKILLED EMPLOYMENT: BARRIERS, FACILITATORS, AND CONSIDERATIONS IN PROFESSIONAL SETTINGS

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BACKGROUND

A disproportionate number of autistic people are un- or under-employed, even though many have specialized training or post-secondary degrees. Yet, little is known about what facilitates successful employment. We aimed to use a community-based participatory research approach to conduct a qualitative study of skilled autistic employees/job-seekers to understand internal, external, and systemic barriers/facilitators to success, and what “success” means to employees and job-seekers. This information is part of a larger study to explore potential interventions.

AASP|REE and CBPR

This study was conducted by the Academic Autism Spectrum Partnership in Research and Education (AASP|REE), a partnership of autistic people, academic researchers, family members, and disability and healthcare providers. It was co-founded in 2006 by D. Raymaker and C. Nicolaidis. AASP|REE uses a community-based participatory research approach, where autistic people, academics, and other community stakeholders collaborate as co-researchers in all phases of the work.

METHODS

Population and Setting

- U.S. national sample
- 18+ year of age
- Diagnosed with ASD
- Have skilled vocational training

Recruitment

- Social media, word of mouth, community connections
- Substantial boost from television, radio, news, reddit AMA

Interview Guide

- Story of career path
- Successes and failures
- Effects of ASD and other identities
- What is success?

Interview Modes and Strategies

- Multiple modes for accessibility
- In-person, phone, text-based chat, video conference
- $50 for participating

Demographics

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<th>Category</th>
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<tr>
<td>In-person</td>
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RESULTS

High Stakes of Disclosure

- Reason 2 job worked
- Reason 1 job didn’t work
- Even for the same person in the same field

"Recognize that the employee may have a massive personal risk in making their disclosure, and that they must have calculated that the extra measure of vulnerability prompted by disclosure was worth it.

Unconventional Paths to Jobs

[edit] showed me...some of the basics of using like graphic design software...and it was really the easiest early days of that stuff publishing, and somewhere, and this other guy talked to student congress and they gave them ten thousand dollars...to buy the computer system, which was like gonna be a publishing system...so I learned like really early on...how to use this software when his parents...gave him a laptop for Christmas."

Disconnects with Supports and Services

"I was a highly qualified candidate for WRP positions, but I never received any offers...I later found out the government agencies mostly use disability hiring programs such as WRP...to hire employees for unspecified positions...This is a problem, since those on the autism spectrum often do much better with positions involving analytical thinking than positions involving unskilled labor.

Autistic Burnout and Mental Health Management

"As far as keeping a skilled job goes...I would say that the most important thing is to monitor yourself for signs of burnout and act sooner, rather than later, to thwart it...we would suspect that burnout is by far the biggest contributor to lack of long-term success.

"If I wish I actually hadn’t interned every summer while I was in college...I think working nonstop is a contributing factor in my burnout.

Impact of Intersectionality

[After coming out trans]...I was told...that I was ‘ready for being trans’...I also acknowledge that my privilege as a white-gender non-binary person has also helped me...I feel I had to double-whammy of being a trans woman and a person of color...I would have almost no chance of getting a job...I am only one of few, against me in the ‘not-employable identities’ column...I do worry that when I get married I may face more discrimination...I plan to take my partner’s last name which is noticeably a Latina name.

Autistic Superpowers Facilitate Success

"From the people I’ve chosen to share [my diagnosis] with it’s usually a positive response...like they know me and from seeing how I work with kids [with disabilities] they’re like, oh that’s why you’re able to really zero in on that and you have this good rapport with that kid who’s hard to reach...and I’m like oh yeah I guess so [laughs] using my superpowers [laughs].

"In the course of my education, anatomy, physiology, pathology, and symptom pattern recognition...became a special interest. This meant I could focus my autistic superpowers on succeeding at work.

Workplace Discrimination and Bullying

"Every time I’ve disclosed I suddenly become like a lower person to that manager, because I think that’s what I’m doing. I mean I’m not going to do a low-wage grunt forever. It doesn’t mean you have to talk to me like I’m not an adult or your peer. Acknowledge my differences and needs, but treat me like just another coworker.

Success is More than Job Placement

- Professional growth
- Work-life balance
- Financial independence
- Sense of community
- Feeling valued
- Meaningful work
- An accepting (e.g., neurodiverse) work culture

IMPLICATIONS

- Disclosure of ASD was key in success or even— for the same person in similar jobs— increased understanding of strategic disclosure for employees and employers could be useful.
- Supports and services for autistic professionals may need to include novel approaches; for example, finding ways to bypass human resources, or focusing on mentors and internships.
- In addressing autism-related barriers to employment, supports and services need to also consider how autistic individuals are multiply marginalized (race, gender, etc.) in professional settings.
- Burnout, bullying, and mental health factors secondary to disability management and/or disability discrimination may also need attention.
- Service system outcome measures for autistic people that focus on job procurement and retention may be overly simplistic.
- Being flexible with, and accommodating of, autistic employees (even when it means reconsidering what “professionalism” looks like) can greatly benefit both employers and employees.

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