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Employment for adults with autism spectrum disorders: A retrospective review of a customized employment approach[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Over the past few decades, there has been an increase in prevalence of children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD), and those children are now becoming young adults in need of competitive integrated employment (CIE). Customized employment (CE) is one pathway to employment that has been successful for other individuals with developmental disabilities (DD), though research has been very limited on the effectiveness with individuals with ASD. This paper provides a retrospective review of 64 individuals with ASD who came to our program from 2009 to 2014 for supported employment services as referred by the state vocational rehabilitation services agency. Employment specialists engaged in situational assessment, discovery, job development, customized job descriptions, on-site training and support, positive behavioral supports, and job retention techniques. The employment specialists were responsible for tracking their actual time spent working directly with or for the jobseeker with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). All vocational rehabilitation clients with ASD served during this time successfully secured CIE, and maintained their employment with ongoing supports, with intensity of support time decreasing over time. The majority (63/64, 98.4%) of individuals successfully secured CIE through the use of supported employment, in 72 unique employment positions. Of the majority of the individuals who secured employment, 77% (50) individuals indicated that they had never worked before and additional 18% (12) reported having short intermittent histories of employment. Despite this lack of employment experience, in all cases the jobseeker directed the job search and ultimately the job selection.

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1. Introduction

The U.S. Federal government reports that autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is one of the country's most common developmental disabilities. Data from the U.S. Center for Disease Control (CDC) revealed that 1 in 68 children have a label of ASD (Diament, 2014). These data represent a 30% increase over numbers reported in 2012, when the reported rate was 1 in 88 individuals. The CDC indicates that these new prevalence data for the U.S. equates to 1.2 million individuals with a diagnosis of ASD under the age of 21 (Diament, 2014). This same trend has been noted internationally as well (Elsabbagh et al., 2012; Matson & Kozlowski, 2010).

ASD is a disability characterized by impairments in communication and social interaction, repetitive behaviors, and limited areas of interest (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The Centers for Disease Control report that in approximately 38% of cases, individuals with ASD also experience an intellectual disability (ID). Although individuals with ASD present great variability in severity and clinical picture, their prognosis without treatment is generally poor. ASD is a chronic disability with unique social and communicative difficulties. Therefore, the majority of individuals with ASD require some level of professional support throughout their lives (Billstedt & Gillberg, 2005; Mordre et al., 2012). As more people are being diagnosed with ASD and require specialized services, the increased need for community education, public health, social, and rehabilitation programs is increasing (Wing & Potter, 2002; Yeargin-Allsop et al., 2003). The purpose of this paper is to explore the impact of supported employment (SE) on the employment outcomes for these adults through a retrospective review. Findings include the use of customized employment (CE). CE is a service available through supported employment defined in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act (WIOA) of 2014. CE is a flexible process where a job seeker or candidate with a disability and a employment specialist partner with an employer to design a job description that meets the employer's needs and matches the strengths and interest of the of the job seeker while meeting the definition for CIE (Federal Register, June 26, 2002, Vol. 67, No. 123, pp. 43154–43149).

2. Review of literature

As more and more children are identified with ASD and grow into adulthood, an increasing number of families are seeking direction as their children leave school and enter the world of adulthood (Shattuck et al., 2012; Wehman, Schall, et al., 2013; Wehman, Smith, & Schall, 2009). Yet, the research on vocational interventions that would assist adults with ASD acquire and maintain employment lags behind research on school interventions for children with ASD (Wehman, Schall, McDonough, et al., 2014). However, a body of evidence accumulated recently has shown that individuals with ASD can be successfully employed in CIE and substantially increase earnings in comparison to segregated work or day support programs (Cimera, 2011; Howlin, 2013; Howlin, Alcock, & Burkin, 2005; Schall et al., 2015; Wehman, Brooke, Lau, & Targett, 2013; Wehman et al., 2012; Wehman, Schall, Carr, et al., 2014). In addition there is evidence indicating that the majority of individuals with disabilities and their families prefer CIE to segregated employment or day services, CIE is now assumed to be the most desired outcome for adults with disabilities (Siperstein, Heyman, & Stokes, 2014; Workforce Innovations and Opportunity Act of 2014, § 113–128).

Despite the many advantages offered by CIE, including increased inclusion, improved cognition, and increased economic independence, the use of community non-integrated day/support programs continues to grow noticeably faster than participation in CIE. For example, the number of individuals with ASD and other developmental disabilities (DD) participating in non-integrated day programs grew by 96,300 from Fiscal Years (FY) 2000 to 2011. In comparison, the growth in competitive employment outcomes during that same period was only 13,000 individuals (Butterworth, Hall, Smith, Migliore, & Winsor, 2011). There are current and substantial efforts underway in many states and agencies serving individuals with ASD and other DD to systemically transform their day and work programs by promoting CIE as a first choice (Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, 2013). Despite these efforts, there has been minimal growth in competitive employment outcomes for individuals with ASD (Shattuck et al., 2012). For example, The State of the States in Developmental Disabilities reported that, in FY 2011, national state developmental disabilities agencies served approximately 455,600 individuals in day support and sheltered employment programs that excluded integrated competitive employment (Braddock et al., 2013). In comparison, approximately 116,000 individuals with ASD and other DD were in supported CIE, an approximate 4:1 ratio of non-integrated day/programs to competitive work for people served by DD agencies (Braddock et al., 2013).

2.1. Pathways to employment for individuals with autism

To improve the employment outcomes for individuals with ASD we need to examine possible pathways to employment. There are numerous ways to enter into CIE. For example, there are some reports that indicate paid work prior to graduation for youth with ASD will lead to successful CIE (Siperstein et al., 2014; Wehman, Sima, et al., 2014). Teenagers can gain valuable work experience by participating in internships or engaging in part-time work while in high school (Wehman, Schall, McDonough, et al., 2014). These work experiences often provide opportunities for youth to learn about themselves, as well as gain important work skills that have the potential to guide their career path. Such opportunities include learning if they prefer working alone versus with a team, or working in a demanding high production industrial job as opposed to a quiet moderate paced office position (Schall et al., 2015). If youth with ASD were provided with real work experiences that were both intensive and varied they would be in a position to identify a career track and potentially secure employment upon graduation from high school.

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