Autism Speaks®

FAMILY SERVICES

EMPLOYMENT

THINK TANK

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"Those of us who are parents
can recall the day when we were told,
'Your child has autism.'

Experts told us that it is a lifelong disability,
and they told us about all the things
our child would never do.

But today, I look around and see a room filled with
people who said to those experts,
'You are wrong.'

Autism is something you can live with
and be successful with.
People with autism deserve to have
meaningful employment
in the community with their peers.

Each of you has taught us a lot.
You inspire us.
This is just the beginning."

–Peter Bell
Father of a son with autism – Tyler Bell, age 19
Executive Vice President for Programs and Services at Autism Speaks

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Introduction

Most Think Tank meetings begin with the hope that by bringing together like-minded people who share a common drive and expertise, we will be able to solve a problem that is too big to solve alone.

The goal of this Autism Speaks Employment Think Tank was to convene a two-day intensive and focused discussion on the role of adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in the workforce and on the needs of the current competitive labor market at large. Our hope was that by shining a spotlight on the unique abilities, strengths and untapped resources of people with autism to potential employers, we could inspire business leaders and our stakeholders to make this issue a personal priority as well as a national focus.

In order to do so, we needed to ensure that all stakeholders were represented in the discussion. We first sought adults with autism who have had varying degrees of success in the world of work to share their personal perspectives. These self-advocates were, as always, some of best contributors to the dialogue. We then enlisted business leaders, entrepreneurs, and small-business owners who have demonstrated a commitment to increasing the employment rates of adults with ASD and other disabilities. We also sought to engage a representative sample of direct service providers and scholars from the United States and Canada with expertise in the field of adults with autism.

The efforts of each Think Tank participant to travel to New York City to share his/her perspective – from the adults with autism, business leaders and professors who flew across the country, to the company that coordinated our meeting space, to the school district that arranged for students and staff to attend – illustrated a determination to move the discussion forward. The group that gathered for the two-day discussion in June 2012 shared the fundamental belief that all people have the right to work, and that no perceived obstacle, prejudice or lack of awareness should deny them that opportunity. The obstacles are challenging, given the current state of the economy and national unemployment rate, but the group was steadfast and focused.

Gabe Rhodes and Amy Rosenfield, volunteers from Adaptations, the Young Adults Life Skills Network, welcome Think Tank participants.

Think Tank facilitator James Emmett.

One of the immediate outcomes of this executive summary will be the upcoming Autism Speaks Employment Tool Kit.

The information and perspectives shared at the Think Tank will be used to inform the tool kit, which will feature resources and best practices for adults with autism, their family members, job coaches, vocational rehabilitation professionals, and prospective employers.

For more information, please visit: http://www.autismspeaks.org/family-services/adult-services/autism-workplace

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The Challenge

National data indicates that the majority of adults with autism are unemployed or underemployed (Institute for Community Inclusion, 2012). Many of the factors that contribute to the high unemployment rate for adults with autism and other developmental disabilities are addressed throughout this summary.

This collaboration enabled the participants to confirm, discredit, or add assumptions about the most important issues facing adults with autism as they struggle to gain and maintain meaningful employment. Although some of these issues have been raised and discussed as barriers over the past decade, little progress has been made and we are still largely without effective solutions to resolve them.

The purpose of this report is to outline the issues presented during the Think Tank and highlight the strategies that were developed to create a potential pathway for the estimated 500,000 teens and young adults with autism who will enter adulthood in the next decade, and for those who are already adults with autism looking for work. Notwithstanding the current high unemployment rate, the United States faces a longterm workforce crisis as the Baby Boomer generation ages and retires. By 2030, roughly 20% of the U.S. population will be aged 65 and older. Millions of new workers will be needed to take the place of retirees in the workforce; individuals with autism are ready, willing and able to help fill that void.

Employment is a critical component for most adults to build full and productive lives. Individuals living with autism deserve the opportunity to contribute as productive workers in appropriate employment settings, paying taxes while improving their quality of life. Smart employers know that the community of individuals with disabilities constitutes a $1 trillion consumer market and is passionately loyal to companies that hire workers with disabilities. And those that win government contracts should know that the federal and state tax dollars they are paid also come from workers with disabilities. Hiring individuals with autism is good for business and for society at large.

Growth in integrated employment primarily occurred between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s, with no meaningful change in the number of people in integrated employment since 2001.

- National Survey of State Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Day & Employment Services (Institute for Community Inclusion, State Data Project)

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We hope that readers will gain a better understanding of the perspectives of both self-advocates as well as business leaders throughout this report, and will be encouraged by the 'Promising Practices' presented in Part III.

This most recent effort to help increase meaningful employment opportunities for adults with autism is especially timely as it coincides with a report from Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA) and an announcement from the National Governors' Association focusing on disability employment, as well as a Presidential Executive Order 13548 described in Part IV.

However, it all starts with a personal commitment from individual stakeholders.

"A job is more than an income. It's an important part of who we are."
– An employee with autism

The Process

On June 12-13, 2012, Autism Speaks convened a two-day Think Tank designed to advance a national agenda to increase the meaningful employment opportunities for adults across the autism spectrum, and to generate concrete action steps for advocates, educators, policymakers, business leaders, and adults with ASD.

Facilitators James Emmett and Chris Simler, nationally recognized disability employment consultants, led discussions with our stakeholders. Through structured dialogue prompted by thought-provoking and open-ended questions, the facilitators guided crosscutting discussions regarding the complexities that surround the employment of adults with autism.

Day One participants.

Day One

Thirty-three stakeholders – including adults with autism, family members, vocational rehabilitation counselors, educators, service providers, and academic experts – met to identify key issues and barriers related to full employment, and to identify specific action items to be considered by business leaders.

Day Two participants included Tammie Hollar, Accessibility Coordinator at Best Buy Corporation.

Day Two

A group of business leaders and entrepreneurs representing targeted industries shared successful models and strategies for supporting employees with autism, identified their own challenges and barriers, and reflected on the action items identified by participants on Day One.

This report summarizes the stakeholder perspectives, delineates the most critical challenges, identifies promising practices, and proposes specific action steps. Quotes and comments from Think Tank participants have been included to preserve the authentic and active voice that characterized this unique gathering of adults with ASD and other stakeholders.

Autism Speaks is pleased to present this Executive Summary.

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Part I
Perspective: Individuals with ASD, Parents, Service Providers, and Academic Experts

Pressing Issues for Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder Who Want to Work

"What are the issues that matter most to you? What do you need the business community to know?"

Facilitators invited adults with autism to describe the issues that matter most when seeking employment and the challenges presented. This candid and open discussion raised the following list of concerns:

The Interview Process

People with autism spectrum disorders often experience challenges that include reading and using nonverbal communication. This can hinder their ability to convey their qualifications for a particular job and negatively influence an employer's first impression. The inability to accurately use and read body language and gestures, make and maintain eye contact, and engage in the social banter of an interview creates major barriers in highly variable social situations, such as an initial job interview.

Disclosure

The issue of disclosure for individuals with an obvious disability – a person who walks with leg braces or crutches, for instance – is presented immediately upon meeting with a prospective employer. For people with ASD and other "invisible" disabilities, however, the decision to disclose their disability can be complicated. Many employees with autism fear being judged because the accommodations they need are often related to the "soft skills" on a job site, and are not always easy to see or understand.

Underemployment

Many people with autism, particularly those who are less significantly impacted, are fully capable of challenging and high-paying work. However, they may not function easily in "high-powered" environments. Weak or atypical social skills, a lack of resources and home support, and the demands of managing home, career and other responsibilities can be taxing on any adult, but particularly on a person with autism.

The term "soft skills" refers to people skills or social skills that employees need to interact successfully with people in a variety of situations. These abilities are often taken for granted by neurotypicals (people without neurological disabilities), but can present significant challenges to people with ASD in the workplace.

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Workplaces are increasingly dynamic and responsibilities and job requirements often shift over time. Attending training sessions or company retreats, as well as working on joint projects – which may not have been part of the original job description – can present challenges to people with autism who often have difficulty adapting to changes in demands and routines. Difficulty "reading" the unwritten rules of corporate culture is another obstacle for people with autism in the workforce.

The Need for Meaningful and Value-Based Employment

Adults with autism expressed their desire to work for industries they value and to enjoy the work they perform. Public and private agencies that provide job skills to support employees with autism too often focus on simply finding a job. This often translates into low-paying, menial tasks or employment in sheltered workshops. People with autism, like all adults, are seeking work that they enjoy and find meaningful, and for employers who value their strengths and offer the potential for advancement.

Transportation

The lack of convenient public transportation often interferes with employment and professional growth for people with autism. Many adults with ASD do not drive. Thus, getting to job sites, meetings, etc. on time can be very challenging and in many cases poses a very significant barrier to employment. Those who do not live *and* work near public transportation often experience limited choices and blunted work opportunities.

Clarity of Job Requirements

"Clutter" in the workplace and vague or overly broad job descriptions complicate a clear understanding of the range of skills truly needed for a particular job. Adults with autism described a need for clarity and specificity in job descriptions and expectations.

Medical Issues

Some adults with autism experiences seizures and other medical issues, often presenting additional barriers unless accommodations are provided on and off the job to support their medical needs.

Example: a simple, yet effective accommodation that can help an employee with a seizure disorder or light sensitivity would be to replace fluorescent tube lighting with full-spectrum light or compact fluorescent light (CFL) bulbs in the workplace, or to allow the employee to wear sunglasses or caps at work.

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Understanding the Employment of Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder

"What do we know? What are we missing?"

Facilitators asked the group to discuss their knowledge of employment and autism. It was concluded that while there are a great deal of presumptions relating to employment of adults with autism, little hard data exists to back it up. To a large extent, the community is relying on anecdotal information and unscientific impressions, rather than quality data and information on evidence-based interventions. Think Tank participants shared impressions and concerns as described below:

- Unemployment for adults with autism is too high and is too easily accepted.
- Too many students, upon leaving high school, are not "career ready." They lack self-advocacy skills and generally cannot identify their strengths.

"When a person with autism is unemployed, the default response is often: 'Perhaps you should go on disability.' This causes a downward spiral."
-An Employee with Autism

"Schools use a 'deficit model.' I know what is wrong with me, but not what I'm good at."
-An Employee with Autism

Accomodations

Because of their behavioral, communication, and sensory challenges, some people with autism appear to need more supports than those with other developmental disabilities. Job coaches and employers often do not know how to redesign the workplace to support employees with autism.

"Soft Skills"

Adults with autism are more apt to successfully learn and perform "hard skills" directly related to a job. "Soft skills" such as small-talk, office politics, and team-oriented projects often prove more challenging. These softer skills, though, are highly valued in the workplace and are often unspoken requirements to remain employed or be considered for promotion. Bullying by coworkers and managers can also be a problem in some work settings.

"In some ways, the same bullies that tormented students with autism in middle school are evident in the workplace where they now experience 'social gang-ups.' Success at work is not just about pleasing the boss, but pleasing coworkers."
-An Academic Expert

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Myths

There is often a presumption that adults with autism are not capable of meaningful, complex work. As a result, many students with ASD are not sufficiently prepared with the skills needed for employment. Teachers must be encouraged to believe that students with autism can and will grow up to hold jobs, and they should instruct their students and help plan their educational goals with this in mind.

"The bottom line is that we will bankrupt the system if we keep doing what we are doing."
-A Service Provider

Fading Out the Job Coach

Employment models that rely on 1:1 or 2:1 job coach-to-employee ratios can be costly, impossible to sustain, and ultimately detrimental to the person with autism. People with autism should receive direct instruction on how to manage and monitor their own behavior in order to avoid relying too heavily on job coaches in the long term.

Transition from School to Work

At the conclusion of a student's high school education, he/she often experiences a precipitous decline in services, including speech and language therapy. Transition planning needs to be dynamic and begin early in adolescence. Too often transition focuses on "placing" a person with autism in a job and fails to account for the arc of a career path that includes promotions or changes in jobs or industries. For those with significant challenges, it is especially important that instruction be practical and community-based.

"The work place is changing, becoming more diverse and inclusive. People with autism need to be considered."
-A Parent

Legislation

Newly proposed provisions of Section 503 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973 would require that employers awarded federal and state contracts maintain a workforce in which at least 7% of their employees have self-disclosed disabilities. Non-compliant employers would run the risk of losing federal funds or incurring other penalties. These changes, if adopted, would help create an added incentive for employers to recruit and retain employees with autism.

"The message has to be, 'Hiring someone with autism is cool.'"
-A Parent

Media

There is a need for positive media efforts to promote the employment of adults with autism who will add to the neuro-diversity of the work environment. Many employers lack knowledge about adults with autism and their strengths and talents. Their expectations are often based on anecdotal accounts or stereotypes that must be debunked.

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The Role of Families and Caregivers

"What role should families play in the employment of adults with autism?"

Facilitators encouraged the group to explore the role of families and caregivers. Three significant issues were identified:

1. Entitlement to special education typically ends at the age of 21. It is at this point when parents find it extremely difficult to connect with adult service providers – a much-needed service.
2. Many states offer families and consumers a choice of service providers; however, there is not enough information to help make a thorough analysis. Easy access to standardized tools with meaningful metrics to help review options would be beneficial. The "Consumer's Guide" approach to resources is an example of a user-friendly research directory.
3. Most parents lack the financial resources to provide for the lifetime care and support of their son or daughter with autism. Federal and state assistance is desperately needed, but is in short supply. Thus, individuals with autism need the ability to support themselves. But this is more than simply a monetary issue. So much of an individual's identity in American culture – and indeed one's value in society – is defined by his/her career or occupation. Like most other citizens, adults with autism wish to be fully included, and to contribute to their households and society at large.

"If parents select the 'wrong agency' to provide support for their adult family member with autism, they are dead in the water."
-A Parent

"Parents cannot be the backbone of the employment system. Eventually, they will die. It needs to be society."
-A Service Provider

A Note on Developing Adequate Funding for Supports

During the Think Tank, participants agreed that the current government system intended to support employment of adults with autism is under-funded and incapable of serving the number of people in need.

Stakeholders agreed that a combination of public and private funding is needed to support adults with autism. The benefits of such a public/private system would allow financially secure families to pay for services as well as offer a co-pay system for healthcare.

Additionally, while larger businesses may have systems and protocols to accommodate adults with autism, the nation's small businesses cannot take on the cost of training or support of this nature.

Participants also gave consideration to the benefits of expanding opportunities or microfinancing to allow a person with autism to open and operate his/her own small business.

A 2012 Autism Speaks--funded study found that lifetime care for an individual with autism costs an estimated $1.4 million. For those who also have an intellectual disability, the calculated cost was $2.3 million on average.

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Part II
Perspective: Business Leaders

"Businesses exist to make money. Period. The social benefit of hiring someone with autism comes after profit. -A Business Leader"

On Day Two of the Think Tank, business leaders, human resource professionals, entrepreneurs, and other participants met to share strategies and experiences – both positive and otherwise – and to offer best practices for employing adults with autism. Industries represented at the table included advertising, agriculture, the arts, business-to-business sales, contract services, distribution, electronic media, entertainment, finance, healthcare, hospitality, information technology, legal, non-profit, pharmaceuticals, retail, and service.

Stakeholders shared their business and hiring practices as they relate to employees with autism. Included were human resources strategies for recruitment, hiring, accommodations, and supervision, as well as challenges, barriers and specific actions to which they would commit.

Success Story: Walgreens

One idea sparked an innovative and inclusive way to look at productivity, efficiency and opportunity at Walgreens distribution centers. In 2002, Randy Lewis, Walgreens senior vice president of supply chain and logistics, wanted to create job opportunities for people with disabilities. This was the right idea at the right time as the company was investing in new technology for its next generation of distribution centers.

In 2007, Walgreens opened its 14th distribution center in Anderson, S.C. Built to support the company's expansion throughout the Southeast, this center was the first facility of its kind to employ a significant number of people with disabilities. More than 40 percent of the facility's workforce has a physical or cognitive disability, ranging from autism and mental retardation to those who are visually or hearing impaired.

After working with some of the best in the field for technology and training, Walgreens designed a plan that could be rolled out at its next generation of distribution centers and implemented at other centers across the chain. "We've worked technology and creativity into every inch of this place, but it's the people here who will amaze you," said Lewis. This new distribution center model, launched in 2007, allowed management and partner organizations to look for people with the right attitude to learn and succeed.

Broadening the workforce by employing people with disabilities is not just a nice gesture; it makes good business sense. As Lewis says, "This has led to the conclusion that hiring the disabled is not just as good – it is better." Walgreens found that, with the right mix of training, technology and awareness, its newest generation of distribution centers runs more efficiently and productively than older counterparts.

– The HR Group, Inc

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Lessons Learned

"What have you learned about hiring and working with employees with autism?"

Business leaders from more than a dozen industries were invited to share their perspectives and strategies for recruiting and hiring workers with autism. Lessons learned are reflected below:

Hiring people with autism can be good for the bottom line.

Business leaders with a proven track record of hiring employees with autism said that these workers are often excellent, dependable and long-term employees. They follow company rules, arrive on time, and have low rates of absenteeism. Other strengths often include intense attention to detail and a need for perfection. One employer noted that the turnover rate of his employees with autism is one third that of neurotypical workers (those without disabilities), thus reducing company costs.

Employers agreed that neurotypical employees also benefit from the supports put in place for their coworkers with autism. Visual reminders, simplified job descriptions, and "traveling" interviews – where job candidates observe employees performing the job for which they are being considered – are useful for all company employees. Productivity can be increased for all employees with these universal accommodations.

Universal Design for accommodations is defined as, "the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design."

– Center for Universal Design, NC State University

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"Provider agencies need to have the right spirit, be flexible, and be willing to come in and give us what we need."
-A Business Leader

Employers need to plan carefully for appropriate supports and accommodations.

The needs and talents of employees with autism vary greatly, requiring highly individualized support solutions and accommodations. Business leaders agreed that it is vital to select the right service provider agencies and choose the most appropriate positions for the employee with autism, based on the individual's interests and strengths.

"People with autism need an internal mentor to help them navigate the social hurdles of the workplace."
-An Employee with Autism

Natural supports are vital.

Most business leaders concur that external job coaches are helpful; however, they also underscored the need for natural supports and internal mentors within the company. Some businesses found the external job coach to be burdensome and inflexible, and looked for ways to retain the employee with autism while "firing" the job coach.

"It's okay to start off with a solid double – it does not have to be a home run."
-A Business Leader

Employers must set reasonable expectations for hiring.

Employers reflected on the need for businesses to start small and make incremental changes as they approach their efforts to hire employees with autism. Often, grand initiatives result in short-lived hiring programs that fail to live up to lofty expectations.

Training is vital for both the employee with autism and for his/her coworkers and managers.

Employers agreed that realistic pre-training environments are needed to better prepare employees with autism for the workplace, and to help them integrate into the culture of the organization. Employers found external job coaches to be most beneficial during this stage of training.

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"Autism is hard to understand –bosses and employees cannot see it, so it is hard to know what to do."
-A Business Leader

"The funding system needs to be simple and transparent."
-An Academic Support

"What works in one state may not even be possible in another."
-A Business Leader

"The passion of advocates overrides an understanding of how business works. Providers have to listen to what we need and be willing to collaborate."
-A Business Leader

"Sometimes the job coach actually limits [the employee with ASD] more than we do. The job coach is supposed to be an accommodation – they should not be doing the job."
-An Employer

"In our efforts to hire people with disabilities, we got good traction at the high school level – much better than with the adult provider agencies. We now try to get people right out of high school and sidestep the adult agencies."
-A Human Resources Professional

"Any time we have a good idea or want to try something new, we have a team of lawyers telling us to 'look out.'"
-A Human Resources Professional

Challenges and Barriers to Employing Adults with Autism

"What has been difficult for you as an employer? What gets in the way?"

Employers described both internal and external challenges as they relate to the employment of adults with autism. A number of issues emerged:

- There is a lack of information about autism and the benefits of employing a person with autism.
- Business leaders lack information about successful models for hiring people with autism.
- The relationships between and among government-funded programs (e.g., SSI, Medicaid, Vocational Rehabilitation, Ticket to Work) are difficult to understand for business leaders, employers and individuals with ASD and their families.
- Publically funded programs designed to support adults with disabilities vary from state to state, making nation-wide expansion of successful practices difficult for multistate companies.
- Agencies offering job coaching services can be inflexible and unsympathetic to the needs of employers. It is often difficult for companies to hire employees with autism to work the hours, shifts, and positions available in part because of this inflexibility.
- The quality and scope of job coaching varies greatly, not only from one provider agency to another, but even within a trusted agency. In addition, many job coaches lack a basic understanding of business and human resources.
- The lack of a national certification process for job coaches – along with the absence of an accepted skill set – creates a double risk for businesses when employing someone with autism. Because of these inadequacies, some employers try to avoid using job coaches altogether.
- Businesses operate in highly litigious and cost-conscious environments. As such, concerns about rising healthcare costs, disability insurance, and workers' compensation may hinder the recruitment of employees with disabilities, including those with autism.

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Business Leaders Looking Ahead

Facilitators asked business leaders what was needed in order to move forward and advance the hiring of people with autism.

Day Two participant Patricia Ryan, Senior Vice President of HR & Leadership Development at the Greater Charlotte YMCA.

"How can we continue to learn?"

Leaders expressed a need for quality information and resources about recruiting, hiring, supporting, and retaining employees with autism.

"Who are our resources?"

Employers require communication with agencies in order to help answer employee questions pertaining to work, benefits and entitlements.

"What are the implications of changing rules and regulations?"

Employers require information on how they can prepare for the proposed changes to Section 503 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act to ensure that people with disabilities, including autism, receive the intended benefit.

For more information about the proposed changes to Section 503, visit http://www.dol.gov/compliance/laws/comp-rehab.htm

"How can the business community help collect meaningful data?"

Business leaders want data about the benefits of employing people with autism, and are willing to help collect it.

"How do we start?"

Employers require strategies to develop a basic approach to educating line staff and better integrating service providers into the business conversation, along with a summary of successful models for employing people with autism.

"How can we continue the dialogue?"

Leaders expressed the need to continue to meet and discuss issues and challenges related to employing people with autism. Networking and learning from parents and people with autism will help address challenges outside the confines of government-funded programs, and offer the opportunity to "think outside the box."

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Internal Action Steps

Business leaders were encouraged to identify and commit to specific action steps that they intend to incorporate into their business plans in order to increase and improve the quality of employment of adults with autism and to advance the national agenda:

Traveling Interview

A traveling interview, in which the prospective employee is accompanied by the interviewer throughout the actual workplace and given the chance to experience the required tasks and job settings, has been shown to be useful for all employees. Traditional interviews are often extremely challenging and anxiety-inducing for adults with autism. The traveling interview also serves the dual purpose of ensuring a full and concrete understanding of the job requirements on the part of the individual with ASD, avoiding any miscommunication or confusion inherent in a written job description.

Peer Mentoring Programs and Natural Supports

Peer mentoring programs would educate and train coworkers and managers of individuals with autism in how they can best support their peers with disabilities in ways that are similar to how they might support their neurotypical peers. Natural supports in the workplace are more sustainable and cost-effective than more formal interventions such as job coaches, and often benefit all employees. Some business leaders expressed interest in the idea of the "manager as job coach," making clear that supporting employees with ASD should specifically be part of a manager's responsibilities. This also helps phase out the job coach, who is best used as a temporary accommodation during times of transition or only when needed. Several participants committed to developing and documenting these and other standardized and simple accommodations that might benefit employees with autism, as well as other employees with different needs.
See section on job accommodations on page 13 for more information.

Diversity & Inclusion and Staff Development Programs

Many participants committed to immediately start integrating people with autism into their diversity and inclusion strategies, if they were not already doing so. A few business leaders expressed the need for greater awareness of the skills, talents, and abilities of adults with autism, and how they can contribute to their workforce. Additionally, employers committed to retooling their learning and staff development programs to better accommodate and include employees with autism. Some business leaders who actively hire individuals with autism appear to focus primarily on entry-level and/or part-time positions only. Participants recognized the need for an effort to include employees with ASD in higher level positions and provide them with opportunities for internal promotion.

Artwork created by Tyler Bell for TIAA-CREF's Fruits of Employment initiative.

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Part III
Perspective: Promising Practices That Can Advance the Hiring of Employees with Autism

Participants in both sessions of the Think Tank identified strategies and best practices to be used in schools, interviews, job accommodations, and corporate culture and diversity.

In Schools

Consumers and academic experts suggested:

- Teaching and reinforcing the skill of positively "accepting correction" – a common negative experience when one is new on the job, particularly for an individual with autism who has social skill deficits.
- Developing a "sensory scan" or "social scan" tool that can help someone with autism independently identify and then advocate for the supports he or she might need to function well in the workplace.
- Teaching essential vocabulary to people with autism to help them better describe their experiences, such as the feelings of sensory overload and other challenges.
- Starting early on to teach self-monitoring skills to people with autism, thereby minimizing the need for employer instruction and preparing these future employees to self-regulate in the workplace.

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"Internships are free to employers and invaluable to the members who are looking for real life skills that will prepare them for competitive employment. As an internship program sponsor, your company will benefit by obtaining reliable employees at no cost, providing a valuable and productive community service, and increasing productivity as a result of expanded staff. In exchange, your company will become an important partner in helping individuals achieve their career goals. As a result of their experience with you, [individuals with autism] are better able to prepare for the work force, handle real world responsibilities, and acquire actual job skills." – Vista Vocational & Life Skills Center

Interview Process

Business leaders suggested:

- Using the entire building as the interview location, so that the prospective employee can preview the work environment and develop a realistic idea of the job.
- Interviewing for trainability, not for specific skills.
- Avoiding sarcasm and humor in the interview process or in the supervision of an employee, as individuals with autism often have a very concrete understanding of language and tend to interpret words literally.

Consumers and academic experts suggested:

- Avoiding jargon and small talk during the interview, as these "soft skills" can be very challenging for individuals with ASD.
- Clarifying expectations during the interview and in written job descriptions.
- Expanding the interview process to include a job preview (a walk-through of the actual job that is to be performed).
- Waiving formal interviews in favor of trial work days.
- Using internships as part of training and assessment.

Job Accommodations

Business leaders suggested:

- Teaching the job where it will be performed.
- Considering the sensory experiences of the employee.
- Avoiding lowered expectations or patronization, being sure to treat employees with autism as one would other staff and being direct and specific about the skills required.
- Reconsidering the role of the job coach as follows:
  1. Building a network of natural supports.
  2. From the first day, preparing for the job coach to leave.
  3. Devising a fade plan that allows for support to move in and out as needed.
  4. Pulling back job coaches to allow employees to respond and problem solve independently.

Consumers and academic experts suggested:

- Considering cognitive and sensory "curb cuts" as a way to create more accessible entry points into the workplace.
- Viewing the job coach as an accommodation.
- Breaking down tasks into component parts for instruction.
- Using visual information and cues to help train employees.
- Using competence measures that evaluate job-specific skills.

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Corporate Culture and Diversity in the Workplace

Business leaders suggested:

- Recognizing the successes of all employees in the workplace, not just those with disabilities.
- Maintaining a measurable job performance matrix for all employees.
- Working with qualified employee partners who are productive through diversified skills, including them as part of the company.
- Involving open, optimistic people.
- Building and maintaining a coalition of people with disabilities and service providers.
- Grooming and training supervisors as the ultimate job coaches, and encouraging the vision that the employees with autism are "their employees".

Day Two participants (from l to r):
Carrie O'Connell,
Director of Programs and Services at Ability Beyond Disability
Van Hatchell,
Director of Marketing and EV Gifts at Extraordinary Ventures, Inc.
Lori Ireland,
parent and founder of Extraordinary Ventures, Inc.

Consumers and academic experts suggested:

- Bridging the "jargon gap" by creating a dialogue about specific, desired workplace behaviors.
- Ensuring the corporate mission is intrinsic in the workplace culture and reflected in the attitudes of local managers who often fail to assimilate diversity.

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Part IV
Perspective: Action Steps Toward a National Agenda

Over the past two years, the lack of employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities has been thrust into the national spotlight. In response, both federal and state lawmakers from around the United States have launched initiatives designed to help address this dire need. Four such efforts are cited here which have been advanced by legislators who are leading by example. These efforts present promising opportunities to advance the discussion of employment for individuals with autism on a national level, to make it a national priority and to help build a national agenda.

- In July 2010, President Obama signed Executive Order 13548 entitled "Increasing Federal Employment of Individuals with Disabilities." This order illustrated the federal government's commitment to expanding access to employment for people with disabilities by ensuring that the Executive Branch hires workers with disabilities, enforces existing laws, provides technical assistance and information on reasonable accommodations, and identifies and removes barriers to employment encountered by people with public benefits. In addition, this order establishes the federal government as a model employer of persons with disabilities, requires agencies to create hiring plans and holds agencies accountable for their hiring practices. To learn more about the President's Executive Order 13548, visit **http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/executive-order-increasing-federal-employment-individuals-with-disabilities.**

- Concurrently, the Department of Labor has proposed new rules to strengthen requirements established in Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 that would mandate federal contractors and subcontractors to employ a workforce of which at least seven percent consists of people with disabilities. The proposed regulatory changes detail specific actions contractors must take in the areas of recruitment, training, record keeping, and policy dissemination similar to those that have long been required to promote workplace equality for women and minorities. A course of action steps is outlined in the document. For more information about the proposed changes to Section 503, visit **http://www.dol.gov/compliance/laws/comp-rehab.htm**

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- Delaware Governor Jack Markell was named chair of the National Governors Association (NGA) in July 2012. Gov. Markell announced his chair's initiative, "A Better Bottom Line: Employing People with Disabilities," which aims to increase employment for individuals with disabilities. Specifically, the initiative will focus on the employment challenges that affect individuals with intellectual and other significant disabilities, and the role that both state governments and businesses can play in facilitating and advancing opportunities for these individuals to be gainfully employed. To read more about the NGA chair's initiative, visit http://www.subnet.nga.org/ci/1213/home.html
- U.S. Senator Tom Harkin from Iowa, chair of the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP Committee), held a series of hearings in 2012 to explore the persistently low labor force participation of people with disabilities. The resulting report, "Unfinished Business: Making Employment of People with Disabilities a National Priority," describes the dismal disability employment situation, points to some recent developments that create an historic opportunity to bring more workers with disabilities into the labor force, and calls on the leadership in Congress, the Administration, the business community, and society at large to elevate this issue to a national priority. Read the HELP Committee's report at http://harkin.senate.gov/documents/pdf/500469b49b364.pdf.

Data Collection and Information Sharing

- Collect data demonstrating the cost benefits and sound business reasons for hiring people with autism.
- Collect data regarding safety, performance, and attendance from businesses currently employing people with autism.
- Advocate that school districts specifically report on employment data and statistics as a measure of successful transition from school to work.
- Create a portal where employers can share how to document best practices, and where prospective employees with autism can post resumes and search for positions.
- Establish a committee of service providers and businesses for ongoing dialogue.

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Developing and Leveraging Community Strengths

- Seek champions of this issue by considering partners and obtaining success stories from and for the business community.
- Develop a one page "pitch sheet" designed to encourage employers to hire people with autism, focusing on the strengths and abilities of these employees.
- Create a fact sheet or white paper regarding the purchasing power of people with autism, and leveraging their extended families and friends as a potentially loyal customer base.
- Help establish a network of adults with autism who are willing to mentor teens and young adults with ASD to a position of competency and confidence. (An example of such a network is the Autistic Global Initiative (AGI) in San Diego. Learn more at http://www.autism.com/index.php/tests.)
- Provide technical assistance and education to employers about "soft skills" and their relevance to the work required.

Addressing the Changing World of Work, Fears, and Misconceptions

- Lead a campaign to create and promote new strategies for business leaders to hire and retain employees with autism.
- Encourage the development of a business "clearinghouse" of ideas and strategies, such as ways to build the capacity of a business and the pros and cons of eliminating the job coach.
- Establish a "share network" to encourage service providers, autism experts, employment specialists, and business leaders to work together.
- Create a job posting website to link employers and job recruiters with people with autism.
- Collect and publish stories of best practices, highlighting how businesses have captured or leveraged funds and are meeting milestones for employing people with disabilities.
- Establish a communication portal including facts, benefits, myth-busting, and definitions of clinical jargon for businesses to learn about hiring people with autism.

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Education and Training in Self-Advocacy and "Soft Skills"

- Work with schools and transition programs to advocate a strengths-based approach to better prepare students entering the workforce upon graduation.
- Create a job- and career-readiness tool kit for teachers and school districts that develops and strengthens the skills students with autism will require to progress through the arc of a career path rather than simply secure entry-level jobs.
- Create communication tools that can be used in the workplace to encourage self-discovery and self-advocacy among individuals with autism.
- Specify instruction and assessment to address a student's need for self-advocacy skills.

Transition from School to Work

- Create a tool to assist parents of younger children and teens with autism to think positively about their futures (see the Autism Speaks Transition Tool Kit).
- Work with physicians to modify the language used at the moment of diagnosis to enable parents to have realistic and hopeful outlooks for their children's futures.
- Begin vocational training and transition to adulthood earlier in adolescence and focus on marketable and employable skills.

- Create a strengths-based model of core skills for teachers and job coaches to utilize with students.
- Consider the obstacles that prevent successful transition, such as the lack of information currently being incorporated by the service provider community or policy makers.
- Bring together major disability groups that are developing teacher competencies.
- Develop a job coach certification process with formal training requirements and outcome measures.
- Consider strategies for employers to train neurotypical employees to act as job coaches through peer mentoring.
- Look to researchers for best practices in the use of peer mentoring.

For a detailed guide to the transition process, please refer to the Autism Speaks Transition Tool Kit. All Autism Speaks tool kits are available for free download at http://www.autismspeaks.org/family-services/tool-kits.

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Please stay tuned for the Autism Speaks Employment Tool Kit, which was informed by this Employment Think Tank.

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