

# AN AUTISTIC VIEW OF EMPLOYMENT

Advice, Essays, Stories, and More from Autistic Self Advocates

from The National Autism Resource and Information Center  
and the Autistic Self Advocacy Network



*a national  
initiative of*



This document was edited by The Arc of the United States.  
The final product was not approved or endorsed by the  
Autistic Self Advocacy Network.

# Foreword

The Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN) is excited to have collaborated with Autism NOW on this cutting-edge project that is aimed to give a voice to Autistic individuals who are either looking for jobs or who are currently employed. The hallmark of our organization is to provide support and services to Autistic individuals while working to educate communities and improve public perceptions of autism. We strive to open doors for people to live fulfilling and productive lives. There should be no limitations to the possibilities for Autistic individuals to achieve their personal goals and attain the dreams they have for themselves. Nothing About Us Without Us!

This anthology is an honest look at the passions, trials, and tribulations of Autistic self advocates. It is tempered with advice, rich perspectives, and stories. Our contributors have shared what it feels like to assess where they've been in life and where they want to go. They have also shared the lessons they have learned. In the following pages, you'll discover information about ADA and employment, employment scams, characteristics of good managers, and tidbits about disclosure and self care. Other subjects include finding work, Vocational Rehabilitation, networking, resumes, schedules, clear communication, and showcasing your best skills.

While we do not guarantee that the information and essays shared will help readers to find employment, we have confidence that most who encounter this resource will find the information and advocacy ideas that are presented helpful in advancing their own educational and life experiences. We hope our essays serve as a guidepost that inspires and supports the journeys of our reading audience, especially because we wish you the best as you advance your futures! Thank you for stopping by!

---

This document was supported in part by a cooperative agreement from the Administration on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, Administration for Community Living, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Grantees undertaking projects under government sponsorship are encouraged to express freely their findings and conclusions. Points of view or opinions do not, therefore, necessarily represent official Administration on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities policy.

# Table of Contents

Foreword .....	2
Lessons Learned in 20 Years of Highly Skilled Employment <i>by Dora Raymaker</i> ....	4
Finding a job through the back door: 25 tips <i>by Carl Peterson</i> .....	19
Vocational Rehabilitation <i>by Carl Peterson</i> .....	22
Finding the Right Job for You: Your Needs, Your Wants, Your Interests <i>by Shain Neumeier</i> .....	29
Career Options <i>by Meg Evans</i> .....	34
Building a Resume and Cover Letter <i>by Elizabeth Boresow</i> .....	37
Me and the Anti-CV: Taking a Look Backward in Order to Look Forward <i>by Andee Joyce</i> .....	39
Keep it Moving: Musings for Young People in Transition & Thoughts on Preparing to Search for, Self-Manage, and Succeed in Employment <i>by Emily Wilson</i> .....	50
Personal Job Requirements and Networking <i>by Elizabeth Boresow</i> .....	57
Using a Schedule <i>by Elizabeth Boresow</i> .....	61
Autistic Employment <i>by Tracy Garza</i> .....	63
Finding your niche in the workplace <i>by Jason Ross</i> .....	65
Aut at Work: The If, Why and How of Autism Disclosure on the Job <i>by Shain Neumeier</i> .....	69
The Gift of the Authentic Self <i>by Meg Evans</i> .....	75
Clear Communication <i>by Elizabeth Boresow</i> .....	78
Avoiding Employment Scams <i>by Kathryn Hedges</i> .....	81
Unhelpful Professionals in the Job Search <i>by Kathryn Hedges</i> .....	97

# Lessons Learned in 20 Years of Highly Skilled Employment

*by Dora Raymaker*

Every employment-related workshop for people on the autism spectrum I've attended has focused exclusively on entry-level, very physical, jobs. Sanitation worker. Filing clerk. Warehouse stocker. Jobs that are, ironically, utterly inaccessible to me. In fact, the list of positions I've been fired from for incompetence include: janitor, ticket-taker, clothes-folder-person—entry level positions that require perception and coordination skills like getting the mop to actually go into the bucket of soapy water, or noticing that the shirt is inside out. (I can't even manage that one when dressing myself!) Yet, I've been employed for over 20 years. The list of positions I've held and excelled at include: process analyst, scenic painter, programmer, information architect, writer, researcher—highly skilled professional positions.

I always ask the same questions at those employment-related workshops: Where is the discussion of jobs in technology? What about the jobs in the arts and sciences? What about the jobs that require the advanced degrees or creative and craftsman skills many of us have? What about the highly skilled jobs that I can actually do?

I always get the same answer: Blank confusion.

So, this is some of the information I wish was included in those employment-related workshops for people on the autism spectrum. These are some of the things that have enabled me to work in highly skilled jobs both with deference to—and in celebration of—my abilities as an Autistic person.

## **The Scope of This Article**

This article is only about skilled professional jobs. These jobs are different from entry-level positions in a number of ways. Some ideas in this article may backfire badly if used in entry-level settings.

This article is a broad overview. It covers some big things to think about and gives some examples from my personal experience. This article is not comprehensive. It is not a step-by-step guide.

The tips in this article are based on my personal experience. These tips may not work for others as well as they have worked for me. They may not work for others at all. (But hey, they've got to be marginally more useful to anyone interested in skilled employment than one more session on stocking a warehouse!)

## **Special Interest City: Figuring Out If a Job Is a Good Fit**

I love complexity. I have always loved complexity; I can not get enough of it; everything I do always comes back around to it. How do parts combine to make wholes? How can relationships be understood when they are too complicated to be explained by a simple formula? How does a change to one part make a change to the whole? How can I make change in the world around me? What are the patterns? I'm lucky because I can find jobs that make use of my special interest. (Though I'm also unlucky because no one but a tiny handful of specialized scientists actually understands it!) But there are jobs out there for any interest from old movies to things that spin, from 18th century Russian literature to comic books to computer games. Here are some ideas for how to figure out if a job is a good fit for you.

**KNOW THYSELF:** The key to everything in this article is knowing yourself. Know your special interests, your strengths and talents, your limits, your preferences, and what resources you have to use. You can't find a job that suits you well if you don't know what kinds of things suit you well. Look for patterns in your life. Pay attention to what is easy and you do well. Pay attention to what is hard or impossible. What brings you calm and joy and what brings you frustration and overload? Be realistic and honest not just about what you are bad at, but also about what you excel at. Make a list of things you love studying, thinking about or doing, and make a list of the things you find frustrating.

**THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX:** You may already know of a job that is right for you. Go for it! But if there doesn't seem to be a job out there suits your strengths, interests, and limits, don't get stuck and stop. Brainstorm a bunch of ideas, no matter how grand.

**ASK YOURSELF:** What do I currently do that I wish I got paid for?

**ASK YOURSELF:** What do I love so much that I could do it for the rest of my life and not get tired of it?

**ASK YOURSELF:** If I could invent any job in the world for myself, what would it be?

The ideas you come up with might not be realistic or do-able, but there may be realistic jobs out there that are similar to your ideas, or that you can create with some help (see the section on Job Carving later).

## **Beyond interests: evaluating corporate and professional cultures.**

Personal strengths, interests, and limits are only part of the “good job fit” equation. The other piece is the culture of the job and how compatible it is with you. A job that works well will be in an environment that also works well. What works well will be different for everyone. Here are some things to think about when determining if a job environment might be good for you.

- Do you like a lot of supervision, or would you prefer to work mostly independently?
- Do you like having an explicit task list, or do you like having a big project that you manage yourself?
- Do you like following rules, or do you like making up your own rules?

- Do you like working set hours, or do you like working on your own time (flexible hours)?
- Do you like working in your home, or do you like working at a job site?
- Do you enjoy start-up environments where you get to invent a lot of your job (but things may be a bit unstable), or do you enjoy places that have been around for a long time and have a well-worn routine (but you might have less ability to influence)?
- Are you a casual “jeans and t-shirt” person, or would you rather work in a formal business-suit type setting?
- Do you like working in hierarchical settings where everyone has a set place, or in flat-management settings where everyone is on the same level?
- Do you like places where co-workers joke and laugh a lot with each other, or places where people tend to focus on their work and not interact very much?
- Do you like to work collaboratively on teams, or do you like to work independently?
- Do you like management to share a lot of information with you about the company, or do you only like knowing things that directly affect your work?
- How important is it to you that the people in your workplace are tolerant of disability and difference?

**EXAMPLE:** When I was in my mid-30’s, I was at a crossroads in my career. I knew I needed more of a challenge in my job, and I wasn’t interested in promotions along my current career path because they all included management and public relations aspects I wasn’t interested in or couldn’t do. I wasn’t really sure what jobs were “out there” for someone with my interests and skills. Here are some things I did know I needed in a job:

- Complexity had to be a huge part of it (of course!)
- —but I didn't care how. I'd do anything from creating library classification systems to programming robot brains.
- Flexible hours were a must (my brain does not always work when others want it to).
- I needed a lot of freedom to define and manage my own projects (my brain does not always do things the way others want it to).
- The work needed to be mental. No perception or coordination required (see my failure at keeping shirts right-side-in).
- I understand neither hierarchy nor rules and have only ever sustained employment in mostly flat-management structures with a culture of information-sharing, autonomy, and a lot of tolerance for quirks.
- I'm never truly happy unless I'm doing something that improves people's lives. Even if it's just making their jobs easier.

What does this add up to? Well, a lot of possibilities. Some I seriously thought about were: Think-tank-person at Intel, computational biology programmer at the health sciences university, and owner of a small business specializing in business dynamics consulting. What did I end up going for? Academia, with a focus in research. Which, of all my ideas, ended up being—ironically—the least complex option.

## **Back Doors and Key Niches: Getting a Job Even if You Can't "Pass" in an Interview**

I remember looking for a job in my field and giving up because everything I was qualified for required using the telephone and meeting with clients. I've never gotten a skilled job by applying for it and interviewing. Even if the job description didn't include

a bunch of things I couldn't do, how would I make it through the interview? I've gotten all of my skilled jobs through back doors, and by finding key niches that I can fill and no one else can.

## **Interning, job tryouts, and volunteering**

One way to bypass the interview process is to do the job so well you get hired, if not at that job, in a similar position elsewhere. Unpaid internships and volunteer positions don't pay the bills, but they are a way to impress people, prove your abilities, and both learn skills and make contacts who may be able to get you into job positions later. Another strategy is to get a job that's related to what you want to do and then ask to take on extra projects in the area you're interested in. If people like what you do, it could develop into the job you want.

**EXAMPLE:** I had a job as a computer operator, but I wanted to develop a career in technical communications. I volunteered to write manuals for my department that covered all my computer operator job tasks. The manuals were so useful to others that I was able to change my job from computer operator to technical writer.

Networking with people who know you and who are impressed with you – One of the nice things about highly skilled work is that it puts you into contact with highly skilled people. This includes people who may be in positions to help get you a job. Professors, researchers, managers, politicians, senior personnel in a particular industry, and even co-workers who value you are all potential routes to employment. This isn't "networking" in its socializing sense that a lot of us aren't so good at (or at least I'm not so good at). This is building one-on-one relationships with others around mutual interests and shared passions.

**EXAMPLE:** Through our mutual interest in autism, I made friends with a scientist. Because she liked the kind of work I could do, she started helping me with my career

switch into research, which eventually developed into starting a new research group. Shortly after that, through our mutual interest in autism, I made friends with another autistic person who was interested in a job. She impressed me with her writing and facilitation skills, and I was, in turn, able to employ her as a research assistant in my research group.

## **Sell your special skills**

You don't have to be a Nobel-Prize-winning savant to have special skills! Special skills could be related to interests. Or they might be learned from your unique experiences in life. Your special skills could be broad like being good at learning independently or being excellent at making diagrams (both skills of mine I've sold for technical writing positions). Let people know how you can be helpful. When you're trying to show that there are reasons to hire you instead of someone else, any quirky special skills that are relevant to the job position can help.

**EXAMPLE:** There are very few researchers with communication disabilities. This makes me uniquely able to adapt research materials for use with people with communication disabilities. This makes me valuable on any project that intends to collect data from other autistic people, or people who have other types of communication differences.

## **Ask for accommodations in the application process**

Disclosure is covered more later, but if you end up needing to apply for, interview for, or use other traditional means of getting a job, you may want or need to ask for accommodations. This means disclosing your ASD during the job application process, rather than after you've gotten the job. While there is some risk of discrimination, there may be benefits, or it may even make the difference between being hired and not. It is up to you whether the possible risks are worth the possible benefits or not.

**EXAMPLE:** When I applied for a professional blogging position, a telephone interview with multiple managers and editors was required. I knew my auditory processing, telephone skill, and spoken communication was not good enough for the interview. So I asked if we could instead do the interview in text, in an instant messaging program. The employers agreed, and I was able to be at my best for the interview. I got the job.

## **Job Carving with a Sculptor’s Touch: Creating a Job that Fits Your Strengths**

I have aced advanced graduate math classes—but would fail a 3rd grade arithmetic test. I have made a living from my writing—but cannot have a conversation on the telephone. I can manage highly complex projects—but am perplexed by what to say to a client. Across the board, I can do the hard stuff, and not the easy stuff. That makes it hard to find a position I can work at because most “hard” jobs assume that someone also knows the “easy” stuff. One way around this is “job carving”.

The basic idea of job carving is modifying a job to fit abilities. In other words, instead of finding a person to fit a job, job carving creates a job to fit a person. Unlike most entry-level positions, there is often a lot of flexibility in job responsibilities for highly skilled work. Jobs will have certain required core skills, for example one must be able to program computers if they are to work at a computer programming job. But other aspects of the job description may be open to negotiation. Here are some tips related to job carving:

### **Try to swap responsibilities you can’t meet for ones of equal weight that you can meet.**

**EXAMPLE:** I’m often in job positions that include managing a budget, which I can’t do (see the whole failing of the 3rd grade arithmetic test thing). So I look for something I can do instead, particularly something that will free up someone else’s time to deal with the budget. I might ask, “I can’t do the budget, but I can take over all the document

management for the project. That would free up some of the research assistant's time to do the budget instead. What do you think?"

## **Include your strengths**

The point of job carving isn't just to accommodate your disabilities; it's also to make use of your abilities.

**EXAMPLE:** I had been working as the senior technical writer for a telecommunications company for a while when I started to get bored—which is really dangerous for me because when something no longer is in my “interest zone” I tend to not do it at all. So I asked to add a new piece to my job that I was interested in. “I'm really good at programming and I enjoy doing it. Could I change my job to include helping out the engineers in the middleware department?”

## **Look for niches you can fill that no one else is filling—or that no one else but you can fill.**

If you're working in a highly skilled field, you probably know a lot about your field. Look for job-related tasks well suited to you that no one else is doing and incorporate them into your custom job.

**EXAMPLE:** When I first began working in research, I discovered my previous career had given me a lot of skills in writing and computer programming that most researchers don't have. This has made me very valuable on projects.

## **The Importance of Effective Management**

At my high tech job, I had a manager named Brian. Brian “got” me. He got that I needed to know about changes before anyone else, that I needed my desk to be in the quietest, darkest place in the office, and he got that when it came to office

politics, he would need to step in and either explain what was going on very clearly to me, or just take over and take care of the situation. He also got that if he did these things, he would have a happy high-powered mutant (and I mean “mutant” in the awesome X-men super-hero way!) who could complete more work tasks for the department better than anyone else in the office. While on one hand Brian was simply a good manager and everyone flourished under him, on the other hand I have never succeeded at a job without a “Brain”. If I don’t have a manager that “gets” me, I fail at the job. I need help with social navigation. I need an advocate for my needs who can play the right social games and give the right eye contact in the right situations.

## **Some characteristics of a good manager**

- A good manager understands both your disability and your abilities. Not just on paper, not just in a stereotypical way, but how your unique, individual, disabilities and abilities manifest.
- A good manager facilitates your ability to do your job. This includes advocating for your needs, whether they are disability-related or not.
- A good manager “has your back.” They will watch out for you and protect you from bullies and individuals who will take advantage of you. Trust needs to be built in both directions for this to work. It can take time to develop a trusting relationship with a manager, but a good manager will know how to help build that trust.
- A good manager is proactive. If they know something might upset you—like a change at work—they will talk to you about it and deal with it before it becomes a problem. In other words, they won’t wait for a crisis; instead, they will take steps to avoid a crisis.
- A good manager listens and is responsive. That doesn’t mean he or she will always do everything you want them to—the manager has other things besides you they need to

juggle. But it does mean that he or she will not make you feel bad for coming to them with a problem or with an idea for improvement, and it means he or she will work with you to come to a resolution you both can live with.

- Lastly, a good manager respects you and you can respect them back.

## **ADA Armor: Disclosure, Civil Rights, and the Role of Disability Legislation in Employment**

“You need to tell human resources about your autism. You’re too vulnerable otherwise. You need to protect yourself.” A good friend said those words to me at a time when my job was going well.

I scoffed. After all, why go through all the effort when I already had all the accommodations I needed (via my Brian) and everyone I worked closely with not only accepted my autisticness but even loved me for it?

Then I lost my Brian. Then I lost my accommodations. And then I lost my job. My friend had been right: I had been too vulnerable. If I’d disclosed my disability to human resources, I would have been able to keep my accommodations even after I had lost my advocate. I might have kept my job. Civil rights legislation for people with disabilities exists for good reason. It exists to give us the same shot as everyone else at getting and keeping employment. And it exists to protect our civil rights when others try to take them away, either maliciously or because of lack of understanding.

## **The ADA and Employment**

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is civil rights legislation that protects people with disabilities, including people others perceive as having a disability (even if they do not personally identify as disabled). It covers a number of areas, one of which is

employment. The purpose of the act is to give people with disabilities an equal chance at getting and keeping work that they are otherwise qualified to do.

Because no two individuals are the same, and job needs vary, The ADA does not list specific recommendations for workplace accommodations. Instead, accommodations are arrived at through a conversation with human resources, your manager, or anyone else involved in setting up workplace accommodations with you. An excellent summary of the ADA in employment settings can be found at <http://www.eeoc.gov/facts/adaqa1.html> or search for “ADA FAQ employment” and select links from the EEOC.

It is difficult to invoke civil rights legislation if you have not identified as a member of the minority group which the legislation covers. In other words, if you haven't identified as autistic, then your workplace will see no reason to accommodate your needs as an autistic person. Many human resources departments have specific rules around workplace accommodations for employees with disabilities, some of which may include the need to self-identify as a person with a disability in order to get accommodations. If you have a job, or are starting a new job, it can be useful to look up the company policy on disability and diversity.

## **Disclosure Decisions**

Disclosure of your ASD diagnosis in employment is your choice. You choose whether to disclose, and to whom. There are both risks and benefits to disclosure in highly skilled employment settings.

## **Potential Benefits**

You have a legal ground, via the ADA, to stand on in order to fight workplace discrimination.

Your manager and/or co-workers might understand you better and be better able to accommodate your needs. They may even start advocating for you or helping to watch your back in difficult situations.

You can negotiate for accommodations that are appropriate to your needs, in order to help you do your job or keep your job.

Knowing that you are autistic may help prevent misunderstandings that can lead to workplace problems. For example, people may be less likely to think you are rude, aloof, or a snob.

## **Potential Risks**

Some people might not have a positive view of autism, or may have a stereotyped and wrong view of autism. They may respond badly to you or your disclosure. You may be able to educate them, although not everyone is able to work past their prejudices.

Some people might not respect your confidentiality. Not everyone at work can be trusted. If you ask someone not to tell anyone about your diagnosis, they might tell others anyway.

## **A Few Notes on Sustainability: An Ecological View of Employment and the Rest of Life**

Someone said to me recently, “the difference between a job and a career is that you can leave a job at work.” Highly skilled, salaried positions—which are dotted along career paths—don’t involve punching a clock and going home. Professionals are typically expected to work extra hours if needed, to work on weekends or from home, and to stay abreast of new developments in their field during leisure time. If a job is in someone’s area of special interest, it can be extra hard to disengage. And for many of us, work of any kind takes up so much energy and effort that we can’t manage other activities of living, like cooking, cleaning, and self-care, when we get home.

**TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF** This means different things to different people. To me it means having a lot of hours set aside to arrange things and be alone and unwind. It means eating well and exercising and taking care of my health. It means having time for creative pursuits that are different from the kind of creativity I do at my job. For all people it means not forgetting to consider the rest of our lives, and our happiness outside the office as well as in it.

**GET HELP IF YOU NEED IT** Being employed in a skilled position has the terrible side effect of disqualifying many of us from services we need—including services we may need to maintain our employment or to survive outside of the office. As unfair as it is, the only way out of this I've found so far is to spend some of my paycheck to hire someone to help. Someday, hopefully, there will be far better solutions.

**WORK TOWARD LONG-TERM SUSTAINABLE EMPLOYMENT** It is usually not be possible to get a perfect, sustainable job at first. But it may be possible to get a job that can be developed into something better. Building a career is hard work for everyone. It's necessary to take a long view and make a plan that covers years. Consider what jobs might get you closer, one at a time, to the job you really want. Careers, like professional skills, take decades to develop.

## **Last Words**

While I love my work, it is not without problems. I've had to work harder, longer, and for less pay than people without disabilities. I've had, at times, to give up hobbies, friends, family, and even my health to remain employed. I've had to ignore discrimination. I've had to learn the hard way that social services for employment, like vocational rehabilitation and job coaches, are unable to assist individuals who work in highly skilled professions because they do not understand the professions themselves. A well-paying, skilled job in an area related to special interests isn't a magical solution to the larger problems with employment that autistic people face as a community.

No article is going to provide easy answers to the employment issue for us. Only continued pushing for system and policy change will do that. My dream is that in 15 years this article will become a piece of history because better solutions exist for us. Until then, well, at least this wasn't yet another presentation on entry-level jobs!

# Finding a job through the back door: 25 tips

by Carl Peterson

A lot of people ask about how to find work these days. They want to know how to find work when there appears to be no work out there. Through the back door of course! Happy job hunting!

## **25 tips that will bring you closer to finding work:**

1. Check out the book, *What Color is Your Parachute?*
2. Tailor every cover letter, every resume, and every application to showcase your most valuable accomplishments and skills.
3. Make a portfolio of all of your accomplishments and present the portfolio to potential employers. Have a concise narrative of who you are and how that makes you unique.
4. Be open to any and every vocation, and never pass up an interview—ever.
5. While being open to any and every vocation that comes your way, set your eyes on a few different options.
6. If working with a job developer, participate in the job search with them. Ask them how they get people work, and ask them how long they have been doing it.
7. Volunteer as much as your schedule allows. Volunteer work often turns into paid work.
8. Research a business or a job before you apply. A good place to start is their website.

9. Always ask these questions: “What can I do for this company?” and “What skills do I have that could be of use to them?”
10. Practice for interviews, and be deliberate in your practice. (Use a video camera to record yourself role-playing with another person in an interview situation. Watch it, learn from it, and try the interview again).
11. Take help from others offering it. Think of it as a hand up, not a hand out.
12. Remember this phrase: “Network to work.” It is in your own network that the work resides. Everyone you have ever met is a connection of yours. Keep in touch with people. You never know when they might run across something that could be perfect for you.
13. Seek out tours and informational interviews (interviews in which job seekers ask for career and industry advice rather than employment) and other community vocational offerings.
14. Job fairs are not always the best place to find a job, but they are a good place to find out what potential employers are looking for in employees.
15. Dress for the position you want to be in.
16. Don’t shy away from telling an employer about what you did wrong at a past job and how you learned from what you did wrong. Remember, employers love solutions.
17. Positively frame your history, especially your failures. If you own your failures and figure out what you have learned from them, it will help you in the long run.
18. Be sure to thank the interviewer/s for their time.

19. Follow up after interviews. Always follow up with written communication.
20. Be open to working odd hours.
21. Reward yourself for your successes during your job search.
22. When you've got a job offer, a good way to disclose your disability to an employer is to immediately follow up with the accommodations/solutions that work best for you and keep you productive.
23. Employers love solutions, not problems. How can you be a solution?
24. Take care of yourself! An employee who takes care of his business can take care of a businesses' business.
25. Never ever give up!

# Vocational Rehabilitation

*by Carl Peterson*

The Vocational Rehabilitation administration spans all fifty states. Its primary goal is to get people with disabilities employed in their communities in jobs that are long term and stable. It is a cost savings program that also assists people who are on Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and/or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) to gain employment. Many autistic people use the VR system in their state. Each state's VR administration is different and unique. The funding levels and services differ greatly not only from region to region, but from office to office.

## History of Vocational Rehabilitation

Vocational Rehabilitation was first used in 1918 with wounded Veterans from World War I. It was established to help them get employed in the community. In 1935, the Rehabilitation Services Administration was created—it is now currently under the Department of Education. In 1943, services expanded and began to include people with psychiatric barriers and learning disabilities. VR has always been keen on doling out and utilizing the latest assistive technologies that will help disabled people access meaningful work. Because of VR's roots with veterans from WWI, it has a driving ethic that includes empowerment and normalization within the populations it serves.

As VR expanded, it allowed more and more client populations to take a part in its services. The VR administration is unique for the government because it is seen as a cost-savings tool (and it has garnered little attention from the media and other similar information sources). It's generally one of the more quietly but widely used services.

If you are on the autism spectrum, you will usually automatically qualify for services. It can take up to three months (or longer) for you to get assigned a VR counselor. This counselor will serve to assist you in helping you find work or go to school (which

will hopefully lead to work). Early appointments with your VR counselor will serve the purpose of building knowledge about your wants, needs, and desires in the workplace. From there, a plan of attack will usually be constructed by the counselor, which will have an end means of getting you gainfully employed.

## **VR services today**

The arsenal of tools a typical VR program has is surprisingly large, especially factoring the resources that other state agencies have in relation. For example, VR can do many things for you. If you are self-diagnosed, VR can assist with getting you a formal diagnosis (depending on your state, and any co-disabilities). VR can also assist clients with paying for school; however, each VR across the States provides different services. I have heard stories of grad school being paid for, as well as stories of refusals to pay for grad school. It is all based on each person's individual situation and needs. Again, services can also be dependent upon your counselor and the office that they work in.

Even states that are in financial straits continue to sponsor and support VR because of its track record of helping people find gainful employment. (If the state can show that the average amount of money a successful rehabilitation brings in is positive, the state will have good reason to sponsor VR.) In a nutshell, VR assists state businesses by providing them with candidates who, on average, stay longer and produce good quality work. This far outweighs the costs of sponsoring Social Security payments and/or Medicaid, for example.

VR counselors have been known to go to great lengths to help clients. This includes sending them through school, or buying assistive technology for them (iPads are recently quite popular), or buying interview clothes or wheelchair lifts and/or wheelchairs. VR also assists deaf people and blind people, as well as many different kinds of people with disabilities. It truly is an advantageous resource for the disabled community. That noted, unfortunately, it has been reported that the Autistic

community in various states has found a lot of problems with the services offered by their VR systems.

## **Potential problems**

VR has had noted issues with providing adequate services across the board. Stories of incompetence and ethically dubious practices are not uncommon. The state of Oregon's Vocational Rehabilitation Department is currently—as this paper is being written—under investigation by the Justice Department for some ethically questionable practices.

Back room deals and underhanded processes make VR scary for numerous populations. These stories are often well hidden from the gaze of the media and other watchdogs, hence it allows a certain 'Wild west' mentality to pervade many VR offices (for better and for worse). If you approach VR for services, remember to ask around about where the best services are and take those recommendations to heart!

One of the greatest problems with VR and autism is that VR does not have a thorough understanding of the autistic population and its needs. Because of this there are multiple stories of dissatisfied autistic people who have accessed the services of VR and been disappointed by it.

## **Common complaints from autistic people:**

- Jobs attained via VR services were not appropriate or adequate for the client's needs and/or skill level. (It has been reported that many counselors had clients take tests such as The Strong Career Test, and from there, they went on to suggest that their clients look into fields that made little sense given their unique personal situations).

- VR took too long to contact the client or clients never received the services that they were slotted to receive.
- The client was not able to get work and VR didn't provide reasonable assistance (or the whole process simply took too much time).
- Counselors treated clients like they weren't human, and instead relied on many assumptions and misconceptions about autistic people versus getting to know each client personally.

## **How can all clients increase their chances for a positive VR experience?**

- Think of VR not as a vehicle that hands out work, but instead as a vehicle that assists clients in finding work. (Every VR counselor I have ever met has thought of themselves as a hand up, and not someone who “hands out” services).
- Ask around for recommendations. Again, what you will get as a client will vary greatly. If someone you know has had a good experience with a particular counselor, get that counselor's name, as well as the location of the office they work in. When you hear about good counselors who provide good services, take note of who they are. Good people to ask for recommendations for VR counselors include college counselors and vendors who work with VR. (A vendor might be a local community college, for example.) Recent graduates of VR programs tend to make excellent counselors.
- You don't have to stay at a specific office if you're unsatisfied—you can transfer. In many states there are ways to request counselors.
- Americans, in general, tend to dislike their jobs (in most surveys general job satisfaction is less than fifty percent of the population). Because of this, it is not

uncommon for someone to associate a job they dislike with someone that helped them get the job.

- If you ask someone who works at a VR office to recommend a counselor, they will likely not be able to pinpoint one person. They are under obligation to mention all counselors as potential good fits. A good way to get around this situation would be to say something like, “I am on the autism spectrum and I am looking for someone who can best assist me in my quest to find gainful employment. Are there any counselors in your office who know how to give someone a “step up” to that goal?” Mentioning that you’re on the autism spectrum might make the person more likely to recommend a counselor who has a good track record with autistic people.
- When you start coming to VR appointments it is best to come prepared, ready to learn, and ready to receive what VR has to offer you. VR does not hand out work, but it does help people find work. Also, remember that it is intended to be a short-term support system and not a long-term support system. Although VR does not provide a menu of services, it does aim to work with each person as an individual.
- When you are working with community partners who do business with VR, remember that many of these partners report back to VR counselors about their experiences with you and your learning and/or work style. For this reason, it’s recommended to be as professional as possible with community partners. Show up to appointments early, and come prepared with all of the materials you need. Good reports from community partners will likely make your VR counselor want to send you to more community partners, and that increases your opportunity for finding gainful employment!
- When you meet with your counselor you should take numerous factors into account. VR representatives notate everything. As arbiters of state funds, they are on the lookout for clients who are “unready” for services. Case closures are more prevalent than one would like to think, and VR counselors know how to cut clients who are

unready for services (for example, if the client has an especially strong defeatist attitude, or if they are unwilling to follow through with helping to build a resume, etc.).

- Ask many questions. For example, if you are signing something you don't understand, ask what it is. Also remember that the 'squeaky wheel gets the grease'. So if you aren't receiving services in an expedient manner, make a point of reminding the counselor of what they consented to assist you with. Give them the benefit of the doubt if they don't get back to you in an expedient manner, but also take note if you plain out don't receive services from them.

## **Helpful VR counselors**

VR is often staffed by disabled people or people who have a disabled family member. A good VR counselor will treat you like a person and not like a piece of paper. After all, the best rehabilitation systems bring out the best in you. The best systems assist you in becoming a better applicant for work. They bring to light things that might not have been apparent to you before (things that might've been preventing you from getting the jobs you want). They also show you how to network better, and how to make a better cover letter and resume. In essence, VR counselors are teachers as much as they are counselors, and the best counselors are usually organized and tend to come through with what you need most. They think outside the box and are well networked in the community. They expect only the best out of the vendors they work with. Good VR counselors will often be able negotiate with anyone. They will also listen more than they will speak, and they should be able to reflect back to you most of what you have shared.

## **Unhelpful VR counselors**

Unsatisfactory VR counselors are often not effective communicators and tend not to be successful with getting you services. They can be controlling with their resources

and might not be willing to send you where you need to go. Sometimes they offer you only one choice regarding a job and will then refuse to look into other options for you. They also tend to be unresponsive when contacted.

If you are not satisfied by your VR services look into client assistance programs. Put on your advocacy hat and make a fuss about the services. Read about your rights as a client. When you know your rights, you will realize that you have many tools in your tool shed and that you can be empowered by the services you receive verses disempowered. Remember that you are using VR to receive the skills and tools that will make you a stronger applicant for an employer. Ideally, you and your VR counselor should have fun together working toward your employment goals.

Lastly, be wary of VR if your state uses “order of selection” (priority based on how “severely” your ability to work is limited). This is usually an indicator of a VR system that is over taxed and under-staffed. You might need to look into other programs that can help you find work. Your local work assistance center can be a great help.

## **Summary**

Be open to new possibilities (as well as to possibilities outside of VR). Take initiative in your own job search, and follow through with what you tell your VR counselor that you are going to do. Remember that you are in control of the services you receive and that if you are unhappy with what has been provided, find out whom to go to so that you can share your concerns.

You can achieve anything you want with a good dose of initiative. Be willing to take a part in any process that will make your dreams come true. Though finding work can be one of the greatest challenges our population faces, when you find and keep work, you are making an act akin to positive and productive political activism. Keep your hopes up! There is work out there to be attained!

# **Finding the Right Job for You: Your Needs, Your Wants, Your Interests**

*By Shain Neumeier, J.D.*

The job search process can be difficult and intimidating at the outset, not only because of the steps one has to take in order to get a job, but also because of the potential scope of the search. While there are people out there who know what they want out of their careers and the context they will be able to find it in, there are many more who don't.

There are more jobs open than a single person could apply for even if that person is interested in and qualified for all of the open positions. Thus, you'll want, and even need, to have a way of focusing and narrowing your job search so that you can quickly decide which jobs are worth applying for and which aren't. To a degree, the jobs you choose to apply for will depend on the extent of your financial, or other, need for work, and what amount or type of work is available in the area you live in. That noted, there are a few other factors worth strongly considering as you focus your job search. Namely, you should think through what you want and need out of a job, what kind of work you're capable of, and what your interests are.

Perhaps most obviously, in deciding on what kind of jobs to apply for, you'll want to consider what you're looking to earn out of the job. This includes, of course, wages or salary, which will vary across different lines of work. There are resources on the Internet that one can look to in order to see what the average salary is by both region and profession. Depending on how pressing your need for income is, this may weigh heavily on your decisions of where to apply. If you have a budget or other way of keeping track of what you will likely be spending your money on and in what amount, you may want to compare it with this information in deciding whether certain jobs, or locations, will be feasible.

Beyond salary itself, you will want to think about what benefits you want and need from a job. This can include things like health and dental insurance, life insurance, retirement plans and time off of work for vacations or sickness, as well as work-related expenses such as moving costs, if applicable, and public transportation passes. The availability of such benefits may vary more by employer than will salary, but employers will often list on their websites and job postings which ones they offer, sometimes more readily than they will their salaries. You might also want to do your own research, whether that means looking at job resources online or in print or talking with a career counselor, both about what benefits are most important to you and which ones you can reasonably expect in a certain line of work.

Finally – and this may intersect to some degree with both your capability and your interests – you’ll want to consider any intangible benefits you want or need out of any job and how likely you are to find that in a field you’re considering working in. This might include things such as how likely you are to make social connections on the job, how you help people through what you do, or how to physically engage with your work by doing things with your hands or your body in general. Depending on what you’re looking for, this may be easier to determine about a specific kind of job at the outset, but if you haven’t actually started looking for work or even figuring out what sort of job you are going to look for, thinking about this might help better frame or narrow your search.

As far as your ability to do a given job or type of job goes, there are two different sets of issues and concerns involved. The first is whether you meet the qualifications for a profession or available position. Most basically, this includes things such as having attained a certain level of education, having any licenses or certifications that may be necessary to practice in a given profession such as teaching, law or medicine, and having a certain amount of prior work experience. That noted, employers might also require specific types of knowledge or skills, such as fluency in a second language or proficiency in certain computer programs. When it comes to these latter

types of qualifications, employers might in some cases be more lenient, and if you are otherwise interested in and qualified for the job, it might be worth applying to anyways. However, depending on the difficulty of learning a skill and its importance to a given job, its being listed may allow you to screen out – or, alternately, if you have it, specifically seek out – jobs that list specific knowledge or skills as a requirement.

The other, more subjective but in the end no less important issue to consider is whether you can, physically, emotionally or otherwise, handle working in a specific field or job. This is a particularly relevant issue for Autistic people seeking work by virtue of the sensory, social, executive functioning and autism-related health challenges that many of us continue to face in our adult lives. However, it also applies to things that have nothing to do with being Autistic, and affect everyone, such as long hours or emotionally difficult subject matter. While it can be worthwhile, necessary or both to gain or improve on certain skills and qualities by holding a job that requires them, you have to weigh this against the risks of stress and the resulting possibility of meltdowns and eventual burnout, as well as sheer incapability when it comes to certain tasks. It will help neither you nor your employer for you to hold a job that depends on tasks that you find impossible, incredibly uncomfortable, or just unpleasant enough to impact your wellbeing and performance at work.

To some extent, federal and state laws regarding reasonable accommodations for people with disabilities in the workforce such as the Americans with Disabilities Act allow Autistic people to obtain and hold jobs that we might otherwise be unable to perform. That noted, what counts as reasonable accommodations as required by these laws may fall short of what we may want or need. Furthermore, even though these laws are in place, discrimination in the form of employers' refusal to understand and accommodate their employees' disabilities still happens, and enforcement of the law takes money, time and emotional resources that one may or may not possess. This isn't to say that the law provides no protection and that you should not seek accommodations, but rather that you should still also be thinking at the outset about

what kind of job will best meet your needs in light of your disability, as well as other aspects of your life, even aside from what the law provides.

The final thing to consider in deciding what sort of job to apply for and eventually accept is what you're most interested in. This may seem less important, by virtue of being based more on want than on need, than some of the other issues discussed above, but it's actually very important, not only for your happiness but also quite possibly for your success in the job search and, later, your job performance as well. This is also another thing that may be more crucial for Autistic people, even, than it is for many neurotypicals, because of the depth and specificity of our passions.

Depending on your interests, or the breadth or lack thereof, and the nature of the field of employment associated with it (if any) you might have an easier or a more difficult time finding a job related to your interests. Thus, in thinking about what kind of work you would be most interested in doing, you will want to take into account not only what you're interested in, but how far outside of that you can go while still having enough interest and motivation to do well at it. Part of this includes thinking about how what might seem like jobs that are unrelated to your interests, actually leading to jobs in the field you'd eventually like to work in. Answering these and other questions that are related to the kind of work you're interested in doing will help you not only to narrow and focus your job search, but also to think about how you might convey your interest in certain positions to employers in cover letters and interviews during the application process, which is probably your most immediate concern.

If, after thinking through these questions, you come to the conclusion that you don't have any skills or interests that will be useful in the context of employment, or are otherwise not qualified for the jobs that you have seen posted, there are several things you might want to consider doing. One option is to apply for positions you are interested in anyways, especially those where you have some, but not all, of the skills or qualifications listed. While this is not always the case, some employers will appreciate interest and enthusiasm and may be willing to spend time training the

right employee. If you choose to go this route, you might also want to discuss or list positive qualities about yourself – such as diligence, attention to details or the ability to learn quickly – that are not listed in the job posting, but could be helpful to the employer nonetheless. This may further help to offset reluctance on the part of employers to hire an inexperienced person for the position.

If you're able to do so given monetary or other constraints, you might also want to develop further skills or explore your career-related interests before you search for a paid position. One way to do this is through education. Whether this means pursuing a four-year, or graduate degree, or taking classes at the local community college or adult education center, this may serve to both introduce you to areas you enjoy and excel in and allow you to attain marketable skills that will assist you in the job search and your eventual career. Another option you might consider is volunteering at an organization that needs assistance, but that cannot yet afford to hire anybody. Volunteer positions are frequently less difficult to obtain than paid ones, but that can nonetheless give you work experience and, with it, abilities that you can use in other contexts. Many of the same issues discussed in the rest of this article will apply to finding a volunteer job, and you might find it easier to locate a volunteer position that meets your needs and interests verses a paid job. If nothing else, engaging in activities such as classes and volunteer opportunities will show the employers you eventually apply to work with that you're hardworking, and possibly well-rounded as a person as well.

Getting a job of any type, regardless of desirability, has become increasingly difficult, and likely moreso for people on the autism spectrum. Given what is often a limited number of jobs available, as well as any immediate financial or other need you may have, your options may be somewhat limited as far as picking a job you truly want is concerned. That noted, to the extent possible under the circumstances, you will want to focus your efforts on finding a job that matches up with your needs, abilities and interests. Doing so will not only make you more likely to be successful in the job search process, but in whatever job you eventually get and decide on as well.

# Career Options

*By Meg Evans*

Young people entering the workforce often have to sort through a lot of career suggestions. Autistics and others with developmental disabilities may be advised to start a small business, on the assumption that it would be easier than finding a conventional job. Rather than commit to hiring a new employee who lacks experience, a company may be more willing to give tasks to an independent contractor. I have occasionally seen the word “charity” used in this context.

Of course, neither hiring an employee nor doing business with a contractor is a matter of charity. Both are straightforward business transactions—an exchange of money for services. Hiring an employee requires more investment, though, and generally is seen as a more substantial relationship than contracting out work. Managers have to be convinced of a job applicant’s long-term value to the company before they’ll hire the applicant. Historically, that calculation often has been influenced by society’s attitudes about the relative value of certain kinds of people.

I am old enough to remember when some folks thought it was an act of charity to hire a woman or a person of color. When I was a student looking for work experience to put on my resume 30 years ago, I applied for an internship at a radio station. Upon arriving bright and early for the interview, I found myself greeted by a tirade to the effect that women had no business trying to become radio personalities. Nobody wanted to hear a woman’s voice when they turned on the radio, the manager declared. Why, the very idea was absurd.

When I told him that I wasn’t interested in being a deejay and just wanted to learn about advertising and the radio business (which was true), he became much friendlier and gave me some work composing ads. So I ended up with a useful entry on

my resume after all; but it's fair to say that although I learned a few things about advertising, the experience I gained with regard to workplace bias had more impact.

Although it would be easy to dismiss such attitudes as nothing more than irrational prejudices, they often have reflected social reality with some degree of accuracy. Back when people considered it normal to hear only male voices on the radio, they might have been uncomfortable listening to a female announcer. A radio station might indeed have lost audience share and advertising revenue if it hired a woman—or a man who spoke with a noticeable ethnic accent, or who had a foreign name and wasn't willing to change it, or who sounded like he might be gay.

Until civil rights boycotts and equal employment opportunity laws changed the equation, managers in all industries routinely rejected applicants based on what kinds of people they believed the company's customers didn't want to see or hear. For those who couldn't get on a payroll because of prejudice, self-employment in a service business—for example, working as a cleaning lady—was a common way to make a living.

This history shows why some young people with developmental disabilities have been advised to start their own business or to work for companies that specialize in “charitably” employing their kind. The subtext of this advice is that employers never would hire them for conventional jobs on an equal-opportunity basis. After all, customers surely would be uncomfortable dealing with employees whose voices sounded unusual, or who made less eye contact than might be expected, or who had nervous tics such as hand-flapping. To expect that such people could just be hired like anyone else would be absurd—wouldn't it?

When we consider how much the landscape of our society has changed, almost a half-century after the passage of the federal Civil Rights Act, we can see that cultural expectations are much more fluid and easily shifted than they might appear. It's true that people are likely to be uncomfortable when they have to get used to something

new, such as diversity in the workforce. But they do get used to it, and quickly. Nowadays, a woman on the radio is just another announcer. Companies that wouldn't have hired an openly gay applicant a generation ago are providing health insurance and other benefits to the partners of their gay employees. Bilingual workers often are hired because of their language skills, rather than being rejected for speaking with an accent. The United States now has an African-American president, as well as a female Secretary of State who was a serious contender for the presidency herself.

More progress still needs to be made toward ending disability discrimination, of course; but we're on the right track there, as well. The 2008 amendments to the Americans with Disabilities Act, along with their implementing regulations in 2011, greatly expanded legal protections against discrimination in the workplace. Federal agencies are actively seeking to hire workers with disabilities, and some private-sector employers have developed affirmative action plans.

As with other groups of people, the simple fact of integration—that is, being seen and heard in the workplace on a regular basis—leads to social acceptance. It's human nature to define normality in terms of whatever we see regularly. When we interact with people who have various disabilities as we go about our everyday business, we come to look upon disability as a natural part of the human experience, and the artificial divide between “the normal” and “the disabled” vanishes.

For those who genuinely want to be self-employed because of a passion for the work, it's a perfectly valid choice. But if you are a young person just getting started in the workforce, please don't let anyone convince you that there are no other options but self-employment and “charitable” segregated employment. It's not true that you could never be hired for a regular job. Yes, prejudice and discrimination still exist; but they are not the only reality. Even if you've had a few job interviews that went poorly, it doesn't mean all employers have the same outdated attitudes, and it certainly doesn't mean you are less capable or worthy than others. Consider it a learning experience and move on.

# Building a Resume and Cover Letter

*By Elizabeth Boresow*

An ideal resume sets you apart from other applicants and summarizes your strengths and qualifications. A resume allows you to focus on content that will help your “case” as a potential employee. Here are some basic tips that people tend to keep in mind when designing a resume:

- Make sure your name is the biggest thing on the paper (most people put their name at the top of the paper).
- Make sure your contact information is easy to find.
- Include previous work history—if you have any—and previous volunteer work, specific certifications or trainings, and interesting coursework. (Traditionally, people tend to order things starting with the most recent “stuff” at the top and then insert older information as they move down. Dates should have a start and end date, even if that means you say “2008-Present” instead of “2008-?” or “2008-”. )
- Know that many professionals recommend against resumes that are too flashy as they can be visually distracting, which could take the focus off of your relevant skills and assets.

As for cover letters, they are a way for you to state a formal interest in a position of employment. The letter is usually addressed to the person or committee who will be making decisions about filling the open position. Think of a cover letter as a direct request for consideration of employment. What goes into it depends on your style and how much you know about the potential employer. Many people take the time to read and learn about a particular place of employment before writing a cover letter. Your cover letter might simply be a request to meet and learn more about a position, or your letter might also include what you want to highlight, such as why it is worth

an employer's time to consider you for the job. You could indicate work experience in the field, a history of volunteering with the facility, or a certain skill set that would be useful.

Many people find it easier to write resumes and cover letters (and possibly other documents related to employment) by keeping track of certain parts of their lives on a regular basis. Store basic information about previous jobs (start date, stop date, employer/supervisor) or community service (dates, volunteer supervisor, hours), and the responsibilities you held within each position, all in the same location. Letters of recommendation or reference are also good to have on hand. When it comes time to find a job, you'll have what is needed to get you started.

## **Resume and Cover Letter Resources**

Purdue University has compiled a quality resource list:

*<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/681/01/>*

LinkedIn is a networking site for working professionals. While this site may not be helpful for all, I find some of the site's functions helpful. For example, entering your work information at this site allows you to create a simple resume with their formatting. Whether or not I use this resume, it gives me a basic idea of what information I can include and how to appropriately show the dates.

*[www.linkedin.com](http://www.linkedin.com)*

# **Me and the Anti-CV: Taking a Look Backward in Order to Look Forward**

*By Andee Joyce*

Believe it or not, I never actually set out to become a medical text editor, which is the job I do today. What did I set out to do with my working life? If you had asked me in my teens or early twenties, long before I was diagnosed, I probably would have given you a nice, vague answer, like, “I want to be creative,” “I don’t want to work 9 to 5 in a cubicle,” “I want to write,” or, “I want to be respected for my intelligence.” Later on, through my late twenties and thirties, still undiagnosed, I started trying on job titles for size: “I want to write songs and make records,” “I want to write for a good quality sitcom,” “I want to study landscape architecture,” “I want to be a holistic vet” (yeah, that one snuck in there).

But honestly, I had no idea what was involved in actually landing one of those sought-after creative-class careers, let alone what I would have had to do to advance and maintain my place in them. It was just a bunch of words that sounded good. As it happened, reaching one of those goals would have taken both photogenicity I didn’t have (creative women have to be pretty!), and the ability to navigate an incredibly complex set of unspoken social rules, which I also didn’t have. Oh, had I but known that what I needed was a camera-friendly and socially adept collaborator, someone who loved to schmooze and talk a good piece of work, but would be happy to leave most of the nuts and bolts of writing to me! It would easily have been worth a 50% cut of my potential income; after all, 100% of zero is and will always be zero. And that is what I felt like for not being able to “make it.” A zero.

However, one thing I could always do well was spell, even without having to be taught. Good old hyperlexia to the rescue! Before I knew what hyperlexia was, I used to semi-joke that if I couldn’t spell, I’d be homeless. But really, I didn’t seek out my current work situation so much as back into it, thanks to my acing a medical spelling test at a

temp agency in 1989. I didn't know what half the words meant, but I could spell them. That was good enough to get medical clerical work at hospitals, and at each temp stop, I soaked up more and more vocabulary. Then I was able to do some overflow work for local transcription services, then get a regular job with a local transcription service, and finally a telecommuting job with a big national service – all without any formal training, which was highly unusual even then. I had other jobs here and there, but always, I returned to transcription like some sort of homing pigeon with a keyboard.

Once I was diagnosed, my therapist actually congratulated me for being “clever” enough to find a career I could do mostly at home, where I wouldn't get into serious trouble for Being Autistic In Their Own Personal Space™; after all, a huge percentage of autistic people didn't have jobs at all. I never would have thought of it that way; I thought of my work as something I did because I couldn't get it together. I had had some success writing freelance trade and specialty magazine articles, and during the dot-com boom, I even managed to land a full-time telecommuting job as a writer for a year and a half. I knew I wasn't completely talentless.

But some combination of almost-nonexistent social skills and continuous nagging problems with my physical and mental health kept me from going any further. I had also spent most of my 30s in a marriage to someone I was supporting by scraping together any work I could possibly find even if I hated it, while he pursued his dream. He insisted that if I had wanted to pursue my own dreams badly enough, I would have (without any assistance from him). He also helpfully reminded me that writers wait longer than anyone else on earth to get paid: “Try making someone wait a year after they fix your toilet to pay them, and see if you can avoid being hauled into court,” he'd say. All of this contributed to my feeling that I wasn't a “real” writer, that I was a self-sabotager, afraid of success, didn't have the guts or the desire, couldn't stick to a routine, etc. So transcription it was, by default.

I can't say I loved every minute of it. I yearned almost constantly for what I thought of as the greater fulfillment and happiness – and respect – of the creative classes (in spite of the fact that I wasn't all that happy or fulfilled – or respected – when I was briefly allowed to join their ranks). But during a time when I had a lifestyle that involved almost constant packing and moving (including moving cities eight times in eight years), it kept a roof over my head, regardless of where that roof turned out to be. It kept me in medical and mental health benefits, got me a diagnosis, allowed me to work around my sleep disturbances and chronic allergy to mornings.

And now it's coming to an end.

No, I haven't been fired or laid off, not yet. But I can see the writing on the wall in this business; smaller companies (like the one I was hired to work for), are being gobbled up by huge multinationals, each of whom has a huge and growing stable of offshore workers in India, people who are thrilled to be making \$150 U.S. per month with no health insurance. We U.S. workers can't compete with that; it's just a matter of time before the voice recognition technology improves to the point where they won't need seasoned U.S. medical-language specialists for even the most difficult dictators. (Although, paradoxically enough, it's probably the dictators themselves who do the most to impede the process; by insisting on dictating on their iPhones and Blackberries with poor connections instead of using land lines like they used to, they've ensured that for the foreseeable future, the voice recognition software will continue to turn out gobbledygook. Isn't technology awesome?)

And to be perfectly honest, the way they've been slashing our pay the last few years and restricting our previous schedule flexibility, and then telling us we should be grateful to have jobs at all, they're acting like they can't wait for most of their U.S. workforce to go away. This is not unique to my company; judging from what I've heard from other people working for other transcription companies, it's an industry-wide problem.

Besides which, it's rather a joke that someone with an auditory processing disorder has to do a job that depends on listening to sound files all day. I could handle it fine when the audio wasn't so badly recorded, but now I'm at the point where listening to all that background noise and skipping and distortion is about to make me scream, and they'll never do anything to fix it because the client is always right. Furthermore, much of the work that isn't being offshored is being automated with reproducible electronic medical records and more and more doctors self-completing their own dictation, or even having the patients do it themselves. Yes, the last time I went to my primary care physician's office, they had me enter my own review of systems in the computer via checklist! That is the direction my industry is going in. It's time for me to get out before I'm thrown out with no place to go.

Enter the Anti-CV.

What, you might well ask, is an Anti-CV? Well, a CV, or curriculum vitae, is basically a resume in greater detail, in which you take multiple pages to detail all the things you've accomplished during your career. An Anti-CV, then, is a document in which you do the opposite: list all the problems you've ever had on the job related to your disabilities and chronic illnesses.

Why would anyone want to do this? Well, my original impetus for writing one was for the purpose of applying for SSDI disability, which I was required to do in order to qualify for my state's Employed Persons with Disabilities Program. Mind you, I have more disabilities/chronic illnesses other than just being autistic; I also have to manage major depression and extremely high levels of anxiety, which led to off-the-charts stress during the decades I went undiagnosed, and the hornet's nest of stress-exacerbated physical problems that have accompanied that: hormone imbalances, sleep disturbances, gastrointestinal distress, migraines, killer menstrual cramps, waves of staggering fatigue, and so on. I went into rather exquisite (and sometimes disgusting) detail about each of these, reasoning that if they got through two or three

pages and slammed the whole thing down and said, “Okay, we’ve seen enough, she’s definitely disabled,” the Anti-CV would have done its filthy work.

It worked. I got my EPD insurance, which meant I didn’t have to punish my body any longer by forcing myself to work enough hours to qualify for health benefits. Funny how that worked; I ground my body down working so I could get insurance, which I might not have had to make as much use out of if I didn’t have to drag myself around like an anvil in the first place. SSDI turned me down on income qualifications, also because I was pushing myself like a sled dog to earn an amount of money that was just enough to disqualify me from benefits. (I’ve re-applied since the income drop; we’ll see what happens.) It also worked to get me accepted into vocational rehabilitation. Voc Rehab wanted “barriers to employment”? I’d give them barriers to employment, all right.

Having that tool in my hands undoubtedly went a long way in helping my counselors understand my condition a lot better – and faster. Without it, they might have been left to sit there scowling while I gave one incomprehensible interview answer after another, and then said, “Well, we don’t know what’s wrong with you. You worked all those years before, right? What happened?” What happened, of course, were two things:

One, the working world became much tougher than it used to be when I started working, and just getting my work done and not disrupting others wasn’t good enough any more; now I had to look right (i.e. uniform with my coworkers) doing it, even as a telecommuter, and I would be micromanaged to death in pursuit of that goal even if it made me less productive (which it did).

Two, and this is probably related, I ruined my health trying to keep up with what my employers were increasingly demanding of me. What I was doing all those years wasn’t sustainable; I was never going to make it to age 67 (or later, or maybe even never, depending on how much monkeying around the government wound up doing with Social Security retirement benefits) at the rate I was going. And what if I couldn’t

afford to retire even then? I was going to have to do that until the day I died? That would have marked me for death a whole lot sooner.

Another good thing about doing an Anti-CV is that it's helped me forgive myself for not accomplishing more. After I got through writing all 11 pages, I looked at it and thought, "Damn, I actually held a job all this time?" When my therapist told me about the very high levels of unemployment among autistics, I dug my heels in and refused to "accept that as an excuse." After all, aren't most of the big autiebiographies written by people who have enjoyed sustained professional success? She admitted that was true, but stressed that they probably didn't have the degree of depression and anxiety and self-loathing that I've had all my life, plus the endocrine stuff. I'm not sure I buy that the unemployment level among autistics is 94%, which is what she told me; there are, after all, a lot of autistic people who are running around undiagnosed but still have jobs, and most autistic people of my acquaintance are employed in some capacity. But maybe it is that high when you factor in underemployment.

For all the media hype about "aspie geniuses" who get multiple advanced degrees without cracking a book, and autistic technology wizards earning six and seven figures for tech companies, you don't hear much about those of us who aren't academically or technologically gifted and haven't had the necessary supports to succeed in anything else, and so wind up in one menial job after another, resenting how we have to spend our days doing mindless McBusywork, and often finding ourselves getting booted out the door over and over again for not fitting in. Not to mention those who have never worked at all, because the very idea of having to try to fit in at a standard workplace, with all those sounds and smells and inner sensations and arbitrary rules and itchy clothing and chitchat and bad jokes and getting up early day after day after night after night of insomnia, pushes us to the brink of total meltdown. We actually don't know at all how many of us could do more than we've done; if we had something close to full employment and employers had to try to accommodate us, what might our working lives look like?

But I'm very good at understanding how other autistics might struggle and how it's not their fault; I'm not so forgiving of myself. Other people are victims of circumstance, but I'm just a failure. Probably the most difficult thing I've had to do since being diagnosed is to be as forgiving of myself as I am of others, to re-frame my past as something more like, "You needed help and support for decades and you didn't get it, and in fact, people heavily resented you for even asking for it; you're lucky that you've done as well as you have."

It's true. After college, I spent all but one year of my life living independently, which in itself is pretty extraordinary even for someone without disabilities. I've never spent more than a few months of my adult life with no work at all. I've earned money writing. I moved cities multiple times, including one move cross-country, doing all my own packing and in many cases, even all my own driving (before I realized I would always be a road hazard and quit taking the wheel), because I had no one to help me. And yet, I'm a flop burger covered in flop sauce with flop fries on the side because I haven't consistently had work at my skill and educational level, despite having had absolutely no career guidance that took my disabilities into account until a few years ago. I'd tell anyone else that made absolutely no sense at all, because it doesn't. Seeing it all spelled out there on the page really hammers that home for me.

Here are some excerpts from my anti-CV:

My current employer: [name redacted] I telecommute, and was hired remotely for this job. The people I work for have never seen me, have never even seen a photo of me. I was hired in October 2007, just a few days before I received my diagnosis of Asperger's. [snip]

[insert stuff I already mentioned about my job not being long for this world]

The fact that my employers cannot see me means that I've had the option of not disclosing the Asperger's, and I've opted, so far, not to disclose. [Note: I wrote this

before I went on company disability late last year, at which time I had to disclose my condition to the insurer, which means that now they probably know.]

They don't see how many times I go to the bathroom (sometimes just to go, as a tension reliever), or how often or where I scratch myself, or my staring spells, or that I frequently choke on my own saliva or spill or drop things or trip over my own feet, or how much I squirm in my chair. They don't hear the weird noises I (involuntarily) make or the things I say to myself or to the cat. They have limited exposure to my odd voice and vocal tics. They cannot see the twitches and fasciculations and pinched nerves I get in various parts of my body which wind up taking over my brain when I have them. They don't know that I have scoliosis and a flat back and walk kind of funny. And no coworkers in the vicinity means little chance I will say something bluntly honest, or laugh at something that isn't funny, or not laugh at something everyone else thinks IS funny, or talk about things they have no interest in, or otherwise give them strong cues that I am not one of them. [snip]

[insert lots of grody medical stuff about my digestive tract and all the stuff I do to control it, polycystic ovaries leading to hirsutism I compulsively pluck, male-pattern baldness, killer cramps and migraines, and other hormonal weirdness]

Speaking of mornings, I have always had a terrible time with them. My circadian rhythms run on a 25 or 26-hour clock rather than 24; therefore, regardless of when I get up, I'm always tired and am so until the stimulants kick in (and remember, I can't do caffeine at all until I'm done having bowel movements, which takes me several hours). I'm even more tired in the mornings, because I have a hard time sleeping at night, and actually find it easier to sleep during the day. Furthermore, I find that — at least partly thanks to the psych meds — I must have a minimum of 9 hours of sleep on a work day, or my left brain does not function at all. With this job, I can clock out and have a nap if I am feeling particularly logy that day; on most jobs, that's not an option.

I also no longer drive, because it has become apparent to me that I am not safe behind the wheel; I often have instances where too much sensory information and internal rumination makes me “space out” for several seconds, which is long enough to cause accidents. If I am telecommuting this is not a big deal, but it does limit the number of workplaces I can get to. [snip]

Right before I was diagnosed, I was working at [redacted] as a transcriptionist, working as a contractor through a service called [redacted]. They hired me as a radiology transcriptionist, specializing in vascular and angiography reports. However, they soon ran out of transcription work for me to do, because doctors were starting to self-complete their own dictation there, and they had me doing endless Xeroxing projects, and were discussing having me work the reception desk, which I would have been terrible at.

The on-site supervisor I had at first, who was very nice and seemed to like me very much, left the position and was replaced by someone who not only absolutely loathed me (in part because I was not able to be as precisely punctual as she liked), but insisted on coming to work (in the same room as me) with horrible contagious viruses because she said she couldn't “afford” to take a sick day (although she worked for the same company I did and I knew no one was allowed to cash out sick leave). I have no doubt she loathed me for all the reasons I enumerated above about both my appearance and my mannerisms, although she had no complaints whatsoever about the quality of my work. (As you will see, this is a continuous pattern; it's rare that anyone has problems with the quality of my work unless there is something external interfering with my getting it done.) I knew I had to get out of there as quickly as I could; fortunately, with my skill set and the favorable job market in my field at that time, it did not take me very long to get hired as a work-at-home. [snip]

[insert lots of tedious detail about my former marriage and the squalor and chaos we lived in because I married the one person on earth with worse executive functioning than mine, while I worked a different telecommuting transcription job and moved

from Phoenix to southern California and back again multiple times, then split with my husband, then moved to Seattle and finally to Portland, all over a 5-year period]

During the first four months of 2002, I worked at [redacted], doing proofreading of financial documents. I was working overnights here, and also had to do at least 10 hours a week of mandatory overtime most weeks. I was absolutely exhausted, and highly distractible. I got written up constantly for taking too long in the bathroom and for staring into space — although once again, I got plenty of work done. Here, though, I had to work at these long tables with dozens of other chattering proofreaders, and I told them I would continue to make errors until I got a desk in a quiet place and one where I could at least occasionally stand and work. At this time, my working diagnosis was attention deficit disorder rather than Asperger's, so legally they had to accommodate me, but it took them months before they ever did anything, and by then, I had secured employment at [redacted]. [snip]

[and so on for about eight more pages]

Yes, I did lay on the tragedy-of-being-me a little thick when I wrote this. I admit it. I did major in Dramatic Writing, after all (no, seriously, I did). But you know what? None of it is a lie. And I don't think I'm exaggerating how painful it really was to have no support, no understanding, and no knowledge of my condition for years and years. I don't think I'm exaggerating the toll it took on me to have to work that way for so long. Really, it's a wonder I'm not sicker than I am.

And here's the important thing: people believe me. Having gone for so many years not being believed and having my reality denied to my face over and over again, you don't know what that means to me, to have people take your condition seriously and want to help you work with it. That includes Vocational Rehabilitation, which is working with me now on developing a career I'm much better suited for: working as a peer counselor, or Personal Support Worker, for other people with developmental disabilities. So getting it all out of my system has paid off for me, in more ways than

one. Maybe I can help the people I work with in the future write their own anti-CVs, so they can see for themselves where they've been – and maybe, just maybe, go somewhere they actually belong.

# **Keep it Moving: Musings for Young People in Transition & Thoughts on Preparing to Search for, Self-Manage, and Succeed in Employment**

*By Emily Wilson*

## **Introduction**

Making the jump from any stage or step in life is stressful for everyone, no matter who they are, where they are headed, what their strengths are, and how many barriers they may face. In such situations, we can learn a lot about navigating transitions, opening new doors, and trying to manage the stress that comes along with such choices from those who have come before us.

There are some wonderful education programs and guides out there that will take you through different types of transitions and offer technical assistance for success based upon your individual status; however this is not one of them. Instead, this chapter will focus on some non-traditional aspects of life transitions during young adulthood, some things to expect, others to look out for, and a lovely mash-up of resources at the end of the chapter (including a few of those wonderful guides) to hopefully help you on your way. The main thrust of this chapter is to normalize the rockiness, uncertainty, and new challenges that we encounter as young adults during the transitional parts of life and within the specific context of employment, while also recognizing that these are exciting times filled with hope, opportunities for self-actualization, and endless potential for creativity in learning about yourself and carving out the life you want.

## **Work It, Flex It, Own It**

Ask any job hunting or employment expert and they will tell you that the key to securing the employment you want and need is networking. You may have heard this before, and perhaps you are utterly tired of hearing about it. After all, putting yourself

out there, especially for something like an important internship or a first job can be intimidating and downright bumpy at first. There is no doubt that building a network of people who support you and can make recommendations, offer job leads, or provide other types of feedback is a project that requires effort. Nevertheless, networking is just as much about putting yourself out there to find out about what you want as it is about discovering what you don't want. Let me explain...

For example, many of us have family obligations, diverse work styles, complex health issues, and other considerations that may make it more difficult for us to maintain work life balance in the type of job that offers no flexibility in terms of hours, work space, etc. Learning more from others – either by reading, talking, or connecting online – about the various options and types of employment that may interest you will go a long way to inform what you will need to reach your goals. Some strategies to get started with your employment research and networking include:

**GETTING CONNECTED:** Professional and industry organizations offer many great benefits, including resources, mentoring, and job boards for young people who are entering the workforce. A quick internet search usually yields some good finds, and there are also databases you can search for targeted fields such as science and technology. Check out Job Hunt's searchable Directory of Professional and Industry Associations and Societies here: <http://www.job-hunt.org/associations.shtml>

**JOINING A JOB CLUB:** Job clubs are becoming more popular among people looking for opportunities across the country and these often serve as networking spaces at local community organizations for folks to come together, strategize about their job searches, and provide social support. Check out Job Hunt's listing of state job clubs and networking groups at <http://www.job-hunt.org/job-search-networking/job-search-networking.shtml> to see if one currently exists in your area, or start your own!

**SHADOWING SOMEONE:** Getting connected with a professional or mentor through an organization, job club, or other resource who holds a position that you are interested in is a great way to learn more about what education and steps you will need to take along a career path in order to land this type of job, and also what your day-to-day will be like once you are in the job. Contact your school or a local community agency to see if they have mentoring or shadowing programs that you can participate in to learn more.

**INTERNSHIPS AND VOLUNTEERING:** Gaining experience through performing paid and unpaid internships as well as doing just about any type of volunteering is becoming more essential these days for mapping out your plans to enter the workforce. Idealist.org has a comprehensive overview of volunteering and other types of development opportunities that can be found here: <http://www.idealists.org/info/Volunteer>

Paying attention to others who are already established in a field that interests you and have pearls of wisdom to pass on about their successes, failures, and recommendations will help you to navigate your way towards finding a good fit for your needs in the world of work.

## **Practicing Resilience as Resolve**

Despite our best expectations of ourselves and our talents and strengths, we all experience feelings of failure at some point in our lives. It is important to recognize that along with the stress and disappointment that can sometimes accompany a particularly hard time when things did not work out, it is common and also part of life to not immediately reach a goal that we have set for ourselves. We may experience changes or obstacles that make it impossible for us to reach a goal in the way that we thought we would or should. Regardless of what happens that stands in our way, we must remember that these experiences can also be opportunities to learn more about

ourselves than we knew before, and even start down a new, more fulfilling path that was revealed as a result of something not working out as we had originally planned.

As human beings, we are all built for resilience, which means we all have the ability to adapt and overcome difficulties, failures, and changes that force us to make new plans. Strength and resilience in tough times are skills that help us to manage our lives as we become adults, and must be practiced just like any other thing that we do to improve over time. Some tips for building resilience include:

- Creating and maintaining relationships with family and friends
- Thinking positively
- Taking care of yourself in both smooth and difficult times

For more information, check out the American Psychological Association's Road to Resilience brochure here: <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/road-resilience.aspx>

## **The Importance of Self Care and Closing Thoughts**

The last tip on taking care of ourselves in order to practice resilience leads us to the importance of self care, which includes giving our minds and bodies the things they need in order to live a happier, healthier, and more balanced life both in and outside of work. When we are engaged in any type of a transition – leaving school, looking for a job or internship, or adjusting to a new job or routine – it is critical for our wellbeing that we continue to check in with ourselves on how we are feeling and to make sure that we are getting enough sleep, eating nutritious foods, and doing some physical activity such as brisk walking on a regular basis. Keeping up with these habits will not only help you to feel better in your daily life, but they will also help to build your body and mind's defenses against stress, depression, anxiety, and burnout.

The work place can be hectic, taxing, and can make many demands on our time, balance, and wellbeing, both with healthy and toxic sources of stress. In order to

succeed and lead a balanced life, it is helpful to learn techniques for relaxation and reflection so that you can self-manage these stressors. For example, some find it helpful to practice Mindfulness, which is an easy form of meditation that teaches us to be present, reduce our anxiety about what may happen, and to focus on how we are feeling in the moment. There are many other types of relaxation techniques, and you can learn more about them in addition to Mindfulness here at the Mayo Clinic's Stress Basics page:

*<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/stress-management/MY00435>*

Regardless of which path you choose to reduce your stress around finding and succeeding at work, be sure to give yourself the gift of compassion by treating yourself well and recognizing that although transition to anything can be challenging, these periods hold rewards as well as the lessons that will help shape who we become as adults on the way to reaching our job goals.

## **Employment Resources**

**Ask JAN** (Job Accommodation Network) *<http://askjan.org/>*

**Chemists with Disabilities**, a Committee of the American Chemical Society

*[http://portal.acs.org/portal/acs/corg/content?\\_nfpb=true&\\_pageLabel=PP\\_TRANSITIONMAIN&node\\_id=332&use\\_sec=false&sec\\_url\\_var=region1&\\_\\_uuid=c1c47422-aef6-41f5-83a0-86dee514fcea](http://portal.acs.org/portal/acs/corg/content?_nfpb=true&_pageLabel=PP_TRANSITIONMAIN&node_id=332&use_sec=false&sec_url_var=region1&__uuid=c1c47422-aef6-41f5-83a0-86dee514fcea)*

**Flex Jobs** *<http://www.flexjobs.com/>*

**Foundation for Science and Disability** *<http://stemd.org/>*

**Getting Hired** *<http://www.gettinghired.com/>*

**Guru.com** *<http://www.guru.com/>*

**Idealist.org** <http://www.idealist.org/>

**International Guild of Disabled Artists and Performers** <http://igodap.org/>

**Job Hunt** <http://www.job-hunt.org/>

**Professionals with Disabilities, LinkedIn Group**

<http://www.linkedin.com/groups/Professionals-Disabilities-124018>

**Snagajob.com** <http://www.snagajob.com/>

**Society of Nurses with Disabilities** <http://www.nursingwithdisabilities.org/>

**Society of Pharmacists with Disabilities**

<http://www.pharmacistswithdisabilities.org/>

**Society of Physicians with Disabilities**

<http://www.physicianswithdisabilities.org/>

**The Society of Health Care Professionals with Disabilities**

<http://www.disabilitysociety.org/>

**The Ladders** <http://www.theladders.com/>

**Workforce Recruitment Program, U.S. Department of Labor**

<https://wrp.gov/AboutPre.do>

## **Additional Resources for Young People**

**Advogrrl Meets World** <http://advogrrlmeetsworld.com/home>

**Autism Self Advocacy Network (ASAN)** <http://autisticadvocacy.org/>

**Autism Women's Network** <http://autismwomensnetwork.org/>

**Career Opportunities for Students with Disabilities**

<http://www.cosdonline.org/>

**Being a Healthy Adult: How to Advocate for Your Health and Health Care,**

Kathy Roberson, the Elizabeth M. Boggs Center on Developmental Disabilities

<http://rwjms.umdnj.edu/boggscenter/products/documents/>

[TransitiontoAdultHealthcare-EN-complete.pdf](#)

**Kids as Self Advocates (KASA)** <http://fvkasa.org/index.php>

**Mindfulness and the Autism Spectrum, Council for Relationships**

<http://www.councilforrelationships.org/resources/articles/>

[autism-mindfulness\\_7-28-08.shtml](#)

**National Disabled Student Union** <http://www.disabledstudents.org/index.htm>

**National Youth Leadership Network** <http://www.nyln.org/>

**The Riot!** <http://www.theriotrocks.org/>

**Youthhood.org** <http://www.youthhood.org/index.asp>

# Personal Job Requirements and Networking

*by Elizabeth Boresow*

When considering job possibilities, contemplate your needs and your work style. Thinking about your collective academic and leisure experiences will also help you realize your interests, strengths and weaknesses. Once you can articulate this about yourself, it becomes easier to consider employment – and yourself as the employed! The working conditions of different jobs can be considered in light of what you know about yourself, which will help you pinpoint and pursue specific jobs.

## About You

- What do you like to do?
- What is easy for you?
- What do you have the stamina or energy to do?
- Do you need to move around often or can you sit still for long amounts of time? (Do you like to work “in the field” or at a desk?)
- Do you need absolute quiet to work or do you work better in a busy environment?
- Are you a person who likes to work with others or alone?

Perhaps you like working with your hands and working with tools is easy. Maybe your woodworking teacher told you that your skills in carpentry are valuable. Or maybe your friends always ask you to help them with computer problems – they have definitely recognized your special skill set! Considering the questions above will help you figure out which types of environments you might be most successful in as an employee.

## About the Job

Think about what kinds of jobs would permit the working conditions you favor. The most important factor to consider in any job search is the set of job requirements. If you want to have a certain job, you should be able to perform the tasks required competently. This does not mean you must perform the job without accommodation, but you must be able to do the job. For example, if the job you are considering requires that you be able to swim while supporting another body in the water, you must be a competent swimmer with the strength to do so. If one of the primary responsibilities of a job is to alphabetize files, one must be able to do just that. For some individuals, work situations are accommodated when they have the skills to perform the job otherwise. For example, a person who is able to alphabetize files might need to work where there is no fluorescent lighting, as well as work in a scent-free environment. These kinds of accommodations can be worked out with an employer.

Now that you have indicated interest in certain types of jobs, you can begin to look at other factors:

- Do you need to find a job where you live or are you able to move?
- Are you looking for a part-time job or a full-time job?
- Do you need a job that provides benefits or do you have another plan that helps with health insurance, dental insurance, and vacation time?
- What are the job requirements? Can you do them?
- Will you need an accommodation/s to perform the tasks required?
- Will you have (or be able to arrange) transportation to the job?

- Do you want a job where you can set your own hours or where you have to be in the office or field at certain times?

When you know what your skill set is, and you know what you want to look for in a potential job, you are ready to start the job search. Good luck!

## **Networking**

Networking is a concept that supports the idea of fostering professional relationships with others in your field and related fields. In the past, this mostly consisted of word-of-mouth recommendations and face-to-face interactions. The technology boom has greatly altered networking, as much of today's networking takes place through social media.

LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook are a few online networking tools that can be used to keep in touch, to share information, and to comment on current events. Some people like this mixing of professionalism with personal accounts while others are less comfortable or satisfied with the concept. Since others can access a great deal of your public online content, you should only post what you are comfortable with others seeing.

How do you connect with people in the professional arena? Go to conferences! Introduce yourself to others and start up conversations about work or the conference, for example. As for me, I attended a local autism conference last year. I drove myself and decided on my own what sessions to attend. While I was there, I saw several people who I had met at various community events (from summer camps to speaking engagements). Through these connections, I found people who could suggest good sessions that I would enjoy and I even got introduced to some of the speakers. Simply by wearing my nametag and looking at the nametags of others, I recognized the main author's name of a book I contributed to several years ago. She recognized mine as well and it was really neat to meet in person!

Networking is tricky, but investing the time and energy in it can be advantageous. Of all the areas where networking can help you, the most important include being in touch with potential new business clients, finding a new job, and having relationships with key people who can help you out in ways that might not have even crossed your mind.

# Using a Schedule

*By Elizabeth Boresow*

## Using a Schedule for Daily Work

Setting a predictable routine allows me the greatest opportunity for success. My schedule is posted right above my desk so I know when I need to be where. As a service provider, I travel to many facilities each week and my schedule helps me to remember and keep tabs on what I am expected to be working on during specific work hours. I even travel with a copy of my schedule. Though I prefer a paper schedule, others prefer to use technology such as a digital calendar accessed through a smart phone.

If you have a desk job, you might want to use a schedule to break up your day up into amounts of time that you work on specific projects. You could designate a slot of time in the morning to check and respond to your work email, and then designate the next slot of time to work on a specific project. Afterward, you might allow yourself a few minutes to get up and stretch and/or to take a bathroom break. Perhaps you have another project to work on after lunch. Looking at the various tasks you have and assigning specific times to devote to each will help you to structure your day if you feel that doing so would be of help to your particular situation.

## Using a Schedule for Long-Term Projects

Using a planner can help you remember and manage a variety of projects. One aspect of long-term project management is keeping track of due dates for the projects you might be in charge of. Another aspect is breaking projects down into manageable steps or tasks. Each of these tasks can have a due date as well, you simply space out the time you are working on each component of the project. This helps many people feel less overwhelmed with their work assignments. At the beginning of a project,

figure out all of the steps needed to reach completion and then enter the dates of each step into your planner. Get into the habit of checking your planner daily so you know how much time you have left before a specific task needs to be completed.

## **Resources:**

This article that suggests 35 different sites, some of which are free:

*<http://www.tripwiremagazine.com/2010/03/35-very-useful-online-tools-for-improving-your-project-management-and-team-collaboration.html>*

My top 3 picks from the article:

- *<http://www.toodledo.com/>*
- *<http://www.getklok.com/>*
- *<http://www.rememberthemilk.com/>*

## **Additional ideas**

**GOOGLE CALENDAR** (*[www.google.com/calendar](http://www.google.com/calendar)*) is what I use to keep track of my daily schedule. It requires you have a Google account, however, I like the control I have over sharing or keeping private my schedule, in addition to the options of color-coding, setting reminder emails, and viewing my schedule via my phone. I use this resource primarily as a calendar, although it has the potential to serve as a planner.

**DOODLE** (*[www.doodle.com](http://www.doodle.com)*) is a tool that allows coworkers to find mutually agreeable times to meet. I have used this with several groups of people and it has worked well in all situations for me.

# Autistic Employment

*By Tracy Garza*

One of the most important things I have learned regarding employment and being on the spectrum is simply this: don't expect others to "get it" – including those you'd assume would be most likely to be informed about it.

I know I am relatively lucky – for me, the official diagnosis that confirmed I am on the spectrum is but one of the myriad factors I have tried to take into consideration as I contemplate a career transition.

Early on during the planning stages of my career transition, I approached a friend who was working at a local vocational service. He suggested (among other things) that I contact the state rehabilitation department and seek their professional help.

Approximately one year later, I've pretty much come to the realization that this state's rehabilitation department is, sadly, all but useless. Not only that – I have also learned that other Autistic people in my area also know this, because (surprise, surprise) they have been told by the very state employees from that agency that they simply "don't know how to help" people with Autism.

Sadly, social-justice organizations are, in my experience, just as likely to be also pretty much clueless about the plight of those of us on the spectrum who have struggled to find the right place in the workplace and/or may need some kind of special accommodation.

Now, just to clarify, I don't want anyone reading this to come to the conclusion that the conditions I've encountered are guaranteed to be identical all over the United States. But, considering I live in a relatively progressive part of the country where many people are usually expected to be well-informed about certain things... let's just say that your mileage may vary, but be prepared if conditions are less than ideal!

Having a local Autism support group (or perhaps an ASAN chapter) may be a somewhat better proposition, again, depending on your local conditions. I've encountered some support and, while it hasn't exactly changed things overnight, it's probably a better place to be.

Another good idea is to simply try and pay attention to the needs of your own friends & relatives. The wife of a good friend, who is a psychiatrist, recently needed to find a replacement for her part-time office assistant and turned to her social-media network to get the word out.

Luckily, we live fairly close to each other.

At the time, it's only an extra 7-8 hours a week, on top of the other ongoing freelance assignments I started out with, but it feels good to be working for someone who at least understands the specific challenges faced by Autistic adults.

Hopefully, the number of people who "get it" will continue to grow in the next few years!

# Finding your niche in the workplace

*by Jason Ross*

## **My employment history: bullying and victimization**

I have been a victim of serious bullying in the working environment. It happened at my first job at a well-known movie theater chain, as well as at another job where I worked with doctors.

When I was employed at the movie theater chain, the management did not allow me to work the concessions since I was too slow at counting money. So they made me an usher. The management also didn't like how precisely I ripped the tickets before I handed the stubs back to customers, or how I helped customers find seats when it was crowded, or how meticulously I used to clean the theater. My supervisors and coworkers called me names and laughed at me.

After the movie theater job, I worked at a chain pharmacy. The store manager wanted me to work with a cashier who had been there since the store had first opened. The cashier frequently screamed at me because I wasn't doing things the way she wanted me to or because she thought I was too slow. Most of the time, I stacked shelves and worked in the stock room.

Soon after that, I decided to become an ultrasound technician. When I finished my training, I got my first job. In my experience, doctors can become very aggressive and abusive if work is not getting done to their standards of 'normal'. Several people in the medical field have explained to me that a lot of doctors act this way because they are dealing with people's lives, and also because they want to maximize payments for their services. At this job, every test had to be performed within a ten-minute timeframe, especially if the doctor knew ahead of time that a test would come out normal. It is difficult working with doctors if you're a technologist who cannot perform

tests under their hurried conditions and specifications. I suggest that Autistic adults who are interested in medical careers be aware that the medical profession is a fast-paced style of work that can be disruptive to common Autistic approaches and work styles. It's not that us Autistics can't deal with people, because we can, however, when we put ourselves in the fast-paced style of the medical field and try to perform, and also deal with and interact with people, it can cause us to break down.

Working in the medical field has taught me that doctors can be the worst of bullies. Doctors work to try to help people with disabilities in their practices, but a lot of them also work to try to create a "normal" that does not exist. One doctor I worked for cut my pay and hours. He also thinks that all Autistic people should be super good at technical computer skills (which is not true). Another doctor I worked for punched me in the arm when he had to pay a customer for a stolen watch that I did not take, only the doctor blamed the incident on me anyway. The same doctor also called me "retard" and "doofus," and often told me to "stop acting like an ass."

Some Autistic people have time management and other executive functioning issues. The "clocks" in some of our brains don't know when to stop or when to begin. It's been a long journey trying to figure out a career that would fit me best. On a positive note, it has led me to become very involved with disability rights. I have been thinking about pursuing work where I can help Autistics live better lives. I have also recently learned how to use Apple products quite well, and now I know how to create many different visual artistic projects. But no matter how much I want to work, none of my old jobs were right for me.

Even though I have struggled with work myself, I have succeeded in learning to verbally express myself. I still have a lot to work on, and I feel that working with other Autistic people would help me to improve myself even more.

## **Striving for happiness in the workplace**

There are ways to handle employer bullying and there are ways not to handle it. My personal experience with employer bullying has made me extremely uptight, and it has also been detrimental to my ego, but I am still here and I am working on feeling better about this situation everyday.

The first step in dealing with employers is creating a healthy and safe environment. As for disclosure, I have tried it both ways (telling upfront and waiting to tell) and either way problems can appear. I've also learned that disclosure requires tact, and that we have to be able to tell an employer about our disability without seeming like we need "special" treatment and while also maintaining that we are competent at our jobs. Most employers need to be educated when it comes to knowing about disabilities, especially autism. But we all have a right to be who we are and to feel accepted, despite the fact that society is not always accepting of us.

It is not uncommon for an employer, upon hearing of a candidate's disability, to either hire out of charity or to not hire us at all. A huge issue I have faced in work environments is dealing with non-disabled employees who feel that my accommodations are unfair. Non-autistic adults tend to work differently than Autistic adults who need certain accommodations to work efficiently. But everyone deserves to work in a healthy and safe environment, and not just non-disabled people.

Most disabled people want to work, and we want to work in environments that consider our needs. We also want to be productive workers. Choosing the right career and/or working environment is crucial. Speak up right away if a specific work environment is not compatible for you. It's okay not to always know what works best for us because many of us learn through experience. Also, many of us try several different types of jobs as we make our way on our life paths. I have always been motivated to work and try different careers so that I can figure out what is best for me.

Sometimes it takes time to understand what career will fit our personality and work style best, but we should still remain open to many possible career choices. The right career will be the most satisfying to us, and we all deserve to be able to earn a living where we can have the quality of life that is truly meant for us. Life experiences have taught me that I need and value a good quality of life in order to survive and live to be who I am. Not every one can be a millionaire, but to be happy with what I am doing and to contribute to society without feeling scared to go to work is enough for me.

It is important to know our rights in the workplace, and it is also important to know what kind of accommodations we need in order to work and to earn a living. This is self-advocacy on the job. There are different reasons why people feel scared to go to work, for example, if they are dealing with a bully at work, or dealing with a less than ideal sensory environment, or dealing with feeling out of place, etc. Choosing the right employment for any one of us is crucial in the planning process of our lives.

Some people quickly make a decision about a job without thinking and become very stubborn not realizing the decision they made was a poor decision. This happened to me. My decision to become an ultrasound technologist was fast and stubborn, and I refused to consider anything else. Self-Advocacy is about knowing who you are, what fits best for you on the job, knowing your rights, and knowing what you can handle.

In the past, I was fearful to quit my jobs because I was afraid I would not be able to find another job. I was also afraid of being on unemployment. Nobody should feel that they should not leave a job if an employer or working environment is not fitting well. The right to work in a safe, comfortable, and non-assuming non-judgmental environment is important and it is something every disabled person deserves. Good luck!

# Aut at Work: The If, Why and How of Autism Disclosure on the Job

*By Shain Neumeier, J.D.*

Autism is what is often referred to as an invisible disability – One generally can't tell, by observation alone, whether or not any given person is Autistic or not. For Autistic people in the workplace, this can be helpful, difficult or both, depending on the situation. An employee who knows about a coworker's autism may take steps to be clearer and more direct in how they communicate, for instance, or they may instead act in such a way as to purposefully exclude that coworker from the workplace community. On the other hand, an employer who observes an employee stimming in order to deal with sensory overload may assume, without knowing that that person is Autistic, that it's a harmless quirk at worst, or may instead punish the employee for their behavior or try to force them to stop engaging in it while at work. Deciding to make the fact of one's invisible disability more visible involves the possibility of achieving greater and more complete acceptance, but also creates the risk of being rejected based on prejudice or faulty assumptions.

Disclosure of your identity as an Autistic person, and of any and all related issues, is a decision that only you should or can make. In large part, this is because you are the only person with all of the relevant information, including what you consider to be relevant based on your priorities, about your particular situation from which to make an informed decision. This article will discuss aspects of the disclosure issue – namely, if, why and how you choose to disclose – as well as things you might consider in deciding each and possible suggestions for going about it.

The first order of business, of course, is whether to disclose at all. For some people, this choice is obvious, either because of the Autistic traits they possess and how those traits manifest themselves, or because an individual's personality and style are such that the decision is fairly easy for them. Weighing in favor of disclosure

are considerations of having access to the assistance and resources one needs, being able to take part in diversity and inclusion efforts, and simply having the peace of mind that comes with having others know who you are and how you work. On the other hand, ignorance about and hostility towards autism and Autistic people is unfortunately widespread, and can make being openly Autistic at work frustrating, isolating and exhausting, if not worse. Based on personal preference and circumstances, you should weigh the benefits of each option, as well as the kinds and levels of stress that will result from both.

Possibly the most important reason for why you may choose to disclose being on the spectrum is because doing so will allow you to get reasonable accommodations in the workplace. The federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), or, for employees at federally-funded organizations, the Rehabilitation Act, prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability. In order to make this prohibition meaningful, it requires that employers provide reasonable accommodation for employees with disabilities – which, for Autistic people, may including things like sensory-friendly work environments or work structures that would work around executive functioning difficulties. However, it is the responsibility of the employee with a disability to request reasonable accommodations, which by its nature will involve disclosure. If you need a given accommodation in order to do your job, it is well worth disclosing.

There are also personal and interpersonal reasons for why a person may choose to disclose. Being “in the closet,” so to speak, can be very uncomfortable. Depending on how easy or difficult it is for you to pass as being neurotypical, choosing not to disclose may result in having to spend extra effort maintaining an image, when, depending on the work environment in question, it might be less stressful in the long run to not have to do so. Additionally, the fear of being found out may put strain on relationships you have with coworkers, or distance you from them. Disclosure, by contrast, may give you a more definite sense of where you stand with others, and who can be trusted. It may also make it easier to ask for and receive help with making

social connections around the office as well as with any other issues that may not fall within the category of legally required reasonable accommodations.

Finally, in some circumstances, it may be beneficial to inform an employer during the job application process that you are Autistic. Some employers are actively looking to hire people with disabilities as part of diversity programs or initiatives. Many will often state this, including language in job advertisements explicitly encouraging people of diverse backgrounds to apply. More obviously, in applying for any position that relates to issues of disability, disclosure will more than likely help you in getting the job rather than hurt you. If nothing else, disclosing in applying for such a job will show an employer that you have a reason to be interested in working for them. Additionally, some if not many employers will appreciate having a different, and very relevant, perspective on the work they do and the services they provide

All this being said, there are valid reasons to not disclose, or to hold off on disclosing until you have a job or have been working somewhere for a while. First and foremost is the issue of discrimination. Even with the ADA and the Rehabilitation Act in place, as well as additional state protections, discrimination still happens. It can, and often will, be very difficult to prove for the purpose of enforcing your rights, especially since employers may not even consciously realize that their decisions are discriminatory or informed by biases. Worse, especially for people on the spectrum, is the fact that discrimination won't always be blatant, but may instead manifest in the form of minor decisions and interactions that add up over time.

Alternately, discrimination may show up in the form of outright bullying and harassment on the job similar to that which you may have faced in school. Fortunately, such treatment as it affects adults in the workplace is considered employment discrimination and is thus prohibited by law in a way that peer abuse in school isn't. That being said, similar difficulties may arise in trying to prove purposeful unlawful harassment as would in trying to prove any other type of discrimination, and in the meantime, management at the workplace may not always respond properly to the

situation if at all. In determining how significant of an issue this could be for you for the purposes of a disclosure decision, you may want to consider both how prepared you are to deal with harassment on your own and who of your coworkers, if anyone, you could call on for support if it became an issue.

Closely related to these concerns is that of the possibility of negative or otherwise ignorant assumptions and comments about you or your abilities. Even where this doesn't result in discrimination, and even when it involves people with only the best of intentions, it can be uncomfortable and exhausting to be in a position of having to educate the people around you about what autism is and isn't, and remind them that you have abilities and struggles that may not match up with any other Autistic person they have met, seen or read about. While these types of problems may, to some extent, be lessened by how you disclose, or by disclosing after you have already been working somewhere for a while, it will also depend on the people you work with and what, if anything, they know or think they know about autism. In deciding whether or not to disclose, you will have to determine for yourself whether this will be more or less stressful than the assumptions people may make if you don't disclose.

The decision of how to disclose is as personal as that of whether to disclose at all, and will depend on both your personal styles and your goals in disclosing. Obviously, some discussions, such as disclosing for the purpose of obtaining reasonable accommodations, will be more extensive and formal than others, such as letting a trusted coworker know in casual conversation. However, in any of these situations, you may choose to include extra information that will more fully address issues that you see as important to your employer and coworkers' understanding of your experience as an Autistic person. For example, you might include things like common stims or known sensory issues, as well as possibly an explanation as to what they are and what function or role they serve in your life.

You may also choose at this point to directly address possible misconceptions about you or about autism in general. This is possibly one of the more fraught decisions

in the disclosure process because of the (often heated) politics surrounding what information and beliefs about autism are valid and acceptable. Deciding which myths to debunk and how will require tact and planning with regards to how to have your stand on these issues be heard and respected while also avoiding confrontations that could endanger your job. You should also, in deciding how to go about this, take into the account the possibility that a person may not know much if anything about autism, and talking to them as if they hold a particular belief or set thereof about the subject may overwhelm, confuse or offend them. You may want to focus in on one or two issues that are particularly important to you or that you know come up a lot in planning for such a conversation.

If you don't feel comfortable with or capable of countering some or any of these myths and assumptions but are still interested in doing so, you may want to print out or offer links to resources from organizations that are supportive of Autistic people and neurodiversity. Alternately, you could offer recommendations of books and blogs that will give someone a better idea about what being Autistic is really like. This won't guarantee that people will accept it as true, but it may make the disclosure process less stressful.

Finally, disclosure does not have to happen all at once. It can be a process that occurs over a series of conversations or other interactions, depending on your comfort level. You aren't required to answer questions, correct assumptions or otherwise disclose more than you want to at any given time, or even at all, just by virtue of having brought up your diagnosis or identity. That being said, it will be more difficult, once you have decided to disclose at all, to control how the information circulates around the workplace and how it's interpreted by other people. People's reactions, assumptions and resulting behavior towards you may make further clarification, if not necessary, then helpful. Yet again, this is a very contextual issue, and thus is something that you should consider based on the information you have in deciding if, when and how to make your first disclosure.

Deciding whether to disclose one's status of being on the autism spectrum is a multilayered, multifaceted issue, and is thankfully but also frustratingly personal. Too often, though not always, there are good reasons in support of either decision, and then still further decisions to be made either way. While the outcome of any decision in this process won't be clear ahead of time, the best indicators as to which of them are the right ones are your job, your comfort level, and your priorities.

# The Gift of the Authentic Self

*By Meg Evans*

Much has been written about deciding when and how to disclose a disability. But for some of us, it's not a matter of choice. Perhaps our speech is unusual enough so that a new acquaintance is sure to notice it's out of the ordinary. There may be something obviously different about our gait, posture, or facial expressions. We may rock or flap our hands, without having much awareness or control of it. Some of us rely on text-to-speech devices and other alternative forms of communication.

In our culture, being different from the majority often is seen as a great misfortune that must be fixed at any cost. This attitude affects not only how people look at disabilities but also at many other conditions, from obesity to male pattern baldness. If our waistlines are too large or our breasts too small—if our eyeglasses are too thick or our hair too thin—we're sure to find many products and services marketed as cures for our embarrassing defects.

The common thread running through all of these efforts to become indistinguishable from the herd is fear. Many people worry that if they don't measure up to all of our culture's norms, then they'll surely be doomed to rejection in both social relationships and the workplace. Advertisements feed on these insecurities with the familiar narrative of the woeful social outcast who becomes an instant success with both his career and the ladies, just as soon as he has the latest miraculous hair transplant or buys home workout equipment and gets all buffed up.

But what is the reality? Are humans in fact hard-wired to despise and shun anyone who doesn't conform to social expectations? Not long ago, I noticed a news article about psychological studies showing that in Western culture, men who shave their heads are perceived as dominant. I mentioned the article to my husband, who is bald and shaves off his fringe. He said that what's being perceived is an actual personality

difference. Because men in our society often make great efforts to hide their baldness, when someone goes to the opposite extreme by shaving his head, it's clear that he has courage and self-confidence. By contrast, a man looks insecure and becomes a target of his coworkers' jokes when he tries to hide his baldness but does a poor job of it—such as by wearing a baseball cap indoors, buying a cheap toupee, or resorting to a comb-over.

To put this observation into more general terms, although people do indeed notice when we stand out from the herd, that doesn't necessarily mean they look upon our differences as flaws. Rather, they often take their lead from how we look at ourselves. When we try to hide our differences, it generally has one of two outcomes. Either people notice anyway and think less of us for our insecurity, or we succeed in blending into the herd at great cost to ourselves. As to the latter, I don't just mean the money spent on products and therapies (although such expenses can be considerable). I'm referring more to the time, effort, anxiety, and resulting drain on mental energy that are the inevitable consequences of struggling every day with the fear of having one's differences found out. That cost isn't just the misery of living in fear. It also includes what, in economic terms, is described as lost opportunity cost—that is to say, the loss of everything that could have been accomplished with the time and energy that went into pretending to be someone else.

So if our differences are noticeable enough that we don't have the option of choosing whether or not to disclose them—well, there's something to be said for looking at this circumstance as a gift, rather than as a misfortune. Instead of wasting our energy and getting stressed out by forcing our lives into patterns that don't suit us, we are free to live authentically and to rearrange our environment to better suit our needs.

Of course, that's not to say embracing one's authentic self is easy. Rather, as mentioned above, it takes courage and self-confidence to let ourselves be seen as we really are. But when we cultivate these qualities in ourselves—when we summon up the courage to follow an authentic path, and when we proceed with the confidence

that it will turn out for the best—that’s what stands out in others’ minds. People notice when someone is comfortable in his or her “own skin,” and many of them react with envy, wishing they could feel as confident. This is the same psychological process that causes a shaved head to be looked upon as a sign of dominance.

In the workplace, just as in other settings, perception creates its own reality. Those who possess a strong, vibrant sense of self are looked upon as natural leaders; and as a result, they are given leadership opportunities. As for others who go through their workdays nervously trying to look and behave just like everyone else, their obvious insecurity gets them slotted into the follower category. It’s ironic that although modern society puts so much pressure on us to change ourselves for the sake of conformity, those who strive to be just like the herd often are not as successful as those who pursue an authentic life without fear.

# Clear Communication

*By Elizabeth Boresow*

## **Employers and Bosses/Supervisors**

Interacting with employers (the people who hire you or who own the company that pays you) can start as early as a job interview. In other cases, you might never meet your employer. Supervisors are often in frequent contact with you about various parts of the job, as they include the person or people to whom you answer and direct questions to. Supervisors also provide job performance feedback. Both employers and supervisors/bosses are considered “above” you in the hierarchy of employment. Employees should be allowed to state opinions, to disagree, or to give feedback to supervisors. That noted, supervisors have the final say in matters. In the work environment, many people report successful interactions when supervisors and other employees work in a collaborative spirit, listening openly to each person’s ideas and considering them carefully, no matter who has the “higher” position.

Fostering a collaborative environment is not always possible when a supervisor is inappropriate or makes you feel uncomfortable. It is important to set boundaries and to let your supervisor know if something they do makes you feel uncomfortable. Repeated comments in front of others about your “oddities”, or touching that you don’t like, or habits of making you do all of the “dirty work” for your colleagues could potentially be forms of bullying or harassment. If you are unsure of whether something is appropriate, it may be helpful to ask a trusted and neutral friend. In the case of bullying or harassment, clearly and bluntly let the person know that their behavior is making you uncomfortable. If the issue continues, you may look into filing a complaint through the Human Resources (HR) office. If your job doesn’t have an HR office, you can talk to your supervisor again or email their supervisor. Hopefully the problem will be resolved by that step, but if not, you may need to contact a state resource. For example, since I live in Kansas, I could contact the Kansas Human

Rights Commission. In the same way that employers should not bully, the same goes for coworkers. If a coworker bullies you, address it with that person and then take it to your supervisor if the problem persists.

## **Disclosure**

There are mixed opinions about disclosure during the workplace. What I will tell you is that if you want accommodations, you will have to justify why you need them. I am of the opinion that disclosure is only necessary if you need an accommodation. If you are not sure if this applies to you, ask yourself if you can perform the job requirements. The key is to communicate about this topic with your supervisor before problems arise. When you have this discussion with your supervisor, some people find it helpful to stick to three main points:

- That you are capable of doing the job.
- That you need to have X modification in order to do the task successfully.
- That you are open to alternative modifications and questions.

Sometimes the accommodation you have in mind is not feasible for the company, but an alternative arrangement can also serve the same purpose. Sometimes you might need to remind a supervisor that you were hired because you are qualified for the job regardless of the accommodations you might be requesting. Finally, being open to questions can put a supervisor at ease. Believe it or not, some people are still nervous about the “taboo” topic of disability. Being open to discussing concerns might be just what your supervisor needs to hear in order to be put at ease about the topic.

## **Coworkers**

No matter how similar or different coworkers are from each other, it is important for coworkers to treat each other with respect. All places of employment have policies about nondiscrimination and respect. Many professions or work environments have

different methods of communication between coworkers. For example, teachers talk in the teacher's lounge, truckers talk over the radios, secretaries use a variety of means to communicate with those they work for (phone, email, post-its...). Athletes are sometimes seen to have special handshakes or body contact to send each other encouragement. The best way I have found to understand the nuances of each position I am in is to observe my coworkers. Additionally, being willing to help your coworkers out with favors, as long as you are not being taken advantage of, can sometimes build up a reservoir of good will; and some day that karma might return to you.

## **Resource**

*<http://www.eeoc.gov/laws/practices/harassment.cfm>*

# Avoiding Employment Scams

*By Kathryn Hedges*

As if job hunting wasn't difficult enough already, job seekers also need to watch out for people trying to take advantage of them. (There are positive and negative people in all aspects of life.) The most common situations that job seekers should be wary of are equal-opportunity scams that prey on all job seekers, including us autistics. It's especially easy to overlook the danger signs if you're inexperienced or desperate for work. This paper will list and describe some common situations to avoid. I will also list some steps to take if you find scams or become a scam victim.

## General Tips to Avoid Employment Scams

The rest of this paper gives much more detail about specific scams (and things to be careful about that are not necessarily scams), but you can spot them by applying these four principles:

- Don't give information about your bank account or credit cards to someone on the Internet, even if they say it is required for a job application or access to exclusive job leads, etc. Requests for information about your bank accounts or credit cards, or information used to confirm your identity (such as your mother's maiden name), in connection with a job search should raise an immediate red flag.
- Ignore spam email. Employers don't advertise legitimate job openings or business opportunities this way, and links in these emails are likely to lead to computer viruses or requests for personal information (see #1 above).
- Don't pay for services you can get for free. If the free services aren't working for you, don't assume that services you pay for are necessarily better, even if they advertise as autism experts.

- If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. (This old saying is probably the key to spotting any kind of scam!)

## **Types of Employment Scams**

### **PHISHING FOR IDENTITY THEFT**

Some people post fake job listings to get people to send them personal information that they can use for identity theft (thieves pretending to be you to take your money out of the bank or run up credit card bills in your name). You may already have heard of scams called “phishing” (pronounced “fishing”) because it is like using a baited hook to catch fish.

Be careful where you send job applications and what information you include. It may seem like a waste of time to check out employers before applying for a job, but it can prevent some major problems. If you have to sort out your finances after someone pretending to be a potential employer accesses your bank account and credit cards—or uses your Social Security number—you’ll wish you’d spent a few minutes on a quick Internet search. Be aware there is no legitimate reason a potential employer would ask for your bank account number, credit card information, or your mother’s maiden name, although they usually ask for Social Security numbers. Employers don’t run credit checks on employees they haven’t interviewed in person yet.

### **SOME WAYS TO SPOT FAKE JOB LISTINGS**

- The salary or pay rate are unusually high for a job described as requiring little or no skills or experience. For example, a job listing advertises a \$100,000 salary with full benefits for an entry-level sales or “account manager” position.
- The job title and/or description are vaguely worded, ungrammatical, and /or poorly spelled. A typo or two may just mean a lower-level HR person was in a hurry or

wasn't familiar with the terms used in the job description, but if the posting looks very unprofessional, it can be a big tipoff that the author is a scammer. (Even if there is a real job, the company could be unprofessional in other ways, such as treating employees badly or underpaying them.)

- If you click on a link to go to the company website and it requests your email address before allowing you to access the website, this is a sign of a phishing scam, or at least trying to get email addresses to sell to spammers. And who needs more spam email? If you really want to be safe, you can check out the link before clicking on it. [http://www.pcworld.com/article/248963/how\\_to\\_tell\\_if\\_a\\_link\\_is\\_safe\\_without\\_clicking\\_on\\_it.html](http://www.pcworld.com/article/248963/how_to_tell_if_a_link_is_safe_without_clicking_on_it.html)
- Try to identify the company and the job listing by searching the Internet so you can make sure a job listing is legitimate. If it is, you may be able to use the employer's secure online job application. You can search using the company name, if listed. (Some companies leave the name out of legitimate job listings to avoid deluging HR with phone calls.) Other things you can search on, if they are listed, are the hiring manager's name, corporate division, email, or phone number. If there are any unusual phrases in the posting that might be unique, search for those too.
- Search for the company name, email, or phone number plus the word "scam" to see if there are online warnings.
- Check to see that the company actually has facilities in the area where the job is located. If possible, see if it is likely someone would do this job at the location listed. For example, if a design engineering position is posted for San Jose, California, but the corporate website says Research and Development are on the east coast, this could be a sign of a fake listing.
- If the job looks legitimate, congratulations! You now have a lot of information you may be able to use to network or at least tailor your resume, cover letter, and application.

You can read more about this at <http://www.glassdoor.com/blog/5-tips-avoid-fake-job-postings/> and also <http://www.microsoft.com/security/online-privacy/phishing-interests.aspx#jobs>

If you spot job postings that look like phishing scams, you can report them to the owners of the job board so they can take down the postings. For example, Craigslist has links in the upper right corner of the screen to report posts that violate their standards.

If you think you may have been tricked into sending information to a scammer, contact your bank and credit cards. You will probably need to close those accounts and open new ones. You can also report the scam to the Internet Crime Complaint Center at <http://www.ic3.gov/complaint/default.aspx>.

## **Charging fees for job placement**

Some people take advantage of job seekers by advertising job placement for a fee or assistance finding work overseas. (Some large companies have positions in overseas locations. But they wouldn't ask for a fee to apply.) They may also request fees to submit applications for temporary or permanent jobs. These scam artists may offer money-back guarantees, but don't trust the guarantee—it is illegal to ask for the fee in the first place. Recruiters' commissions are paid by employers after hiring, not by job seekers up front. There may still be some online job search databases that charge fees, but most of their listings are compiled from other sources that job seekers can access without paying. Save your money and stick to open access listings.

Other scammers offer to prepare applications for government jobs for a fee. There are legitimate resume editors who charge fees to help people prepare lengthy Federal resumes, but they are busy enough through word-of-mouth referrals they're not going to send spam emails or advertise in help wanted ads or on late-night television.

If you see these types of job postings, feel free to report or flag them to the owners of the job board where you saw them.

If you have paid fees to scammers, you can dispute the charges with your bank or credit card. You can also report the scam to the Internet Crime Complaint Center at <http://www.ic3.gov/complaint/default.aspx>.

For more information on how to find and use resources that are free of charge, see the chapters on Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) or other job search resources, such as college career centers, your state Employment Development Department, or even public libraries.

## **Work-at-home schemes**

Working at home may be particularly appealing to autistics who would rather not deal with a traditional workplace or commuting. Although there are certainly professions you can practice at home, such as freelance writing or graphic design, this isn't what I mean by "work-at-home schemes." I'm talking about those classified ads, ads on late-night television, and spam emails that offer big money for easy work at home. These are all scams of some type that target the disabled and elderly, as well as stay-at-home mothers and students. There are also multi-level marketing scams, which I discuss separately, that present themselves as home-based businesses.

Envelope stuffing schemes are an old scam in which someone answers an ad in the newspaper (or Craigslist, these days) offering to sell instructions on how to make lots of money at home stuffing envelopes. The instructions are to place the same ad and get people to pay you for the instructions. This is therefore a pyramid scheme, which is illegal and could get you in trouble.

New schemes include offers to pay people to post links to Google or complete online surveys, etc. These are often just methods to extract personal information for identity theft.

Sometimes the scammers are looking for innocent people to involve in illegal activities, such as money laundering (making it look like money from crimes came from a real business). There are also reshipping scams. There is no honest reason anyone would need to pay someone to do financial business or shipping/receiving from home.

Assembly at home jobs are a scam because the company wants to sell overpriced materials and won't accept the products you assemble.

Mystery shopping turns out to be a scam because the check they send you to pay for the items is phony.

Likewise, there are scams that sell online training for medical billing at home or other services for which there may not be a market in your area. (See also the for-profit training section in this chapter.)

Some scammers are a bit more subtle and write what look like real job listings for jobs someone would do from home on a computer. For example, once I responded to an ad for people to build 3D computer models from photographs. This sounded like fun, based on my particular strengths and interests, and I was impressed by the novelty of this technology at the time (1990s). Unfortunately, the company seemed to be using this as a scheme to sell people overpriced computers and software. My partner and I figured out that the pay scale for completed 3D models was too low to recoup the initial costs. Bonafide employers do not charge you for equipment to do your job (except for uniforms).

You can read more about work-at-home scams at [http://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/2009/april/workathome\\_041709](http://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/2009/april/workathome_041709)

If you want to track down one of the few legitimate work-at-home opportunities, your local library should have the “Work-at-Home Sourcebook” for assistance.

If you saw these work-at-home scams on a job board or Craigslist, feel free to report or flag them to the administrators.

If you have paid fees to scammers, you can dispute the charges with your bank or credit card. You can also report the scam to the Internet Crime Complaint Center at <http://www.ic3.gov/complaint/default.aspx>.

## **Multi-level marketing (MLM) schemes**

A few months ago, I attended a meeting of a local disability organization for a presentation by a man who said he helped disabled people start their own businesses. However, it didn't take long for us to figure out that this wasn't small business coaching, but a multi-level marketing scheme. There were all sorts of things we would pay for—training workshops, various fees—and we were supposed to recruit new salespeople who would pay us to get into the network. He said we could sell the company's services to our friends and family and get them to join us in the network, and everyone would get royalties for each subscriber they recruited. These are all typical signs of MLM scams.

Most autistics wouldn't want to work in sales even for an honest company because sales jobs tend to hit our weak points. If you are the exception who enjoys dealing with people and can be persuasive, there are plenty of legitimate sales positions. Don't waste your time (and possibly your reputation) with MLM.

Most MLM schemes share five major flaws:

- You may quickly saturate the market for your product after you have paid for much more stock than you can sell;
- MLMs are often illegal pyramid schemes where you pay people in higher levels and people below you pay you;
- You may be uncomfortable with ethical shortcomings in the organization; and
- You may alienate your family and whatever social groups you are in by pushing unwanted products or recruiting them to the MLM.
- To put it bluntly, MLMs are bad news. If you share the typical autistic sense of justice and ethics, you wouldn't want to be involved even if you succeeded in making money. You are likely to lose whatever money you put into the venture anyway, as well as making people want to avoid you because you're always trying to sell them something.

If you or someone you know may have been taken advantage of by an MLM scheme, see <http://www.consumerfraudreporting.org/MLM.php> for more information.

## **Wage fraud**

Some employers take advantage of workers and don't pay them all the money they have earned. This happens most often in workplaces where many of the workers are immigrants with poor English skills. However, employers are getting bolder because workers are afraid they won't get another job if they quit or complain. Some employers expect employees to put fewer hours on their time cards than the time they actually worked, or to work through breaks, or to work overtime without being paid overtime rates. Other employers claim that they do not need to pay new workers during training. There are even employers who pay employees with checks that can't be cashed. These employers are all breaking the law! All employees are entitled to pay

for all the time they work. You can read more about it here: <http://www.sfgate.com/news/article/Wage-theft-a-scourge-for-low-income-workers-2354262.php>

In a more subtle method of fraud, some employers intentionally misclassify workers as “exempt” management (who are not entitled to overtime) or “independent contractors” (who are not entitled to benefits or deductions paid into government programs). The key difference with employees who are exempt from overtime is that they are paid a set salary rather than hourly pay rate, although there are other distinctions as well regarding their job duties and responsibilities. The differences between employees and independent contractors are not so simple to summarize, but be very careful if you are offered a position as a “1099 contractor” instead of a “W9 employee”. If you have a supervisor who closely directs your work, the employer furnishes your tools and materials for your work, these are two main factors that would indicate you are really an employee and not a contractor. You can read more about it here: <http://www.irs.gov/Businesses/Small-Businesses-&Self-Employed/Independent-Contractor-%28Self-Employed%29-or-Employee%3F>

For example, if I asked you to work in my machine shop and provided all the materials, as well as telling you what hours to work and when your breaks were, you would be my employee. If I asked you to make some parts, but you bought the materials and did the work in your own shop whenever it was convenient, you would be a contractor. There are some other guidelines too, which you can research on the Internet if you think your employer is trying to classify you as a contractor to get out of taxes and ADA accommodations.

None of these methods that employers use to avoid paying workers for all they are entitled to are legal, and your state should have a labor commission that will help you get all the money you earned. There should be a poster in the break room listing your rights as an employee and who to contact if problems arise. If there isn't, you can find your state labor commission online. (And you can even report them for not displaying the poster, which is required by law.)

I have had to file wage claims with the state labor commission twice. The first time, my employer expected me to work unpaid overtime because I was a “Publications Manager” and they said this was an exempt management position. However, I was paid an hourly wage rather than a monthly or yearly salary, and my job did not meet the other criteria for being a real management position. The company settled when they received the claim and sent me a check for the overtime pay.

The second time, I was hired by a friend of a friend, who didn’t have me go through all the hiring paperwork because he said he just wanted to test my skills before committing to a hiring decision. Well, he ended up traveling and wouldn’t answer my email about when I would get on the payroll. Finally I was let go for autistic behaviors on the job, after he refused to let me take a leave until I could get a job coach to translate for my supervisor and get him to stop bullying me. I filed claims for both the failure to provide ADA accommodations and not paying me. The agency investigating the ADA claim took him at face value when he said that I was just a volunteer and dismissed my claim. The investigator on the wage claim knew this was a typical tactic of deadbeat employers and pushed him to settle for a reasonable amount of wages to avoid having to pay penalties, too. He refused to settle, so I am going to take this to a hearing.

Now I know why legitimate employers make workers fill out all the paperwork before they start a new job! Also, if you intend to volunteer or do an unpaid internship, the HR department should have a form where you acknowledge this. If you are doing odd jobs or commissions for people, even people you know, at least get a letter or email describing the terms of your deal. This way, you both have something to refer to if one of you forgets the details—or if they don’t pay you and you need to go to Small Claims Court.

## **Low-commission job scams**

Some dishonest employers look for desperate job seekers to fill jobs that don’t guarantee workers will earn minimum wage. Examples of these are survey canvassers who are paid per completed survey, petition circulators who are paid per signature,

and door-to-door or street-corner sales people. Most people do not like being interrupted to fill out surveys, sign petitions, or buy random items from solicitors. This makes it difficult to make enough transactions for the low commissions to add up to minimum wage. The employers may classify workers as independent contractors to get around minimum wage requirements.

A good way to spot these types of jobs is if the job posting discusses pay in terms of “potential to earn \$X” instead of stating a definite pay rate or salary, particularly if no experience is required. Most bonafide commissioned sales jobs are looking for sales experience.

Some people who are very outgoing and charismatic, and don't mind being rather aggressive, can survive in or even enjoy these jobs. If you are autistic, this probably doesn't describe you—and you probably recoil at the idea of approaching strangers all day. A friend of mine who is not on the spectrum and is attractive and outgoing still couldn't make his quota of signatures for an environmental group. (That group may be ensuring that canvassers make minimum wage, or just wants to employ the most effective canvassers.)

## **Not Exactly Scams—But Be Careful**

The scams I discussed earlier in this paper are clearly fraud, there are laws against these actions, and there is never a benefit to the job seeker. However, there are some services that can be beneficial if they are provided well, or a complete waste of time and money if they are not. This is a gray area where we need to be careful not to judge or to trust too easily. Unlike fraudulent recruiters who charge fees for jobs they can't deliver, these companies do provide services—but the quality varies. Some of these organizations see parents of autistics (or other DD people) as their customers, as they don't expect autistics or DD people to make their own choices about employment. It can be difficult to self-advocate if your parents are pushing you to do something you aren't sure is good for you, or it may be difficult to second-guess your parents and

wonder if they know what is best. They may even tell you your judgment isn't good enough to make these decisions.

## **EMPLOYMENT SERVICES FOR AUTISTICS**

There's a new cottage industry of organizations helping autistics (and other people with developmental disabilities) find employment, train them for particular jobs, and/or support them on the job. Some of these companies contract with VR or the state DD agency, but others (at least in my area) are private-pay only and charge up to \$250/hour for their services. It is legal to charge for coaching, resume preparation, and similar services, unlike agencies that ask you to pay for the right to apply for a job. However, you need to decide for yourself whether or not they are worth the money.

It is easy to assume that a company who advertises as being experts on autism or neurodiversity will understand your needs more than your local career center or VR. Unfortunately, it doesn't mean they will be a good match for you or that their services are a good value for your time and money. For example, an advisor who helps autistic high school students get their first jobs may not have the experience or contacts to help an autistic professional get a new job after being laid off, or vice versa. They may have rigid stereotypes about autistics and what types of jobs we can do. (Non-autistics often learn a lot of misinformation in their training.) As someone diagnosed late in life, this was a surprise, but it probably wouldn't be a surprise to someone diagnosed during their school days who remembers IEP battles.

Before hiring one of these consultants (or letting a state agency refer you to one), try to get reviews from other autistics, perhaps via social media. I have seen websites that feature glowing testimonials from parents and employers—but not the autistic workers—and this doesn't seem like a good sign. Don't the autistics using their services have anything good to say? Are they expecting parents to make employment decisions for adult autistic children? Nothing about us, without us!

Training programs tailored for people with autism and other developmental disabilities may be funded via VR or DD agencies, but some are paid by the autistic or their family. These may seem ideal, particularly for parents of autistics who want them to become self-sufficient. However, they vary greatly in both the quality of training and how appropriately they treat autistic trainees. You should be able to visit the program and chat with trainees to see if it is a good fit.

For example, if you are interested in art and animation, a program that teaches autistics how to make their own animated movies and introduces them to people in the film industry might be a good program to consider. If a program teaches how autistics how to stuff envelopes, while talking down to trainees and making remarks about their unacceptable autistic behaviors, this might not be such a good program, even if parents approve of it.

Something else to keep in mind is that if these consultants want to teach you social skills for the workplace, this can be helpful, harmful, or just a waste of time. An autistic who hasn't had a job before probably does need tutorials on proper workplace etiquette, but if this material is presented negatively, it can induce more stress and anxiety about standing out as autistic in an environment of non-autistics. A program that insists a laid-off autistic professional needs the same lectures on basic hygiene and attendance as a high-school student is wasting your time and showing their ignorance.

## **SHELTERED WORKSHOPS — EXPLOITATION OR SPECIAL NICHE?**

One of the principles of disability rights is that people with disabilities should be integrated into the general workplace with supports and accommodations. (This is often called “competitive employment.” That means that people with disabilities are competing with non-disabled people for the same jobs, not that you have to be particularly competitive on the job.)

However, many well-meaning case managers, parents, and VR counselors still believe that people with disabilities would be better off in sheltered workshops. This is often linked to several mistaken beliefs about autistics: they say we can only do simple, repetitive tasks; our mannerisms would be too disruptive in a mainstream environment; or the accommodations for our sensory issues would be too expensive for a mainstream employer. For any readers who assume this only applies to autistics with limited speech or intellectual disabilities, I have encountered it in my work search after completing a master's degree. Some of the new programs to train autistics in software testing share some characteristics of sheltered workplaces, although the work is much more interesting.

Although there are non-profit organizations that treat disabled workers with respect and teach them transferable job skills, many (if not most) sheltered workshops are operated by for-profit companies that take advantage of being able to pay far less than minimum wage. These companies advertise light assembly or envelope stuffing services at lower prices than competitors that pay their workers market wages. Others advertise "employment in the community" that means they take work crews of gardeners or janitors to worksites, not that the employees work for employers in the community. Some retailers who hire the disabled also pay less than minimum wage.

Even if the job skills transfer to jobs in the mainstream workforce, employers in sheltered workshops may be reluctant to let the most qualified workers move on to mainstream employment. Since supervisors often treat developmentally developed workers as though they are in an institution, rather than a workplace, the "soft skills" learned in this situation are likely to be inappropriate for a mainstream workplace.

More information is available in a 2011 report discussed here: <http://www.disabilityscoop.com/2011/01/19/sheltered-workshops-report/11974/>

## **FOR-PROFIT TRAINING PROGRAMS AND COLLEGES**

There is a large industry of for-profit training programs and colleges for non-autistics that advertise their training will qualify workers for in-demand, well-paid careers. Most of these offer “financial aid” that consists of student loans. In many areas of the country, students can get similar training for much less at community colleges, state colleges, and continuing education programs. Also, as the economy changes, there may already be enough people trained in a given field that there won’t be enough jobs for all of them.

Since taking out student loans is basically gambling that future employment will be profitable enough to repay the loan and give a higher standard of living, many students (even those without disabilities) lose that bet when they are unable to find work in the current economy. Even if a program offers job placement services for graduates, if there are no job openings in that field, the school can’t magically place people in jobs. As a result, the percentage of people who fail to pay back their student loans is twice as high for people who attended for-profit training programs compared to public colleges or universities. (Source: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/02/04/AR201.102.0400015.html>)

Therefore, it is very important to do your research before signing up with a for-profit training program or college. Their advertisements are designed to make potential careers look very alluring and imply that their training will make you more qualified. I have even heard of programs that are bad enough that graduating from them is a big turnoff for employers who don’t want to retrain people who were trained to do things wrong.

## **Summary**

Please do not read this chapter and worry so much about being scammed that you give up on your job search. My goal is to give you the tools to identify scams and

ignore them, while searching for work that suits your skills and interests. It's just like learning to ignore spam emails offering to improve your sex life. The main thing to remember is that if something sounds too good to be true, it almost always is. The rest is just details... but concrete examples are very helpful for most autistics.

# Unhelpful Professionals in the Job Search

*By Kathryn Hedges*

Both before and after my diagnosis, I've known quite a few professionals (counselors, therapists, instructors, doctors, supervisors) who affected how I felt about myself by how much or how little they respected me.

You have the right to be treated with respect whether or not you have a disability. Some of the people who treated me the worst were supposed to be disability experts helping develop skills for getting or keeping a job, or professionals who promote themselves as autism experts. There is a lot of misinformation out there about autism, and sadly, a lot of it comes from non-autistics who misunderstand autistics but are good at convincing others they are experts. For some reason, most of these misunderstandings are very negative and hurtful.

You should not feel bad about yourself after a meeting with someone who is supposed to be helping you with your career or job search. Feeling discouraged about the job market in general is one thing, being concerned that your job skills are not in demand could be realistic, but if you feel differently about yourself and your autism, they're doing it wrong. I did not realize what the warning signs were, because I (like many of my readers, I suspect) have been treated inappropriately more often than not and have internalized their views of us and our prospects.

I have written some examples of how you should and should NOT be treated. If you have a VR counselor, job developer, etc. who repeatedly treats you disrespectfully, you do not need to put up with this. It may be difficult to respond at the time, and it may be helpful to write your response in an email. It depends on the person whether or not they are willing to listen to you and learn, or if they will reject your statements. If the latter, find out what the procedure is for mediating disputes (which will vary, so I can't be specific) and as calmly as possible let them know you need to work with someone

who respects you as a person with individual skills, strengths, and weaknesses— not a stereotype.

If the organization can't do any better, you are better off without them, because any energy you put into fighting the system is energy you are not putting towards your career search or taking care of yourself.

The following table summarizes behavior that is respectful compared to disrespectful behavior, and suggests ways to approach someone who is disrespectful or ignorant.

<b>RESPECTFUL</b>	<b>DISRESPECTFUL</b>	<b>SUGGESTIONS</b>
<p>Asks questions to find out your interests, strengths, needs, without making assumptions based on your autism (and/or other diagnoses). May ask you for examples to support your position, particularly if you are claiming something very unusual. For instance, if an autistic wanted a sales job— this is not unknown but still rare.</p>	<p>Assumes you fit a stereotype and gives advice based on assumptions. An example might be “People with autism can’t understand verbal instructions, so you need a job where you do the same thing all day every day.”</p>	<p>Find a tactful way to explain that not all autistic people are alike. Provide examples of situations where you did well in a situation that represents what you want. If this person rejects your experiences, you should not work with them.</p>
<p>Knows there are employers who accept employees who are different because of their disabilities. May advise you on standard workplace etiquette to follow to the best of your abilities, how to explain your differences on the job, and how to get accommodations at the interview or on the job so you can do your best.</p>	<p>Assumes all employers are prejudiced against people with differences. May instruct you to pretend you do not have a disability and try to get along without accommodations. May assume that any mistakes in etiquette are deliberate rudeness or that you are incapable of learning new skills.</p>	<p>Explain how accommodations are necessary for you to succeed and how your autism affects whatever social glitches you’re having. Give examples of new skills you have acquired successfully. If this tactic does not work (it didn’t work for me) you may need to follow procedures to find a different person to work with or leave the agency.</p>

<b>RESPECTFUL</b>	<b>DISRESPECTFUL</b>	<b>SUGGESTIONS</b>
<p>Maintains a sensory-friendly space where you can concentrate on the conversation. If you tell them something bothers you, they try to fix it and/or not do it again.</p>	<p>Even after you point out how it affects you, wears strong perfume/aftershave, uses air fresheners in the office, runs a distracting screen saver on the computer behind them, has music playing during your appointments, etc.</p>	<p>If asking them to make changes as a courtesy doesn't work, it may help to make a formal ADA accommodation request, backed up with a letter from your doctor. It is becoming very common in many workplaces, particularly agencies serving the public, to request that employees and visitors do not use scents, so this is not unreasonable.</p>
<p>Believes what you say about your autism diagnosis. May ask for documentation to meet requirements or help you qualify for accommodations.</p>	<p>Does not believe you are autistic because you don't act like their stereotype of autism. May insist you undergo psych evaluation, possibly by someone who is not experienced with adult autistics.</p>	<p>Try educating them about the wide variation in autism and present as much documentation as you can. Research your rights if they insist on having their staff evaluate you. If you do let them evaluate you, request a copy of the report. If that report is inaccurate, file a protest, preferably backed up by your own documentation.</p>

RESPECTFUL	DISRESPECTFUL	SUGGESTIONS
<p>Understands that autistics can't always use all their skills. Does not take autistic social glitches (face-blindness, lack of small talk, etc.) personally. Not bothered by stims or other quirks.</p>	<p>Assumes any lapses are intentional and/or takes them personally. Makes comments such as "Quiet hands" to shame an autistic about stimming or other quirks.*</p>	<p>Explain how autism affects you from day to day. Also let them know that shaming someone about their disability is inappropriate. Forward them Julia Bascom's post, "Quiet Hands." <a href="http://juststimming.wordpress.com/2011/10/05/quiet-hands/">http://juststimming.wordpress.com/2011/10/05/quiet-hands/</a> .</p>
<p>Believes that people with disabilities belong in the workforce, wherever their abilities fit.</p>	<p>Tries to steer disabled people into segregated employment or stereotyped jobs that others find undesirable: Food, filth, flowers, and filing.</p>	<p>It's tough to be picky about jobs in this economy, especially if you have little or no job experience. However, you do not have to agree to enter a segregated employment program. If a job placement program has no experience placing autistics in non-stereotypical jobs, or doesn't seem to take preferences or aversions into account, you can ask your VR counselor (or whoever referred you there) for an alternative. If you don't have any job experience, however, you might try to negotiate the least offensive choice to get some experience. VR programs may not get paid by the state (or Ticket to Work) until you get hired, so they are motivated to get you in a job ASAP even if it isn't the best fit for you.</p>

<b>RESPECTFUL</b>	<b>DISRESPECTFUL</b>	<b>SUGGESTIONS</b>
<p>Understands that autism is not a disease (although autistics can also have diseases/disorders that respond to medical treatment).</p>	<p>Discusses cures for autism, prevention of autism, or prenatal testing.</p>	<p>Let them know that you do not want to be changed, and you are not sorry you were born. You are meeting with them to discuss how to develop your career in the present.</p>
<p>Understands that although some autistics find psychiatric medications helpful, many do not, and this is a very personal choice between an autistic and their medical providers.</p>	<p>Demands that you use psychiatric medications to reduce your autism symptoms and be more employable. May consider autism a mental illness, not a neurological developmental condition. May try to make services contingent on signing a medication contract.</p>	<p>Explain to them that these medications are not always helpful for autistics, and you and your medical provider will make those decisions. Even if you had a mental illness that could be treated with medications, it is not legal for them to insist on a medication contract, even though NAMI has promoted this idea in their mental health training.</p>
<p>Takes autistics' comments seriously and responds to questions with useful answers.</p>	<p>Dismisses your comments and questions with remarks about "theory of mind," "black and white thinking," and other stereotypical descriptions.</p>	<p>Let them know that you need them to take you seriously even if your way of thinking is different. Invite them to ask you to clarify what you mean if the way you express yourself is not clear to them, rather than dismissing your thoughts entirely. If this doesn't work, you need to work with someone else.</p>

RESPECTFUL	DISRESPECTFUL	SUGGESTIONS
<p>Understands that autistics may display feelings and empathy differently, but they still feel it.</p>	<p>Believes autistics have no feelings and/or lack empathy for others' feelings.</p>	<p>This myth is based in Simon Baren-Cohen's research and may be difficult to dispel. Some good resources are <a href="http://www.disabilityandrepresentation.com/deconstructing-autism-as-an-empathy-disorder-a-literature-review/">http://www.disabilityandrepresentation.com/deconstructing-autism-as-an-empathy-disorder-a-literature-review/</a> and the blog <a href="http://www.autismandempathy.com">http://www.autismandempathy.com</a> . If the provider persists with this, complain and request a transfer.</p>
<p>Respects autistics' personal space, and/or feelings about eye contact.</p>	<p>Insists that autistic person must look speaker in the eye and accuses them of not paying attention or even being insubordinate. May even grab autistics' hands, face, or body to redirect attention to the speaker or get them back on task.**</p>	<p>Explain why looking them in the eye is uncomfortable for you, and reassure them that you are listening, most likely more effectively than if you force yourself to make eye contact. If they touch you inappropriately, try not to hit them, although it may be a reflex action. Explain that you have touch issues and a right to your personal space. If they won't acknowledge this, get out, even get legal advice depending on how severe the problem is. This is harassment and/or battery. Some programs that work with autistics with low/no verbal skills and/or intellectual disabilities believe it is appropriate rather than abusive, but they're wrong.</p>

*\*Although nobody has specifically told me “quiet hands,” it is very well documented in the autistic community, so I included it.*

*\*\*Although I have not experienced people grabbing me to get my attention in non-emergency situations, or trying to use hand-over-hand, I have read about it in several sources whose references/links were lost when my hard drive crashed.*

# Contributors



**Elesia Ashkenazy**, Project Editor, is ASAN's Outreach & Project Coordinator. Diagnosed on the autistic spectrum and profoundly deaf, Elesia lives in Portland, Oregon, and is a parent of a child on the spectrum. She is the Community Council Chair and Research Assistant for Academic Autistic Spectrum Partnership in Research and Education (AASPIRE). Elesia is the Editorial Coordinator for the Autism Women's Network (AWN). She's a member of the National Advisory Committee for the Autism NOW Center in D.C. [aspitude.blogspot.com](http://aspitude.blogspot.com)



**Elizabeth Boresow** is a Music Therapy student at the University of Kansas. She is a member of the Autism Society of America (ASA) and of Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN). She is also an active member of KU's AbleHawks & Allies student group. In her free time, she likes to play basketball, listen to Billy Joel, and tutor in calculus.



**Meg Evans** serves as the Board Secretary/Treasurer of the Autistic Self Advocacy Network and is employed in the legal publishing industry. She is a licensed attorney in the State of Ohio and received her law degree from Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. She provides pro bono services through the Greater Dayton Volunteer Lawyers Project. She belongs to a multigenerational Autistic family, is married, and has two grown children. <http://megevens.com>

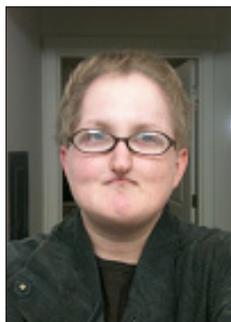
**Tracy Garza** is a San Francisco-based freelance writer and communications consultant. Prior to coming to the Bay Area, Tracy was a Mexico-based correspondent for The Associated Press and the Reuters news service. Tracy's other passions include volunteering for local LGBT organizations and non-profits.

**Kathryn Hedges** is a Steampunk artist and crafter running her own business from TechShop San Jose. She last worked for a traditional employer as a technical writer in San Diego in the year 2000, before losing her job, going on disability, and returning to college to earn a Master's degree in Biology from Humboldt State University. Her love of both art and science began in childhood and were encouraged by her mother, if not the schools in Orange County, California. She is active online as a supporter of disability rights and the autistic community.

[www.khedges.com](http://www.khedges.com), [www.splendidcolors.com](http://www.splendidcolors.com)



**Andee Joyce** is the Portland, Oregon Chapter Lead for ASAN. She is a self-advocate representative on the Oregon State Commission on Autism Spectrum Disorders and chair of the Commission's Adult Lifespan subcommittee. She was diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome at the age of 44. She has written several essays about autism scheduled to be published in the near future, and is working on a young adult novel about autism and baseball, two great tastes that taste great together.



**Shain Neumeier** is an Autistic self-advocate, and has volunteered with the Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN) and other disability rights organizations for a number of projects and efforts. Shain graduatee from Suffolk University School of Law and is a licensed attorney. Shain currently works as a Policy Associate with the Community Alliance for the Ethical Treatment of Youth (CAFETY), a nonprofit organization aimed at preventing children from being institutionalized, abused and neglected in residential treatment facilities.



**Carl Peterson** was diagnosed with PDD-NOS and other learning disabilities when he was three. He majored in percussion performance at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. After he moved back home to Washington State, he founded an Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN) chapter. He has also worked with VSA Arts to bring the arts to people with disabilities. Currently, he works as a Services Coordinator at Enso, a non-profit Vocational Rehabilitation vendor in Washington, where he leads motivational workshops and trains Job Developers.



**Dora Raymaker**, MS, co-directs the Academic Autistic Spectrum Partnership in Research and Education (AASPIRE, <http://aaspire.org>), a community-campus partnership that conducts research to improve the lives of adults on the autism spectrum. Before re-starting her career in academic research, Ms. Raymaker worked as an intranet specialist and technical writer in the telecommunications industry. She enjoys writing fiction, painting, and soft things.

**[www.doraraymaker.com](http://www.doraraymaker.com)**



**Jason Ross** is a 33 year old autistic adult from New York. He is an Autistic Rights advocate and supporter of the Neurodiversity disability rights movement. Jason was featured in the PBS special series This Emotional Life, the Thinking Person's Guide to Autism's Slice of Life, ABC On Call Plus Autism site, and other media.

**[www.drivemomcrazy.com](http://www.drivemomcrazy.com)**



**Emily Wilson**, MS, MPH, CHES, is a public health professional, trainer, and certified community health education specialist based in the Delaware Valley, and the founder of New Wave Grrrl, an information and resource-sharing blog for women with a focus on health disparities that impact women with disabilities which she ran from 2007-2012. Emily works as a Stoneleigh Foundation Emerging Leader Fellow with the Institute for Safe Families.

## Editor's Closing Note

Thank you for reading this anthology, and for supporting The Arc, Autism NOW, the Autistic Self Advocacy Network, our contributing authors, and all who have come together to brainstorm, create, hone, and publish this project.

Essays hold the power to direct and refine our decision-making when we apply what has most resonated with us to our own personal situations. We understand that a significant percentage of our readers have been impacted either positively, negatively, or both, while interacting with today's job market. I am in hopes that the stories and words of our authors have struck a chord with many readers and that this anthology is of benefit.

I would like to thank everyone who has participated in this project from the organizations to the writers. I would also like to extend an enthusiastic shout out to Dr. Scott Standifer, Clinical Assistant Professor for the Disability Policy & Studies Office (DPS) at the University of Missouri, for reviewing our first draft and sharing excellent feedback.

I'll leave you now with this quote by disability rights activist Justin Dart:  
Lead on! Lead on!

Elesia Ashkenazy

## Acknowledgments

Thank you to **Elesia Ashkenazy** for project management and editing.

