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## Employment Equity: What meaningful employment looks like to me

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## Employment Equity: What meaningful employment looks like to me

Elliot Smith

### Abstract

Mister Elliot Smith has found meaningful employment at the age of 21 years. In this personal experience piece, Mr. Smith shares with readers the strategies that have helped him achieve and maintain employment as an individual who lives with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Attention Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). These strategies have helped him gain experience (completing a cooperative learning placement, volunteering, and participating in employment programs) and succeed in his employment (taking breaks, using a visual schedule, training with a support worker). It should be noted that not all of Mr. Smith's experiences will be relatable to all people with ASD and ADHD; however, the messaging regarding equity-based principles are universal.

### Résumé

Monsieur Elliot Smith a trouvé un emploi significatif à l'âge de 21 ans. Dans cette expérience personnelle, M. Smith partage avec les lecteurs les stratégies qui l'ont aidé à obtenir et à conserver un emploi en tant que personne ayant un trouble du spectre de l'autisme (TSA) et un trouble de déficit de l'attention avec hyperactivité (TDAH). Ces stratégies l'ont aidé à acquérir de l'expérience (en effectuant un stage d'apprentissage coopératif, en faisant du bénévolat et en participant à des programmes d'emploi) et à réussir dans son emploi (en prenant des pauses, en utilisant un horaire visuel, en s'entraînant avec un accompagnateur au travail). Il convient de noter que les expériences de M. Smith ne sont pas toutes comparables à celles de toutes les personnes autistes ayant un TDAH ; cependant, les messages qu'il livre concernant les principes fondés sur l'équité sont universels.

### Keywords

*Youth; intellectual disability; accommodations; employment equity*

### Mots Clés

*Jeunesse; Déficience intellectuelle; hébergements ; équité en matière d'emploi*

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My name is Elliot Smith, and I am 21 years old. I was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Attention Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). With my Autism, I have a good memory of sports statistics and knowledge. I also have a photographic memory which means that I can “see” everything I read as pictures in my mind. Therefore, I can recall many facts, sports stats, and maps. So I both remember everything I read, and I can also visually see things in my mind like a map of the world.

I prefer to have support with getting tasks done while on the job. Having a checklist is helpful to keep me on task as my ADHD can make it hard to focus. I also prefer to use timers on my phone to stay on task and complete deadlines. All my life, I have been involved with sports and fitness. I play baseball, soccer, rugby, and archery in mixed and ‘all-abilities’ leagues. I have been involved with sports since grade 1 (martial arts, Tae Kempo Karate) and many other sports as I grew older, including now Archery, Baseball, Soccer, and Rugby. Accommodations I require in sports have instructions clearly explained and broken down into small steps. I also need someone to show me how to do the activities or tasks properly the first time. I usually need some of the activities modified as my balance is not always the best. For example, I cannot balance one leg with stretches due to weak stamina. Instead, I put my hand and arm against the wall for balance so I could lift my leg up. In archery, I have my target a little closer than some other players, so I can see better as I wear glasses.

I graduated secondary school with my diploma and a school-to-work certificate. After secondary school, I graduated from the community integration program at [institution name blinded]. I have worked as a Sports Correspondent, a Disability Advocate, and more recently as a Sports and Fitness Associate. My recent job is my dream job because I help people with disabilities while working in sports and fitness. This is my first article in a peer-reviewed journal, and I am proud to share my experience in gaining meaningful employment with readers. This article will provide an overview of what prepared me for employment and the accommodations that have helped me succeed. While readers may find my experience helpful, not all my recommendations apply to all people. The overall lesson I want future employers to know is that people with disabilities, including ASD, can be excellent employees. A lot of organizations can offer to help them succeed.

## Introduction

Hiring people with ASD or any disability can be valuable to organizations for many different reasons. For example, as a person with ASD, I am very creative, can problem-solve in my own unique ways, and focus well on independent tasks. I have been told I am reliable and committed, and I think these are traits of a model employee. At 21 years old, I have held several different jobs, each helping me develop skills and learn more about what I need to succeed in my career. In this personal experience article, I share what has helped me gain experience (completing a cooperative learning placement, volunteering, and participating in employment

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### **Gaining new experience**

I have had many different jobs over the years, and I have had many opportunities to build my resume. Three activities that helped me gain experience included completing a co-op placement, volunteering, and participating in employment programs.

### ***Completing a co-op placement***

I have had many different cooperative learning (hereafter “co-op”) opportunities in the past. A co-op placement is where you do unpaid work to get school credit. Some placements go one term, while others can last several semesters. It is like having a real job where you go and learn how to do tasks and get evaluated by a supervisor and your school. I graduated with a diploma in secondary school, but I also returned for an extra year to do the ‘School-to-Work’ program, so I also have a ‘School-to-Work’ certificate. The ‘School-to-Work’ program is a program in secondary school that focuses on work and life skills. The teachers help you get ready for independent living. You can earn an extra certificate in addition to your secondary school diploma. The ‘School-to-Work’ certificate allowed me to go to co-op placement and learn how to have a job. I did a few placements within the School-to-Work program, but I remember my first placement was at [business name blinded], and I was in charge of return products. I stocked shelves and put the returned grocery items back on the shelf for sale in this role. If there were any damaged items, I would give them to my supervisor as they could not return to the shelf. I also often help customers look for items they want on their grocery list.

I also had a co-op placement at the [business name blinded] in [location name blinded], where I had to clean equipment in the field house and in the storage closet. I also helped customers learn how to use the fitness machines and sometimes got to set up fitness classes. I volunteered at the [agency name blinded] for a few years and turned this into a co-op placement, and now I am an official employee as a Sports and Literacy Associate. Over time I learned more about the daily operations and was given new opportunities to practice the skills used by employees.

After secondary school, I also completed co-op placements at [institution name blinded] when I took the CICE program, which stands for Community Integration through Co-operative Education. It is a two-year program for students with intellectual and physical disabilities. In the CICE program, I learned how to become independent, live on my own as an adult, strengthen my life skills, and show up to class and placements on time. I learned about deadlines and handing in

assignments and projects on time. All of these skills helped me land my dream job. I worked at a thrift store for one placement, but I got my dream job in my second year. I was offered a placement with the [team name blinded] team. At this job, I mostly did research and made charts to count the number of people who came into the [centre name blinded] at every home game on Thursday nights. I enjoyed this job the most because it was related to sports, and I got to interact with scouts from different professional hockey teams.

Reflecting on my co-op placements, I acknowledge that I was very fortunate to have been provided with the opportunity to participate in so many. I learned a lot of new things, practised new skills, and met new people. Co-op placements were a key part of my success, and I would encourage others to see if it makes sense for them.

### ***Volunteering***

Volunteering has been a great way to meet people and turn opportunities into paid positions. I have volunteered with organizations for my own interest and credit toward my secondary school diploma (students must have 40 hours of community service to graduate from a publicly-funded secondary school in Ontario). I volunteered at a music studio called [business name blinded] in secondary school. I entertained young campers, taught them music, and kept them occupied by helping them with team-building activities and icebreakers, showing them that they were working as a team during music sessions. I even taught them some math and science. I also volunteered at the local library, where I read books to young kids with reading buddies and the [literacy program name blinded]. Through volunteering, I received an award through the [town name blinded] Youth Ambassador Program, where I helped young kids become youth leaders in the [town name blinded] as a Youth Advocate. I also received an award and plaque from the mayor himself. For me, volunteering was very rewarding, as I got to know new people, got connected to potential job opportunities and received awards that I then put on my resume. I continued volunteering after secondary school. I began volunteering with sports organizations, and I volunteer as a YAC member (Youth Advisory Committee) for [children's treatment centre name blinded]. I received speech, occupational therapy, and physiotherapy from [children's treatment centre name blinded] when I was young. I found that volunteering was a great way to give back to organizations that had given to me, at the same time as growing my knowledge and skills as a future employee.

From my experience as a volunteer, I noticed that if you are a hard worker, people may notice and offer you interviews. You will also get good references from these opportunities. All my positions have either resulted from my volunteering, having been a client of a service, or completing co-op placements through school. When I had an interest, my mother always said “feed it”, which is why I ended up choosing placements and volunteer opportunities in sports and disability advocacy. For example, I have been told I have a gift for sports knowledge, so I am like a magnet and go where sports and fitness are part of the position. For others looking to enter a career field, it might be worthwhile to see if the organization you want to work for has volunteer opportunities. This is a great way to learn more about the business and what the leaders expect from their employees.



### ***Employment programs***

In the province of Ontario, there are many different employment programs available to youth and adults. When choosing an employment program, it is important to research what is available in your local area. I have used three resources in my local area: [agencies name blinded]. These three places have one common thing: they help those with different abilities, though [agency name blinded] is specifically for those with Autism. They have lots of programs and supports from employment to leisure activities.

I took an employment program through [agency name blinded]. It was a virtual program, but I learned a lot about how to handle different conflicts in the workplace, how to do well in an interview, and how to build my resume better. They told me to include things like paid work experience, volunteer experience, school diplomas and certificates, awards, public speaking engagements, and any articles that I wrote for a publication like with OutFox Magazine. OutFox Magazine is a magazine primarily staffed with people who have ASD. It is for any youth aged 8 to 14 years. They publish stories on life skills, gaming, sports, and science. They also helped me include things like all the committees I sit on and my disability advocacy work.

I also took an online course with the [agency name blinded]. We did similar things, but I needed a lot of practice, which helped me significantly. The [agency name blinded] also paid for me to take this course, so I earned money doing it too. Not all agencies will provide people with Autism with financial support to take courses; however, if services like these are available in your area, I would recommend investigating. The employment programs I took part in helped me prepare for various roles by giving me practical skills I can apply in any employment role.

### ***Supporting my success***

Co-op placements, volunteering and participating in employment programs helped me prepare for securing employment. Once I was hired for a position (both in my employment and volunteer roles), specific accommodations helped me succeed. As an employee, it has always been very important to ask my employer for accommodations. Accommodations are ways that your employer can help meet your needs better to do the job successfully. Not every employer will meet all of your requests as everyone has their own unique accommodations, but I share some of mine that has been granted.

### ***Taking breaks***

The accommodations that I had in the workplace were listening to music or playing a game on my phone if I needed a break. I am careful not to take breaks all the time, but I only take them when I am feeling very overwhelmed or stressed, and it helps me get back on track. At the [agency name blinded], I had a big job to move spin bikes into form for a class. This was a big task, and I got overwhelmed, so after I was done, I put my headphones on and listened to music while doing laps around the track. This helped me refocus and de-stress. Once calm again, I was able to go back after the class was over and take all the spin bikes back to storage.

### ***Visual schedule***

I have always asked for a visual schedule so I know what tasks I need to do. I have a visual schedule on a whiteboard kept behind the front desk. Every half hour is listed along with the task that needs to be done, so if I forget, I can go back to the schedule and look at it to keep myself on task. The chart should also include breaks to keep track of your time better. Once I complete a task, I can check it off the list. This helps me stay focused, so I don't get distracted.

### ***Support worker***

Another accommodation I have had in the workplace is the help of a support worker or job coach. For example, during my co-op placements, I was allowed to have a support worker, so I used my Educational Assistant (EA) from secondary school. In college, I used my Instructional Facilitator (IF). These support workers helped me get used to the routine and helped teach me what I was supposed to do as I needed things broken down into smaller steps. Over time, as I became more independent, they came less until they were no longer there, and I could do the job independently and on my own. I also had a support worker teach me how to take the bus and the train independently as I had to get to work downtown and get to work at [business name blinded]. The support worker would take the bus with me and show me how to use the special pass and sit. Eventually, I learned how to take transit independently, which made me more self-confident.

The most important thing was that I have always been open with my employers about having ASD, but not every person with ASD will be okay doing this, so it has to be your decision. Whether you choose to disclose this information or not, employers in Ontario must provide accommodation as part of the Ontario Human Rights Code, ensuring every employee has a fair and equitable opportunity for meaningful employment.

### **Conclusion**

My experience and accommodations are helping me to succeed. Currently, I am about to start a new job as a Physical Fitness and Literacy Associate. This job will involve setting up and cleaning equipment for fitness classes, showing gym members how to use exercise equipment, and teaching them how to live healthy and active lifestyles. I had a meeting with [business name blinded] and [organization name blinded], to discuss my needs and goals, so they could match me with a job coach that can support my unique needs and personality. The job coach will be with me for a few months hoping that they will no longer need to come as I learn the job and become more independent. I have also been paired up with a personal trainer who will mentor and train me in physical fitness and literacy. This position is the perfect fit for me because it compliments my strengths and interests, something I learned through volunteering.