



CANADIAN JOURNAL  
OF AUTISM EQUITY

REVUE CANADIENNE DE L'ÉQUITÉ  
EN MATIÈRE D'AUTISME

April 2022 Volume 2 Issue 1

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Au

Sarah  
Owocki

Blake  
"Crash"  
Priddle

Terri  
Robson

Joseph  
Sheppard

Elliot  
Smith

Kirk  
Winter

Cover painting

It's Okay to  
Accept Help

by  
Kimberly  
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## THE CANADIAN JOURNAL OF AUTISM EQUITY

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## Land Acknowledgement

As Equity-minded members of the Constitutional Democracy of Canada among a Commonwealth of Free Nations, symbolized by honorary monarch, geographically co-situated with the Indigenous Peoples of Northern Turtle Island; we gratefully acknowledge and respect the ancestral relationship between Indigenous Peoples (including our 634 First Nations, our Inuit First Peoples, and our Aboriginal Métis Peoples) and their Traditional Lands, their Truth of self-narrative, and their Cultural Properties.

## Language Statement

At the Canadian Journal of Autism Equity (CJAE), our goal is amplifying autistic voices and getting them to the attention of researchers, academics, and other policy makers. To that end, we do not impose or enforce a specific language standard on people writing about their experiences. We realize that many in the autistic community may have a preference for certain types of referential language, like identity-first language ('autistic' person) compared to person-first language (person with autism), and that there is also controversy within the autistic community around use of certain terms relating to older diagnostic terms that have been adopted by some in the autistic community ('aspie'). We also understand that there are different beliefs within the autistic community as to which language standards are 'correct'. We feel that to try and impose a language standard upon other peoples' experience and how they refer to themselves would undermine their autonomy and their self-determination. Therefore, we do not prescribe any particular language standard regarding referential language as it relates to submissions wherein autistic authors are referring to their own experiences as we want to amplify their voices, not replace their voices with the voices of others.



## Cover art by Kimberly Gerry-Tucker



Kimberly Gerry-Tucker is a proudly introverted autistic author, blogger, ghostwriter and artist who resides in Connecticut, USA. Her art has appeared on the cover of several books including Hosseini's [\*Art of Autism-Shattering Myths\*](#). She is most proud of her chapter contributions to Sutton and Forrester's [\*Selective Mutism-In Our Own Words\*](#) and her memoir [\*Under the Banana Moon\*](#). Art is Kim's passion and she has enjoyed many mediums throughout her life. Her day job is as a QA specialist with Ultronauts, where she is on her way to becoming a data analyst and an Accessibility Specialist (ensuring websites and apps meet Accessibility standards). She can rarely be seen without a cat on her lap.

### *It's Okay to Accept Help*

2022, digital collage

Photograph by  
Kimberly Gerry-Tucker



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## Foreword

### Honourable Senator Wanda Thomas Bernard



This second issue of the Canadian Journal of Autism Equity is a powerful collection of stories; stories of resilience and tenacity, written by a group of fierce advocates for access and equity. A concern that frequently emerges as I review federal policy is the exclusion of first voices from social policy development. I make it my mission to change this; partnering with organizations like CASDA helps make that possible. While there are some areas of social policy development in which people with lived experience are consulted, I believe they must be at the core of all decision-making processes. Autistic people have first-hand knowledge of what prejudices they face and what barriers prevent access to education and meaningful employment. Who better to create solutions than the people who have spent countless years advocating for themselves, creating solutions within their own lives? I am in awe of the self-determination and resilience reflected in these stories

of advocacy for accommodations in employment. I believe this publication can prompt the change we need to see for Autistic Canadians.

A strong theme running through this collection of essays is the power of advocacy. As neurodivergent people find themselves marginalized in the workforce, advocacy becomes the key to success. Often, marginalized individuals must engage in self-advocacy, by negotiating and navigating work environments and accommodations. Elliot Smith and Blake “Crash” Priddle aptly describe the trials and successes of self-advocacy in their submissions. Other forms of advocacy include organizational advocacy, or parental and familial advocacy as highlighted in Kirk Winter’s journey supporting his son through various times in his life. Most of my career was centered around advocacy as a social worker, so I am intimately aware of the challenges involved in negotiating and navigating complex systems. In more recent years, I have become a caregiver to my grandsons, one of whom is Autistic. I have learned that advocating for a family member has its own challenges. During the pandemic, these challenges intensified. All marginalized people were faced with the challenge of shifting and increased advocacy efforts. Advocacy is a lifelong, ever-evolving journey to find creative solutions in a system that does not usually account for difference and resists efforts towards change. It is a journey that requires tremendous perseverance and courage.

As I think about employment equity for Autistic people, I am reminded of my mentor Senator Don Oliver who engaged in pivotal work around employment equity for Black people working in the Public Service of Canada. His theory, “The Business Case for Diversity”, presents a way of seeing the benefits of hiring diverse employees. He reframed equitable hiring practices as a process that benefits companies, organizations, and governments. He argued that having diversity of thought and experience is, literally, good for business. There are many benefits to diversity in hiring, including making the world a better place. Senator Don Oliver argued that hiring Black people benefits everyone, and similarly I believe hiring Autistic people benefits everyone. Like Kevin Au said in his piece, “Autistic workers can bring with them diverse ways of thinking, permitting them to be innovative in their work.” Hiring people who live at different intersections of oppression benefits everyone. Workplaces need to see beyond accommodations as a burden or expense. They need to see accommodations as a means to achieve diversity of thought, experiences, and an overall improved workplace.

At times, Employment Equity efforts stop after hiring. We must go beyond diverse hiring and ensure people are supported with appropriate accommodations and on-going review processes to ensure their positions are sustainable. In her piece about entrepreneurship, Terri Robson makes the following statement about jobs: “Getting them was easy for me, keeping them on the other hand...” This is a struggle known to many marginalized people. When I hear stories like Terri’s, I can see how shifting from job to job over the years demonstrates impressive perseverance. Terri stuck with it, going to interview after interview, hoping to eventually get the right fit. She courageously took the leap into entrepreneurship and created the ideal environment for her own employment. Entrepreneurship is one solution for marginalized people seeking employment, however it is not widely accessible due to the financial burden of starting a business. As Joseph Sheppard stated, “I certainly believe in Autistic people and how much life they can bring by designing their brilliant creations as gifts to us all.” Many people could thrive in employment with accommodations or thrive in entrepreneurship if given the chance to design their own employment, but instead, often end up floundering because they do not get the support they need to succeed.

These stories encourage us to imagine a world in which equitable hiring is not a check box for businesses and organizations. I imagine a future of Autism advocacy where the voices of intersectional Autistic people are highlighted. I want to hear from Black and Indigenous Autistic people; I want to hear what their struggles and triumphs are. I want to see a world in which diversity in thought and experience are seen for the strengths they bring to the workplace. The centering of first voices breathes life and reality into social policy development. My hope is that this publication informs future employment equity policies and legislation to create a National Autism Strategy. If the current legislation, Bill S-203, “*An Act Respecting a Federal Framework on Autism Spectrum Disorder*” is adopted by Parliament, the development of a National Autism Strategy could help create more equitable access to services across geographic barriers. What I hope for a National Autism Strategy is to highlight the importance of an intersectional lens in our work with Autism communities. As you take some time to read the pages that follow, I hope you find similar messages of inspiration and reinvigoration for future Autism advocacy as I did as I read these compelling accounts.



## Revue Canadienne De L'Équité En Matière D'autisme, Volume 2 Numéro 1: Avant-propos: Honorable Sénatrice Wanda Thomas Bernard Traduit Par: Justine Côté

Le second numéro de la Revue canadienne de l'équité en matière d'autisme propose une collection puissante d'histoires ; des récits de résilience et de ténacité, écrits par un groupe de militants pour l'accès et l'équité. Une préoccupation qui émerge fréquemment pendant que je révise la politique fédérale est l'exclusion de la perspective des personnes faisant l'expérience directe des enjeux pour lesquels nous développons des politiques sociales. Je me suis donné pour mission de changer cela, et le fait d'être partenaire avec des organisations comme l'ACTSA le permet. Bien qu'il y a certaines sphères de la politique sociale où l'on consulte les personnes ayant de telles expériences vécues, je crois que ces personnes devraient être au cœur du processus décisionnel. Les personnes sur le spectre de l'autisme ont une compréhension directe des préjugés auxquels elles sont confrontées et des obstacles qui les empêchent d'accéder à l'éducation et à un emploi intéressant. Qui de mieux pour créer des solutions que les personnes qui ont passé d'innombrables années à défendre leurs intérêts et à créer des solutions au sein de leur propre vie? Je suis admirative de l'autodétermination et de la résilience qui se reflètent dans ces récits de militance pour des mesures d'accommodement sur le marché du travail. Je crois que cette publication peut susciter le changement dont nous avons besoin pour les personnes autistes canadiennes.

Le pouvoir de la militance et de la défense des droits est un thème récurrent dans cette collection d'essais. Quand les personnes neurodivergentes se retrouvent marginalisées sur le marché du travail, la défense de leurs intérêts devient la clé du succès. Souvent, les personnes marginalisées doivent se défendre elles-mêmes, en négociant des mesures d'accommodement et en apprenant à s'y retrouver dans les milieux de travail. Elliot Smith et Blake « Crash » Priddle décrivent avec justesse les épreuves et les succès de leur autoplaidoyer dans leurs soumissions. Parmi les autres formes de militance, on peut citer la défense des droits au sein d'une organisation ou la défense des droits des parents et des proches, comme en témoigne le parcours de Kirk Winters qui a soutenu son fils à différents moments de sa vie. La majeure partie de ma carrière de travailleuse sociale a été centrée sur la défense des intérêts d'autrui ; je suis donc intimement consciente des défis que représentent la négociation et la navigation dans des systèmes complexes. Dans les récentes années, je me suis occupée de mes petits-fils, dont un se trouve sur le spectre de l'autisme. J'ai appris que la défense des intérêts d'un membre de la famille comporte ses propres défis. Pendant la pandémie, ces défis se sont intensifiés. Toutes les personnes marginalisées ont été confrontées au défi d'une réorientation et d'une intensification des efforts de militance. La défense d'une cause est un voyage de toute une vie, en constante évolution, pour trouver des solutions créatives dans un système qui ne tient généralement pas compte des différences et résiste aux efforts de changement. C'est un voyage qui exige beaucoup de persévérance et un courage immense.

Lorsque je pense à l'équité en matière d'emploi pour les personnes autistes, je me souviens de mon mentor, le sénateur Don Olivier, qui s'est engagé dans un travail crucial sur l'équité en matière d'emploi pour les personnes de couleur travaillant dans la fonction publique du Canada. Sa théorie, « The Business Case for Diversity », présente une façon de voir les avantages de l'embauche diversifiée. Il a recadré les pratiques d'embauche équitables comme un processus qui profite aux entreprises, aux organisations et aux gouvernements. Il soutient que la diversité de pensée et d'expérience est, littéralement, bonne pour les affaires. La diversité dans l'embauche présente de nombreux avantages, notamment celui de rendre le monde meilleur. Le sénateur Don Olivier a fait valoir que l'embauche

de personnes de couleur profite à tout le monde et, de la même manière, je crois que l'embauche des personnes autistes profite aussi à tout le monde. Comme le dit Kevin Au dans son article, « Les travailleurs autistes peuvent apporter avec eux des modes de pensée différents, leur permettant d'être innovants dans leur travail ». Embaucher des personnes qui vivent à différents carrefours de l'oppression profite à tout le monde. Les milieux de travail ne doivent pas considérer les mesures d'accommodement comme un fardeau ou une dépense inutile. Ils doivent les considérer comme un moyen de parvenir à une diversité de pensée, d'expériences et à une amélioration générale du milieu de travail.

Parfois, les efforts d'équité en emploi cessent après l'embauche. Nous devons aller au-delà de l'embauche diversifiée et veiller à ce que les personnes soient soutenues par des mesures d'accommodement appropriées et des processus de révision continue pour garantir la pérennité de leurs postes. Dans son article sur l'entrepreneuriat, Terri Robson fait la déclaration suivante à propos des emplois : « Les obtenir était facile pour moi, mais les garder était une autre paire de manches... » C'est une lutte que connaissent de nombreuses personnes marginalisées. Quand j'entends des histoires comme celle de Terri, je constate que le fait de passer d'un emploi à l'autre au fil des ans démontre une persévérance impressionnante. Terri a persévéré, enchaînant les entretiens dans l'espoir de trouver le bon emploi. Elle a courageusement fait le saut dans l'entrepreneuriat et a créé l'environnement idéal pour son propre emploi. L'entrepreneuriat est une solution pour les personnes marginalisées à la recherche d'un emploi, mais il n'est pas largement accessible en raison de la charge financière que représente la création d'une entreprise. Comme l'a déclaré Joseph Sheppard : « Je crois certainement aux autistes et à la vie qu'ils peuvent apporter en concevant leurs brillantes créations comme des cadeaux pour nous tous. » De nombreuses personnes pourraient s'épanouir dans un emploi assorti de mesures d'accommodement ou dans l'entrepreneuriat si on leur donnait la chance de concevoir leur propre emploi, mais au lieu de la, elles finissent souvent par stagner parce qu'elles ne reçoivent pas le soutien dont elles ont besoin pour réussir.

Ces histoires nous encouragent à imaginer un monde dans lequel l'embauche équitable n'est pas une case à cocher pour les entreprises et les organisations. J'imagine un avenir de la militance en matière d'autisme où les voix des personnes autistes intersectionnelles sont mises au premier plan. Je veux entendre les personnes de couleur et issues des Premières Nations qui sont sur le spectre de l'autisme ; je veux savoir quelles sont leurs luttes et leurs victoires. Je veux voir un monde dans lequel la diversité de pensée et d'expériences est considérée pour les forces qu'elle apporte au marché du travail. Le fait de centrer les voix de personnes ayant une expérience vécue de ces enjeux donne vie et réalité à l'élaboration des politiques sociales. J'espère que cette publication alimentera les futures politiques d'équité en matière d'emploi et la législation visant à créer une stratégie nationale sur l'autisme. Si l'actuel projet de loi S-203, la « Loi concernant un cadre fédéral relatif au trouble du spectre de l'autisme », est adopté par le Parlement, l'élaboration d'une stratégie nationale sur l'autisme pourrait contribuer à créer un accès plus équitable aux services au-delà des barrières géographiques. Ce que j'espère d'une stratégie nationale sur l'autisme, c'est qu'elle mettra en évidence l'importance d'une optique intersectionnelle dans notre travail avec la communauté de l'autisme. J'espère que vous trouverez, en prenant le temps de lire les pages qui suivent, des messages similaires d'inspiration et de revigoration pour la défense future des personnes sur le spectre de l'autisme, comme je l'ai fait en lisant ces récits fascinants.





## **Call for the Federal Public Service to create an initiative to recruit and hire employees with Autism: How the Service can become more diverse, higher performing, and agile while improving staff retention rates and reducing staffing/training costs**

**Kevin Au**

### **Abstract**

Individuals with autism, a neurological condition impacting everyday activities, make up about 1.5-2.5% of the population. Compared to people with other disabilities, those with autism are disproportionately unemployed and underemployed. The Canadian federal government's National Autism Strategy, consisting of research and funding to improve the health and well-being of those with autism, is led by the Public Health Authority of Canada (PHAC), but Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) plays an increasingly important role in supporting those on the spectrum through its programs and responsibility for implementing the Accessible Canada Act. ESDC, along with the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) are two of the largest federal public sector employers. The writer, an autistic individual themselves, advocates for ESDC and CRA to take the lead in creating a specialized hiring and retention process adapted to autistic individuals, as hiring and retaining autistic staff will likely produce a win-win result, helping the organizations become more diverse, higher performing and agile while reducing turnover and therefore staffing and training related costs.

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## Résumé

Les personnes sur le spectre de l'autisme, un trouble neurologique affectant les activités quotidiennes, représentent environ 1,5 à 2,5 % de la population. Par rapport aux autres personnes en situation de handicap, les personnes autistes connaissent un taux de chômage et de sous-emploi disproportionné. La Stratégie nationale sur l'autisme du gouvernement fédéral canadien, qui consiste en une recherche et un financement pour améliorer la santé et le bien-être des personnes autistes, est dirigée par l'Autorité de la santé publique du Canada (ASPC), mais Emploi et Développement social Canada (EDSC) joue un rôle de plus en plus important dans le soutien aux personnes sur le spectre par le biais de ses programmes et sa responsabilité de mettre en œuvre la Loi canadienne sur l'accessibilité. EDSC et l'Agence du revenu du Canada (ARC) sont deux des plus grands employeurs du secteur public fédéral. L'auteur, lui-même une personne autiste, préconise que EDSC et l'ARC prennent l'initiative de créer un processus d'embauche et de maintien en poste spécialisé et adapté aux personnes autistes, car l'embauche et le maintien en poste de personnel autiste produiront probablement un résultat gagnant-gagnant, aidant les organisations à devenir plus diversifiées, plus performantes et agiles tout en réduisant le roulement du personnel et, par conséquent, les coûts liés au personnel et à la formation.

## Keywords

*Autism, Employment, Hiring, Initiative, Government of Canada*

## Mots Clés

*Autisme, Emploi, Embauche, Initiative, Gouvernement du Canada*

Autism is a lifelong neurological condition that results in challenges in communication and social interaction skills, in addition to the presence of restricted and repetitive behaviours, interests or activities. According to the Public Health Agency of Canada (Ofner et al., 2018), the combined prevalence among children and youth aged 5-17 in Canada, in the year 2015, is 1 in 42 among males, 1 in 165 among females, with a total result of 1 in 66 overall. Incidence rates have been steadily increasing, with the increase generally attributed to increased awareness, better diagnostic tools, as well as a broadening of what falls under the ASD umbrella as per the 5th edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, which now includes previously separate diagnoses such as Asperger's Syndrome and PDD-NOS. The Centre for Interdisciplinary Research and Collaboration in Autism (2021) at UBC reports that the overall prevalence rate in British Columbia as of February 2020 to be 1 in 40. However, many autistic adults remain undiagnosed, and members of some demographics, such as those residing in rural areas, face additional barriers to obtaining a diagnosis and supports, and so the statistics cited in this paper are invariably impacted as such.

## Autism and Employment

Those with ASD face significant barriers to obtaining and maintaining employment that are more significant than those with other barriers. These barriers include but are not limited to traditional hiring and interviewing processes, insufficient employer support on the job, misunderstandings due to different communication styles, stigma and discrimination (Baranger et al., 2014; Scott et al., 2017).

Autistic individuals are underutilized in the workforce and as such represent a pool of labour that employers can access to meet their staffing needs. The 2017 Canadian Survey on

Disability (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2020 May), which is based on the 2016 Canadian long form census, found that just 33% of adults with autism report being employed (in any capacity) compared to 79% for those without disability. The same survey (Statistics Canada, 2018) found that the employment rate for those with any disability to be 59%, meaning that autistic individuals are underutilized in the workforce relative not only to those without disability, but also those with other disabilities. These findings mirror an American study (Roux et al, 2017) which found “About half (53.4%) of young adults with autism had never worked for pay outside the home since leaving high school, the lowest rate among disability groups.” The underemployment of autistic individuals is not due to a lack of willingness to work, but rather, the lack of appropriate supports. In Britain, 79% of those reliant on government financial support expressed a desire to work, if appropriate support were provided (Henricks, 2010).

Autistic employees often possess qualities that are attractive to employers, such as being reliable, persistent, technically able, attentive to detail, logical, conscience, loyal and honest (Attwood, 2015), and employers rate autistic employees as having better work ethics and also performing better at tasks requiring attention to detail (Scott et al., 2017). Employers who offer supports and adaptations to their hiring processes and on the job can therefore increase their likelihood of recruiting and retaining autistic employees whose diverse skills, ideas, and talent will bring positive improvements to their organizational effectiveness and bottom line.

### **The Government of Canada’s Staffing Needs**

The Canadian federal public service is one of the largest employers in Canada, with 287,978 active employees in 2019. 42.1% are in the National Capital Region, and 57.9% are in the regions, throughout the rest of the country (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2020 August). The two largest departments or agencies by size are the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) and Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC), with 45019 and 27115 employees respectively in 2020 (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2020 August). This is not surprising as these two organizations are responsible for many programs that impact many Canadians on a regular basis: tax collection, the provision of various benefits (e.g. Canada Child Tax Benefit, Employment Insurance, Canada Pension Plan, Old Age Security, Canadian Emergency Response Benefits) and services (e.g. Social Insurance Numbers, Canada Student Loans). These two organizations also have offices across Canada, and have positions in a variety of fields, including not just research and public policy, but also many positions in offices and in the field, providing a wide variety of potential employment types and opportunities.

As their joint roll-out of the Canadian Emergency Response Benefits showed, the value and importance of the services these two organizations delivered to Canadians throughout the pandemic and in the recovery is immeasurable. The importance of maintaining a stable workforce for both organizations cannot be understated as such. An initiative by these organizations to recruit, support, and retain autistic employees may prove effective in finding dedicated employees while making them more organizationally diverse, higher performing, and agile.

### **The Employment Equity Act**

Section 5 of the Employment Equity Act requires the federal public service and certain private sector employers to “implement employment equity by identifying and eliminating employment barriers against persons in designated groups that result from the employer’s employment systems, policies and practices that are not authorized by law and instituting such positive policies and practices and making such reasonable accommodations as will ensure that



persons in designated groups achieve a degree of representation in each occupational group in the employer's workforce that reflects their representation in the Canadian workforce or those segments of the Canadian workforce that are identifiable by qualification, eligibility or geography and from which the employer may reasonably be expected to draw employees."

### **The Public Service Commission's Audit of Employment Equity Representation in Recruitment**

The Public Service Commission published its Audit of Employment Equity Representation in Recruitment in January 2021. The results clearly showed that persons with disabilities were underrepresented in applications for positions in the public service (4.4% of all applications, while making up 9.0% percent of the labour market), fared well in being screened in, but became even further underrepresented among candidates who passed the assessment stage (3.6%), with an even more dramatic underrepresentation when it came to actually being appointed to a position (2.4%).

The audit (Public Service Commission, 2021) also showed that "54% of hiring managers reported they were not aware that the PSC's Personnel Psychology Centre offered expertise in assessment accommodation and on developing bias-free assessment methods and tools" and that only 66% of candidates with disabilities who requested accommodation were satisfied with the accommodation provided. The audit concluded with a call to action for departments to explore their own hiring processes and practices and to identify and remove barriers to improve the success of various employment equity groups at various stages of hiring. The PSC also noted that it will create new guides on inclusive assessment methods and advance diverse interview boards as a leading practice to improve the quality of assessment of all candidates.

### **The Joint Union / Management Task Force on Diversity and Inclusion in the Public Service Report**

In 2017, a Joint Union / Management Task Force on Diversity and Inclusion in the Public Service reported that a recruitment initiative Youth with Disabilities Summer Employment Opportunity (YwDSEO) was piloted in the National Capital Region to foster positive "early career experiences and develop a better understanding of career opportunities and support for accommodations available in the public service" (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2018 January).

The Task Force reported the initiative as being a success, and recommended that "information about their approach and results should be circulated widely within the public service and elsewhere. To achieve their full potential, these programs need to be expanded into regions outside the National Capital Region, and any changes must be made based on participants' feedback." Bringing in students and young workers is important, as the Treasury Board reported that in 2019, among federal public servants who self-identified as having a disability, 20.9% were aged 20-39 and 79.1% were aged 40+ (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2020 November).

### **The Case for Recruiting Autistic Employees**

Autistic workers can bring with them diverse ways of thinking, permitting them to be innovative in their work, resulting in their popularity among tech companies, some of whom, like Microsoft and SAP, have dedicated hiring processes. (Alton, 2019; Annabi et al., 2019). ESDC's mission is "to build a stronger and more inclusive Canada, to support Canadians in helping them live productive and rewarding lives and to improve Canadians' quality of life" (2018). By creating a specialized process to hire autistic employees, ESDC could itself embody said support and thus be a leader in the field, as the majority of initiatives to recruit and hire autistic employees are in

the private sector rather than in the public and non-profit sectors (Bernick, 2021). Additional anticipated benefits include improved staff retention and therefore reduced resources spent on recruitment and training, as well as helping the department meet its employment equity targets for employees with disabilities.

The department has, in the 2019-2020 fiscal year, brought on 6 employees through LiveWorkPlay placements and also 4 employees through the Federal Internship Program for Canadians with Disabilities, and as such has already used specialized programs for hiring, and has the potential and capacity for further initiatives (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2020). LiveWorkPlay is an Ottawa based organization that assists people with intellectual disabilities and autistic persons with employment supports and independent living. ESDC has hired staff through them since 2015. Public Services and Procurement Canada (PSPC) has already availed itself of the ESDC-funded Ready, Willing and Able initiative to recruit and hire autistic employees, winning accolades for the hiring manager for his efforts in creating a more diverse workplace (Ready Willing Able, 2019). Those efforts were hailed in the Public Service Commission's 2018-19 annual report (2020):

“Public Services and Procurement Canada collaborated with Ready, Willing and Able and its local delivery partner, Autism Nova Scotia, to recruit for positions in their Atlantic offices. The team harnessed the strengths and talents of job seekers on the autism spectrum to fill positions that required skills not common in neuro-typical job seekers. The department's innovative approach to recruitment included a working interview, where candidates performed the duties that would be part of the job instead of simulations or tests, which helped determine right fit for the positions. Several managers and employees also completed training on autism in the workplace and integrated best practices for employment supports. To date, this collaboration has resulted in 3 hires and established a model that other departments and agencies can follow to create a more inclusive public service.”

Furthermore, the Treasury Board (2020) wishes for the Federal Public Service to hire 5000 persons with disabilities by 2025, and support will be made available for that, and ESDC and the CRA, as the largest units, would naturally be expected to take a leadership role in that process. The two agencies also have a large presence outside of the National Capital Region, permitting them to take the lead in piloting the expansion of both student hiring initiatives, and also specialized targeted hiring as PSPC has done.

A mechanism to recruit and retain workers with autism would likely assist ESDC and the CRA in improving retention rates, bring in new approaches to work which may result in improvements for everyone, and enrich their workforces, helping them become higher achieving organizations that are more nimble and agile. It would help make them models among public sector organizations and show that they not only provide funding and support for those on the spectrum, but are also employers of choice for those on the spectrum.

The question thus for the federal public service is not if it too will be a leader in the field of recruiting autistic employees and becoming an employer of choice, but when. And the time is now.

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## If I were a weighted blanket

Sarah Owocki

### Abstract

This is a poem written in the first person, "by" a weighted blanket. It addresses the person who is using the blanket from two perspectives: firstly, a natural one and secondly, a commercialized one. This evokes the divide between the inherent purpose that a weighted blanket can serve as an assistive device for an Autistic person (a liberating potential) vs. its use and commodification in a medical system built around structures of profit and control. This tension is widely present in the Autistic community as well as among individuals who interact with those of us in the community. Confronting this tension helps with building an equitable world where Autistic people can be thriving members of our communities, rather than institutionalized or hidden away.

### Resumé

Ce poème est écrit à la première personne, du point de vue d'une couverture lestée. Il s'adresse à la personne qui utilise la couverture de deux points de vue : d'abord, un point de vue naturel et ensuite, un point de vue commercial. Il évoque le clivage entre l'objectif inhérent d'une couverture lestée en tant que dispositif d'assistance pour une personne autiste (un potentiel libérateur) et son utilisation et sa marchandisation dans un système médical construit autour de structures de profit et de contrôle. Cette tension est largement présente dans la communauté autiste ainsi que chez les personnes qui interagissent avec les membres de cette communauté. Faire face à cette tension aide à bâtir un monde équitable où les personnes autistes peuvent être des membres prospères de nos communautés, plutôt qu'institutionnalisées ou cachées.

### Keywords

*medicalization, insurance, marketing, commercialization, institutionalization, nurses, assistive devices, autism, stigma, poetry, dichotomy, weighted blankets, community living, home, integration, acceptance, self-directed, sensory, stimulation, meltdowns, calm, liberation*

### Mots Clés

*médicalisation, assurance, commercialisation, commercialisation, institutionnalisation, infirmières, aides techniques, autisme, stigmatisation, poésie, dichotomie, couvertures lestées, vie communautaire, maison, intégration, acceptation, autodirigé, sensoriel, stimulation, effondrements, calme, libération*

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<sup>1</sup> Independent Author

If I were a weighted blanket  
I'd lie on top  
Of you and your limbs.  
Help you keep hold of the ground,  
Your breath,  
Your flirtation with sleep,  
Your repose.  
I wouldn't alter your dreams.  
I'd help you remember them, if you liked.  
Make them sharper,  
Or help you forget.  
You'd feel this assurance as you drifted off.  
Remembering I was there,  
And recalling before  
When I wasn't.  
When you made your own weighted blanket  
Or not.  
And felt your limbs as part of you,  
Or part of something else.  
When your mind floated off the ground,  
Not as in sleep -  
But agitation!  
Maybe sweat,  
Mixed with angry fatigue.  
This memory would burn  
But fade.  
Not like the sharper dreams.  
Just the memory of exhaustion,  
Of frustration,  
In your bones,  
And your mind.  
The bones of your mind,  
These I would touch,  
Even as you counted  
How I felt -  
The full weight of it -  
On your pelvic area,  
Your breast,  
Your rising and falling chest,  
Your heaving shoulders,  
Your tired limbs,  
Your fingers and toes.



If I were a weighted blanket,  
I'd sooner or later be  
An insurable expense.  
I'd be prescribed,  
And covered,  
Paid for  
By people far from you,  
Far from your limbs.  
Still I'd want to cover you,  
With my full weight.  
I'd be grateful for this  
That brought you to me.  
Even if my expense  
Will have grown  
As more of me are bought,  
For cots,  
In offices and centres,  
Places of treatment and escape.  
Frantic escape!  
From the weight of the world,  
The comfort of one's own bed.  
Instead the orderliness of the cots  
Will see more of you  
Meet more of me,  
One after another,  
Average stay a week, perhaps, or ten days.  
You will not claim me then.  
Just meet me,  
Catch your breath slightly,  
Quickly,  
Next to others who do the same.  
After lights out,  
Under watchful eyes  
Of the nurses of the ward,  
The cots orderly and sharp  
In a long sad line.

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## Trials, Tribulations and Triumphs - Securing a Career I Love

Blake "Crash" Priddle

### Abstract

From non-verbal to radio announcer...how did I find my voice and rightful place in society? With 85% of my autistic peers not having meaningful employment, this memoir excerpt highlights the facilitators that appeared in my life and kept me from becoming a part of this dismal statistic. Echolalia, dysfluency, sensory disintegration, anxiety, depression and OCD aside, the real fight is shifting society to "walk the talk" and make our schools, workplaces and communities truly inclusive. I take you through the highs and lows of gaining job and life experiences starting as a young teen and into adulthood, building on my passion for working in broadcasting.

### Resumé

De personne non parlante à animateur de radio... Comment ai-je trouvé ma voix et ma place légitime dans la société? Alors que 85 % de mes pairs autistes n'ont pas d'emploi significatif, cet extrait de mes mémoires met en lumière les facilitateurs qui sont arrivés dans ma vie et m'ont empêché de faire partie de cette triste statistique. Outre l'écholalie, le trouble de fluidité verbale, la désintégration sensorielle, l'anxiété, la dépression et les TOC, le véritable combat consiste à amener la société à « joindre le geste à la parole » et à faire de nos écoles, de nos milieux de travail et de nos lieux de vie des endroits véritablement inclusifs. Je vous emmène à travers les hauts et les bas de ma recherche d'emploi et de ma quête d'expériences de vie, depuis l'adolescence jusqu'à l'âge adulte, en m'appuyant sur ma passion pour la radiodiffusion.

### Keywords

*work environment, strengths-based, autism, employment supports, adulthood*

### Mots-clés

*environnement de travail, axés sur les forces, autisme, aide à l'emploi, adulte*

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<sup>1</sup> Independent Author

Being **autistic** evokes emotions, stereotypes, hopes, dreams, worries and wonders in autistic and non-autistic people. People in the autistic community turn to numerous sources to gain a handle on this disability, this other-worldly way of being and viewing the world. Along with my parents, I have gleaned a lot of insight from one such source - Dr. Temple Grandin. While not representative of all folks on the autism spectrum, Temple is an extraordinary role model. In a 2016 media interview with me, Dr. Grandin shared her views on what it takes for autistic individuals to reach their full potential. The interview was conducted at a special autism event where Dr. Grandin was the keynote speaker in Sault Saint Marie, Ontario. Here's an excerpt:

**Me:** *I'd like to chat with you about what tips you'd give to help autistic people reach their full potential.*

**Temple Grandin:** *I have to tell parents, depending on the age of their kid, if you have a three-year-old that's not talking, you need to get him into a really good early intervention program. I recommend they start doing jobs when they're in middle school - paper route, walking dogs. Getting job experience before you graduate from high school and college is a really good idea.*

**Me:** *Eighty-five percent of adults with autism are either unemployed or underemployed. What do you think it will take to change this problem?*

**Temple Grandin:** *Well, the way I got paid work was being really good at what I do. And selling to people based on the portfolio of my work designing cattle facilities writing articles for cattle magazines. That's how I started. Get really good at a skill other people want. I would take my drawings out, and I would show them, and they'd go, "oh, you did that?" And then, I would get a job at another feed yard to design a facility. Get good at something because you're not going to do very well in the job interview.*

**Me:** *What workplace accommodations have helped you succeed?*

**Temple Grandin:** *Well, fortunately, there were some good people in the cattle industry that helped me. The movie Temple Grandin, 2010 showed people that were bad and good to me. (Mick, J. (2010). Temple Grandin. HBO) The boss needs to just help and coach the person on some of the social mistakes, and they can't be vague. (Grandin, 2016)*

With most of my autistic peers not having gainful employment, what facilitators entered in my life that kept me from becoming part of this dismal statistic? Today I am a news reporter and radio personality. I wasn't really verbal until I was about five, and when I did talk, I had echolalia and difficulty understanding what people were saying. Fast forward 20+ years, and here I am - making a living TALKING on the radio! How did this come about? I sum up my path towards working and living independently through the subsequent trials, tribulations and triumphs.



**Figure 1**

*Temple Grandin and me - Sault Ste Marie, Ontario, Canada, 2016*



[A photo of me interviewing Temple Grandin at a conference in Sault Ste Marie, Ontario.]

## **Trials**

### ***Lesson 1: When you are a kid, get a job and learn what work is like***

There is a first time for everything, and a job is one of those things for most people. In grade 8, my mom got me involved in a program that helped autistic teens prepare for the workforce. She had to take time off work to drive me 70 km each week to the program, but she says it was worth it. It covered all the basic aspects of the workplace - things like what to do in a job interview, how to behave on the job, and how to deal with customers.

This first job didn't just happen. My mom was instrumental in helping create the Supported Employment Program. She sat on the Board of Directors of the agency offering the program and then used that as leverage to bring the program to my rural town. Another example of her acting as my advocate.

It's important for everyone, autistics included, to be engaged and/or employed in one way or another. Gaining experience is key to future employment successes, whether part-time or volunteering. Match passions with potential work activities. While more autistic-tailored job training programs are becoming available, we still have a long way to go for all of us to have meaningful and inclusive work, especially in rural and northern communities.

### **Figure 2**

*Me in my itchy polyester grocery store uniform*



[A photo of me in my itchy polyester grocery store uniform from my first high school job]

I was fortunate to obtain a job at a local grocery store. The owners (who my parents knew) understood I needed accommodations. They were willing to give me only two, 3-hour shifts a week since I was already overwhelmed with high school. My position was "front end service clerk", which to me is a fancy term for a janitor since a good amount of my time was spent bringing in shopping carts from the cart corral.

During my first month of training, my job mentors were very helpful. Job mentors were my peer employees who took extra time and effort to ensure I was successful at my job. The job coaches were from the supportive employment program, and they provided a bit of training for the job mentors and me. For instance, they made a special pocketbook that contained instructions for my job, step by step. The tasks were listed in the proper order, with pictures and words, and perfectly organized.

Things went well during the three years working at the grocery store. I recall dealing with only one rude customer. I was asked to help load some bags of soil into a car, and due to miscommunication, I thought I was just supposed to put it in one bag, not eight. So, after I had loaded one, the customer stood by his car, and I wondered why he wasn't leaving. He ended up uploading the rest of the bags by himself, and then he got upset with me. I didn't react! The owners and my supervisors liked my efficiency, and I had always asked if there was anything else I could do before I punched out. This first job helped prepare me for the workforce.

### ***Lesson 2: Find your passion and volunteer to gain experience***

Even as a kid, I knew I wanted to have a career in media, anything from a news reporter to actor or radio personality. As luck would have it, my high school had a program called Spartan Youth Radio (SYR), a media club that specialized in podcasts. My mom and dad told me if I wanted to pursue a career in media, it would be best to get as much experience as possible, so I joined SYR. I was mentored by Media Arts and my English teacher Mr. Stewart, better known as Mister Stew, who recalled my time at SYR: "What did I notice differently about Blake? Everything. And nothing. He was a teenager who wanted to be loved, wanted to catch the attention of the right girl, wanted to do well in school, wanted to catch the biggest fish, but Blake was and is so much more than that. I noticed in him a passion for a world that often confused him. I saw him go through mental breakdowns where he misinterpreted what someone said or missed out on someone's body language or in times where others misunderstood him. There was a time when he quit SYR altogether because of one of these misinterpretations. When I heard that Blake was pursuing radio broadcasting, I was elated. Even if it was a short-term career, I knew that spending time in the real world and working with a broadcasting team would be good for his maturity and sense of empowerment. Like SYR, you're all kinds of different, and we celebrate that!"

### ***Lesson 3: Gear your career interests with school placements and internships***

I knew I needed to get experience in a real radio station, so I applied for a high school co-operative education placement at the local station. I landed a half-day placement with the morning show host. He was very friendly and understanding of my challenges. I learned how to host a show, how a radio station works, and how radio commercials are made. The best part was getting to co-host and have a few laughs on the morning show.

**Figure 3**

*First time on radio, my high school co-op placement, Moose FM, Espanola*



[A photo of me during my first radio broadcast at my high school co-op placement.]

After graduating high school, I worked the summer at the local newspaper, The Mid North Monitor as a freelance journalist. I was mentored by a compassionate editor, who, besides having radio experience, had lots of patience to show me the ropes.

***Lesson 4: To disclose or not disclose - depends on when, where and to whom***

I disclosed my autism to my college professors during the second semester. We had a big test towards the end of the first year, and I had studied hard for it, but once I saw the test, the questions were written in a way that I didn't understand. I handed the test in without writing much on it. This was really embarrassing as I am not a quitter, but I didn't know what to do. My mom encouraged me to explain my situation to the professor and ask if she could rephrase the questions while doing the test orally.

I explained to my professor that I have autism, and sometimes I need things to be rephrased. She didn't hesitate and read the questions to me again and rephrased them in a way that I would understand. The result - a passing grade!

***Lesson 5: Get even more relevant experience in the summers while at college***

With the help of a YMCA employment support program for people with disabilities, I secured a summer job at the radio station on Manitoulin Island. The job developer cautioned my mom that this workplace is very laid back and thus appeared disorganized. The job developer worried it wouldn't suit me since she thought autistic people have a hard time with chaos. My mom laughed, saying that I may be autistic, but I was extremely disorganized and couldn't care less if things "weren't in order".

I was hired and quickly learned this would be a fun place to work because the staff was very friendly. The co-owner was a fantastic mentor. Within a week, I was writing, voicing and producing commercials and announcing the Community Happenings segment.



### ***Got my diploma, now what?!***

Once I finished the Radio Broadcasting program at Loyalist College, it was time to find a full-time job. I underestimated just how hard that would be. I had assumed that if I had a college diploma, I would get a job in my field easily. I was wrong. It was the classic dilemma - I couldn't get a job because I didn't have enough experience, and I couldn't get more experience without a job. So, I decided to do what was needed to build my resume and industry skills while fine-tuning my life skills.

Fortunately, the Manitoulin radio station owners gave me a part-time, limited contract position. Since I was only part-time, I kept applying for full-time radio jobs. After airing one of the first episodes of my weekly Crash's Campfire show, I learned the importance of being more vigilant and double-checking content before putting it on the air. I had found a song online and played it on my show, not knowing it contained offensive lyrics. Once I realized this, I was frozen with fear, and I didn't know what would happen next. Would I get fired? Would I be thought of poorly by the public? It was more than I could bear, and I had a panic attack. In between breaths, I managed to tell my boss what had happened. She assured me that I wasn't going to get fired, and the worst-case scenario is that they would need to do some damage control. I had been so excited about hosting and airing my own show, and I had messed up.

Fortunately, this experience was not in vain, and it has since made me a better broadcaster. I now listen to all the content I plan to put on the air. At the end of my contract, I didn't get hired, but they were supportive in allowing me to volunteer twice a week. I owe a lot to the owner, who was also a great mentor. This experience helped kick start my radio career.

### ***Lesson 6: We all need a life coach at times***

I started seeing a life coach, Theresa. I was wary at first, thinking I didn't need a coach. My parents lined up a grant to help offset the cost. It turned out that Theresa was one of the best things to happen to me!

Theresa recommended that I increase my social media presence, so I started a Facebook page so that people could follow me and keep up-to-date with what I was doing. She helped me to polish and organize my resume and applications. Unfortunately, none of the places I applied to ever got back to me, but it was a good experience nonetheless.

### ***My educational journey and job search continues.***

I went back to college for a summer institute at Seneca College to continue building my journalism skills. My profs and peers knew of my diagnosis and my accommodations and strengths. Everyone was so supportive. Once the post-graduate course was over, I had something else to add to my resume and another certificate to hang on my wall, but looking for a full-time job continued to be a battle. I now had a professional demo website with samples of my television reporting and radio talk breaks. Theresa and I met most days to expand my efforts at getting my portfolio out, applying for jobs posted, cold calls and setting up informational interviews.

### ***Lesson 7: No job yet, so volunteer and freelance in my field***

During my job search, I discovered that Laurentian University had a volunteer-run radio station (CKLU). I pitched a show called "Laurentian Mornings" that would play a variety of music and give students updates on local events. I hosted this show until I found a full time, paying radio job.

**Figure 4**

*A face for radio!*



[A photo of me broadcasting a weather segment]

I continued to look for full-time employment. I found an ad for a freelance journalist for a Sudbury-based magazine called Talent North, showcasing local talent. I sought the chance right away to make some pocket money and gain writing experience.

I was frustrated that I never got an interview for any jobs I applied for, no matter what I did. Once again, I found myself questioning whether it was my autism that was preventing me from getting a media job. The other issue I felt I was facing is that workplaces often fail to make accommodations for disabled workers or don't take the time to learn about autism and what we need. I had been told that radio and television are both competitive markets that are hard to break into. I wasn't the only one not getting hired - most of my former classmates were also struggling to get work.

Sage advice, a radio station employee gave me during an informational interview, is that if I wanted a career in radio, I should take any available job to get my foot in the door.

### **Tribulations**

#### ***First career job: What seemed like a failure but wasn't***

After two years of sending out resumes, volunteering, and doing informational interviews, I finally received the call I had hoped for. A radio station in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, hired me for a news reporter/host position.

I had made all the preparations that I could, but nothing could prepare me for this next chapter of my life, a chapter that has shaped me into a much wiser person.

I had made all the preparations that I could, but nothing could prepare me for this next chapter of my life, a chapter that has shaped me into a much wiser person.

### ***Out of my depth initially, but support was close by***

While co-hosting with Ashley, I made occasional pronunciation and news story mistakes. I was not very good at receiving feedback, but I would apologize to Ashley once I calmed down. Without Ashley's straightforward constructive criticism and support, I might not have learned to sharpen my interviewing and research skills, which I needed to become the journalist and radio host I am today.

At first, it seemed like the perfect job, but there was a lot of unease and continuous staff turnover in the workplace. My anxiety started to grow about two months into the job. This was the first time that my OCD fear of germs came back in a long time. I was also afraid of being fired. One day, it got so bad that I had to take an anxiety pill to calm me down.

My biggest problem was not getting along well with one other employee. I made the mistake of inadvertently upsetting them when I pointed out mistakes in this person's story calmly and positively. I have never handled verbal conflict very well, and I know it's one of my main anxiety triggers. I felt a panic attack coming on. The next thing I knew, I could not talk and struggled to breathe. Ashley and another staff member both tried to reassure me.

Another challenge I had was the company's expectations. I believe, in hindsight, that they wanted me to hit the ground running and expected me to have more knowledge and experience than I had. Yet I had expected more guidance and orientation. Not a good fit.

Frankly, you don't need to know all the details, but it was a toxic environment for me. I dreaded the idea of going to work, and I was crying myself to sleep some nights and waking up in the morning hating my life.

### ***Lesson 8: One door closes, another opens...eventually***

After 9 months on the job, I would finally learn my post-probationary fate. I had butterflies in my tummy and had had trouble sleeping the past few nights before the decision was announced. While my immediate supervisor had emailed me and recommended that I be hired permanently, the final decision lay with the boss - who had a different response. I was being let go. They needed someone who could work more independently and had more experience.

My first assumption was that they were treating me this way because of my autism, but they confirmed it had nothing to do with my termination. I was still devastated, and I held back tears for the remainder of the meeting. I wanted to get angry, yell and insult, but somehow, I didn't. I pulled myself together, took a deep breath, and thanked them for giving me this amazing opportunity. I shook their hands and left the office.

I walked home, only a few blocks away, but the walk somehow felt longer. I didn't know what I was going to tell my parents, and I felt like I had embarrassed not only myself but my entire family and that I had messed up my life for good. I felt this way because I was always under the impression that if you get fired, your chances of getting another job are unlikely.

Everything was so uncertain at this point: Would I ever work in media again? Am I a failure? In a way, I was happy that I didn't have to work there anymore because it really was a toxic environment for me, but it was just so hard to get out this way. I told my parents the news over the phone. I was so worried about what they would say, but they were proud of me for everything that I did, and they assured me that my career in media wasn't over but just beginning.

I was deeply saddened and disturbed by everything that had transpired, and I admit that I had more drinks than I should have that night. I ended up calling a local crisis phone line because, for the first time in a long time, I was having thoughts of suicide. I really didn't want to kill myself, but I was in a lot of pain. When I ended the conversation, it occurred to me that in the movie *Cast*

Away, Chuck Noland wanted to end it all because he felt that he would never get off the island he was stranded on. Still, one day the tide came in and gave him a piece of plastic that he used as a makeshift sail to get off the island. He said, "You have to keep breathing because tomorrow the sun will rise - who knows what the tide could bring."

Losing my first media job didn't ruin my life. I went outside my comfort zone. I tried new things. I saw new places. If it weren't for this experience, which was ultimately a stepping stone for my career, I might still be living in Mom and Dad's basement. Sure, things were still uncertain, and I didn't know what would happen next, but I would continue to learn, grow and get experience.

I will hand the mic over to work colleague Ashley and my Mom and Dad to share their points of view of this chapter of my life.

**Ashley:**

At first, Blake was timid and shy, but then he started to find his voice. It was a difficult atmosphere to navigate with a lot of hostility and ego, but he tried to blend in. Blake was very stuck in his ways. He always had to have things a particular way, and he would ask a lot of questions for clarification. The hardest thing that I have encountered so far in my adult life is when Blake was being bullied. I remember sitting on the front porch of the station talking with another person, and there was an eruption from inside. Blake walked out stark white in the face and had a breakdown. We were already good friends by this time, and it was hard for me to see him like that.

There were a lot of instances where Blake would misinterpret what people were trying to say. Some people would not take the time to understand what he was saying or to explain to him what was going on. I think that the best approach to helping Blake cope was to treat him with respect as any person deserves and patiently explain what was going on in a way he could understand.

I would say to future employers and work colleagues of Blake's: Don't be ignorant. Take some time, ask questions, and learn to do things differently to help the autistic person with transitions and new information.

When I found out Blake was autistic, it changed my view of him and other people on the spectrum. I knew little about autism and what came along with it. Blake has proven to be an outstanding friend, an amazing person and a fantastic co-host. When Blake taught me about autism, I gained so much respect for him and his perseverance to help other people understand. I think that Blake is a super tough individual with a lot of drive and compassion, and I am really proud of him for going through all of that crap and coming out with his head held high. Most people couldn't muster half the integrity that he has.

Ashley left the station a few months after I did - on to greener pastures for both of us!

**Mom:**

In some ways, we may have contributed to Blake's failure at this job. How? Two ways: First, by inadvertently setting him up to believe that his employer would provide him with solid onboarding, training, and orientation. I came from a large employer with extensive orientation for new hires, especially recent graduates. At my workplace, orientation training would take weeks with mentors after the new employee got their feet wet on tasks.

Secondly, I think the whole issue of disclosure is full of pitfalls - for both the new employee/ interviewee and the employer. When one has an invisible disability like ASD, if you disclose during your interview, chances are the phone won't ring for a callback; if you are fortunate to get hired, when do you inform them about your disability? After your probation? What if you need a few simple accommodations to make you succeed but don't want to ask for them if you are being singled out?



I think this first career job taught Blake:

- That there are always going to be bullies at work. The key is to learn not to be one and stay away from them!
- To learn to control one's anger.
- To handle feedback more constructively.
- To ask for help - it's a sign of strength, not weakness.
- To disclose his autism alongside strategies to succeed.

**Dad:**

What Blake experienced was a bunch of life lessons that eventually have made him stronger. It was painful to witness from afar. Since I usually don't spend a lot of time talking through issues every week, I would send a wise quote to help him through this challenging work experience. Below are some I sent Blake to give him some comfort in knowing he wasn't alone - after all, 'what doesn't kill us makes us stronger.

- Stop being afraid of what could go wrong and start being excited about what could go right.
- Difficult roads often lead to beautiful destinations.
- Criticism may not be agreeable, but it is necessary. It fulfills the same function as pain in the human body; it calls attention to an unhealthy state of things.
- Tough times don't last; tough people do.

## Triumphs

### *A new beginning at Arctic Radio and living in The Pas*

A few months later, I interviewed for a job at a radio station in The Pas, northern Manitoba, to work as a news reporter. Even though it wasn't a hosting job, I felt the need to think "outside the box" and apply for the job with hopes that I could get a hosting opportunity while working in the news. When I was offered the job, I accepted. They said I could also host a show or do some voiceover work on a volunteer basis. This made me want to accept the job right away, but I wasn't sure how good I would be at covering the news because I had needed some help at my previous job with getting accurate information. My confidence had been crushed. I felt that I was better at covering human interest stories. Mom and Dad assured me that I would do just fine. I accepted the job offer, and before I knew it, I was on my next career-building and life journey.

### *A family radio station extraordinaire*

Before I officially started work, the assistant manager and I had breakfast at a local restaurant. He was so nice and made me feel welcome and somewhat less nervous about my new job and hometown.

Arctic Radio, the company that runs the radio station in The Pas and two other stations in the province (Flin Flon and Thompson), is family run and they really do treat you like family. The outgoing news director started training me immediately, showing step-by-step how the news runs. On the first day, he gave me his contact list and introduced me to the Mayor.

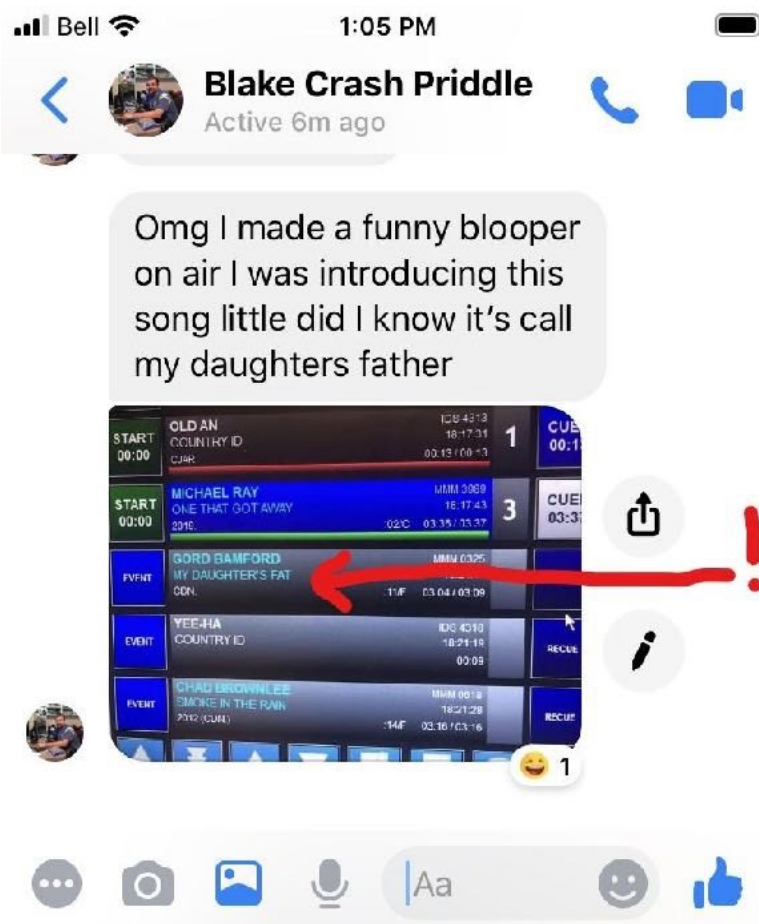
I could go on about how positive my experience has been. A few highlights include interviewing MP Niki Ashton and Premier Brian Pallister, covering The Pas' minor hockey team winning the Chevrolet Good Deeds Cup, and reporting on Northern Manitoba's Trappers Festival. I continue to learn skills that are helping me improve my reporting.

At our station, everyone pitches in, even if it means working outside their position. I have been given ideas for news stories from my colleagues to use almost every day. I don't always use them, but it's great that I have people willing to contribute. In return, I help them with sales/contest ideas, commercial voicing and production. I also fill in and do voice tracking if someone

Is sick and show initiative without being asked. Not only does this company treat people like family, but they are also more than happy to help their employees overcome problems they may have to ensure we do our jobs better. My employer provided me with a checklist to follow before sending the news each day to ensure that the spelling and numbers were accurate.

Like most workplaces, I receive constructive criticism and positive feedback to make me a better news reporter and radio personality. This includes remembering how to talk with a conversational voice on-air and adding voice clips to news stories. The best feedback I received was being told by my employer that the news is the best it's been in a long time since I started working there. These kind words make me feel proud and successful. When anyone makes a mistake on the air, we simply apologize and fix it, or just laugh if it is harmless!

**Figure 5**  
*Gord Bamford's Daughter is not fat LOL*



[Photo of a funny blooper I made on air. I was introducing a song titled "My daughters father" however the last few letters cut and the broadcast displayed "My daughters fat"]

You may be wondering if I have told my employer I am autistic...Yes, I have disclosed my autism and the challenges I have. What I have also provided is what works for me to do a good job. Our Morning Wake Up host even interviewed me to promote World Autism Awareness Day. After all, awareness leads to understanding and inclusion.

### Lesson 9: I Keep on Working (at Life!)

During the COVID 19 pandemic, many have had it tough worrying about jobs, illness and dying. The work I have done on the radio, keeping people informed about the latest pandemic developments, has given me the feeling that I am contributing to society during such a difficult time. Dad tells me not to look at this crisis as a sprint but more like a marathon. There is so much that I haven't done yet, so much that I still want to do, and I look forward to the next chapter of my life. I always look and think ahead and forget about the negatives from the past whenever I can.

I would never trade my autism for anything, although I will gladly trade my OCD and anxiety for a cold beer any day. I am lucky to have a family that supports me every step of the way and friends and work colleagues to help.

Things are better than they were 20-25 years ago, but we can do better. It is becoming increasingly common for autistics to wear headphones in noisy environments, and stimming is becoming more acceptable. Today when people expect me to look at them, I just tell them I am sorry, but I am uncomfortable making direct eye contact and that it has nothing to do with them. Society has made mistakes in the way it treats those "who are different", but we have the power to change the future and create inclusive schools, workplaces and communities.

This is Blake "Crash" Priddle signing off for now. Stay tuned for my memoir: **Good Morning Blake: Growing Up Autistic and Being Okay** available now.

### Figure 6

*At my Arctic Radio news desk*



[A photo of me smiling, currently working at my Arctic Radio news desk]

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## A Path to Passion

Terri Robson

### Abstract

In the Autistic world in which many of us live, very little is discussed about entrepreneurship. This can be done if one finds an interest one is passionate about. With the help of professionals, friends and family, a business can be set up and run successfully. This article discusses my journey to this goal, the trials worked through and endured, as well as the success I have achieved. It is my hope from this telling of my story that others get the inspiration to create a dream and follow it.

### Resumé

Dans le monde autiste dans lequel beaucoup d'entre nous vivent, on parle très peu de l'esprit d'entreprise. Il est pourtant possible de le faire si l'on trouve un intérêt qui nous passionne. Avec l'aide de professionnels, d'amis et de la famille, on peut créer une entreprise et la gérer avec succès. Cet article traite de mon parcours vers cet objectif, des épreuves traversées et endurées, ainsi que du succès que j'ai obtenu. J'espère qu'en racontant mon histoire, d'autres personnes trouveront l'inspiration pour créer un rêve et le réaliser.

### Keywords

*Passion, Entrepreneurship, Success, Strength*

### Mots Clés

*Passion, Entrepreneuriat, Succès, Force*

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<sup>1</sup> Awkward Spirit: Looking Beyond the Mask, Canada



Being diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome (AS) was the start of a hard, wondrous journey in my life, though little did I know it at the time. Prior to the age of 33 I just knew I was different and somehow did not fit in. Jobs were hard to retain, but I had no clue as to why. Getting them was easy for me, keeping them on the other hand... Luckily, I loved to learn and so I worked hard in school: First my high school matriculation, second the Music Merchandising Diploma at Red Deer College. When I completed my diploma, I went to Ottawa for work. To this day I cannot tell you what the job was, let alone why I was let go.

When I returned from Ottawa, I was looking for another opportunity in the music industry. I couldn't find any positions I felt suited for, so I went in a different direction to another adventure. I went to work for a Harley Davidson Motorcycle Dealership. If I thought I didn't fit in before I definitely did not fit with this crowd. They are a society unto their own. The dealership also had another business; they sold jobber (not original) parts to Harley dealerships across Canada. Because of this I was given the opportunity to take the Partsperson Apprenticeship through Northern Alberta Institute of Technology (NAIT) and Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT). This involved a number of work hours, somewhere between 1200 and 1600 per year, if I remember correctly. Each period of hours was followed by 6 weeks of school, for years 1 and 2, with year 3 requiring 8 weeks. Upon completion of the requisite number of hours and schooling, I wrote an apprenticeship exam. A minimum grade, which I cannot remember, was necessary in order to receive your Journeyman Parts Certificate. During the 3-year work and school time, you are referred to as an apprentice. I received my Journeyman's certificate in 1984. I continued to work at the dealership for another year or so.

For the next six years I worked a variety of jobs. I drove a delivery van, worked in the parts and accounting departments of an appliance repair company, and other forgotten jobs. I still had not decided what to do when I grew up. Throughout these years after high school, the many different jobs afforded me the opportunity to learn a variety of different skills that I have since been able to utilize, including learning what not to do. I must not have learned some things well enough however, as I apparently kept making some of the same mistakes. (Where was that filter when I needed it?)

I decided at this point in my life to become a teacher; someone suggested I'd be good at it. So off I went to university. I received my Education degree and began searching for a teaching job. Not an easy thing to get. 40 or 50 resumes, 6 interviews and finally a job. Yay. It turns out, not so much. I was a half-time teacher with more than a full-time load. It was ridiculous. Also, I spent more time in the principal's office as a teacher, than I did in 12 years as a student. Apparently, I had a lot to learn. Problems with students for which I had not been trained; a parent threatening me; another parent questioning my sexuality. I had no clue as to how to handle these situations, but I did the best I could. Anyway, I digress. At the end of the year my contract was not renewed; in a way I was relieved. I didn't think I was cut out for teaching. Thinking back on it, I realize I was never given the opportunity to show people, let alone myself, what a good teacher I can be.

I continued to move from job to job. I never seemed to find the right fit. I didn't fit in because I didn't dress as a "typical" woman. I spoke my mind too honestly, without beating around the bush or being nicey-nice. I was too outspoken about things that I knew would be beneficial to the company. And I thought I didn't like change.

I'd been doing a lot of accounting work at these various jobs, so I decided to work towards my designation as a professional accountant. I took courses at night while I continued to work. Aspies, as a rule, see things very black and white. Management accounting is all grey. I barely passed the class. There ended my dream of being an accountant. I continued working in accounting for another couple of years. I lost another job - it was brutal. My self esteem could not handle any more rejection, firing, being let go for whatever reason. I was done. 11 jobs in 9 years. Too much. Oftentimes, I did not receive a reason as to why I was let go. I was just sent packing. No opportunities to grow and learn from my mistakes. I wasn't told what my mistakes were. How does one fix a problem if they don't know what it is? Time to take a break from the stress of the job and all kinds of rejection. I didn't work for a number of years. I needed time to regroup and find my focus again.

After a couple of years or so I became involved in a program with a company that helps individuals with disabilities find employment. It was during this period I decided to strike out on my own. The idea came out of conversations with professional peers. I decided it was time to tell my story, much as I've done here. At this point in time little of society knew much about Asperger Syndrome; it had been in the DSM-IV about 12 years. My thought at the time (it still is): "awareness, understanding and acceptance". The more people who become aware of AS, the more understanding (with the help of lived experience sharing) and the more accepting people become. It was time to take another step in my journey. I would start a company and see where it goes.

When it came to setting up my company there were a few things I needed to do before I got up and rolling: think of a name for my company; research sole proprietorships and limited companies; research GST numbers and determine whether or not to get one; acquire start up funds; and decide on an accounting system/program. Some tough decisions but I worked it through with the help of some great friends.

When I set up my company, I chose to be a sole proprietor. This means I am the only person who owns the company; all liability is mine alone. I have no partners nor are others involved. It's always been just me. Sometimes a friend comes to my speaking engagements to help me control my anxiety, provide moral support, and give feedback. It's important I get critical feedback; it makes me a better speaker. Because of this I can connect with my audience better and help them understand Asperger Syndrome from an Aspie's point of view. Having Awkward Spirit become a limited company wasn't a sound business decision. I couldn't afford the cost of incorporation and with the intention of making a difference rather than a lot of money, I'd feel an obligation to partners/shareholders I didn't want to be burdened with. Generally, there are two or more partners, and people have shares in the company, which requires paying out dividends.

I decided to name the company Awkward Spirit: Looking Beyond the Mask. I often times feel like an awkward spirit when I'm around other people, so the name is very fitting. Looking Beyond the Mask has a double meaning for me. At its core, Asperger Syndrome is a social-communication disorder. Approximately 95% of communication in the world is non-verbal. People with AS and other communication disorders do not "get" non-verbals. To Aspies it's like other people are wearing masks and we can't see their expressions. The other half of this equation is we want the rest of society to look beyond our mask and see the person underneath.

I had an initial outlay of cash in order to start up: researching a trade name to ensure I

wasn't using another company's; purchasing cheques after I had set up a business bank account; purchasing accounting software and a few other office supplies as well. Oh, and then comes the added expense of business cards and brochures (luckily, I was able to do most of the writing, design work and layout myself). Then comes the website - not an inexpensive endeavour. I was fortunate enough to have a friend who writes code. She created my website (I did the writing), and after many tweaks it was done. When I had thoughts of starting a company, I had no idea how much was involved. I didn't do enough research beforehand; therefore, I learned on the fly. I didn't form my company to make a ton of money. I wanted to make a difference to as many people as possible in many different walks of life. As a result of my decision, some years I have barely broke even, and others I made money. One must remember; however, the government wants its share in the form of taxes. Too late I realized I had not been putting money away (about 30% is a good idea) and wham, I got a big tax bill come April. I was surprised, and not in a good way. It took me quite a while to pay the taxes because some of my presentations were free and others did not pay much. I was okay with that. I was and still am making a difference today. I did learn a valuable lesson: don't be so excited that you earned a lot of money and spend it all. It's not all yours.

Opening a business like mine is not for everyone; especially Aspies, many of whom (like myself) may have comorbid conditions that get in the way of day-to-day life; nevermind starting a business. I should mention my presentations are about growing up without a diagnosis (received that when I was 33 - just after the DSM-IV came out), behaviours and other things that are different for those of us with AS, and tips and tools to help people live easier on both sides of the equation. I figure I have the best job in the world; I get to talk about myself, and I get paid for it. Actually, I don't talk at all about myself. I speak about Asperger Syndrome, and I am the example. I can often hear teachers say things like: "doesn't that remind you of so and so?"

It's very easy for me to get caught up in the moment when I'm speaking. I'm so passionate about the subject I forget about things like money. Some of my presentations (especially Teacher's Conventions) pay reasonably good money. Some of my presentations I don't charge for. It's more important to me to get the message across and make a difference. I've included a list of organizations I've presented to, so you can see the diverse audiences I've shared my message with. If I make a difference to even one person, I've accomplished my goal. I aim for more than one, however.

### **Organizations I've Presented to:**

#### ***Government of Alberta***

- Alberta Works
- Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped
- Employment First 2014 Symposium (panel that was part of a webcast)
- Persons with Developmental Disabilities Program Branch

#### ***Teachers' Conventions*** (all at least twice)

- Central Alberta Teacher's Convention Association
- Central East Alberta Teacher's Convention Association
- Greater Edmonton Teacher's Convention Association

- Mighty Peace Teacher's Convention Association
- Northeast Teacher's Convention Association
- North Central Teacher's Convention Association
- Palliser District Teacher's Convention Association
- Southeastern Alberta Teacher's Convention Association
- Southwestern Alberta Teacher's Convention Association *United Nations International Day of Persons with Disabilities*
- Community Futures Lakeland
- St. Paul Abilities Network
- City of Fort Saskatchewan
- City of Red Deer

### ***Educational Institutions***

- Archbishop Jordan Catholic High School, Edmonton
- Austin O'Brien High School, Edmonton
- F G Miller Junior/Senior High School, Elk Point
- Living Waters Catholic Regional Division, No 42, Whitecourt
- Mother Mary Margaret School, Edmonton
- St. Alberta Protestant School District Educational Assistants, St. Albert (2x)
- Red Deer College Educational Assistant's Program
- Grant McEwan Community College Occupational Assistant's Program, Edmonton

### ***Disability Organizations***

- Autism Society of Edmonton Area, Edmonton
- Canadian Mental Health, Camrose
- CASA House, Sherwood Park
- Centra Cam Vocational Training Association, Camrose
- Children's Autism Services Edmonton (3x)
- EmployAbilities, Edmonton
- Robin Hood Association, Sherwood Park (4x)

### ***Community Organizations***

- Various Lions Conventions and Clubs in Canada and the USA
- Lit Fest - October 21, 2011. Western Canada's only literary festival. I sat on a panel with 2 authors with very differing views of Asperger's.
- The Hub on Ross Street, Red Deer
- Action Group, Learning Circle Program, Red Deer
- 

I look at the list (I think I may have forgotten 1 or 2) and I'm amazed at what I have done. Imagine the ripple effect after one presentation, let alone all the speaking I have done. Wow. Having my own company can be a lot of work but, in my mind, it is well worth it. COVID has really put a damper on live presentations which I enjoy the most. For me it is much harder to engage with my audience on a personal level while on the computer. I plan to continue with my company for a number of years yet. I want to foster an environment of understanding and acceptance to as wide an audience as possible.





## Imagine an Autistic hotel

Joseph Sheppard

### Abstract

Let's Imagine an Autistic hotel is a thought experiment that asks a scientifically curious question: How would we imagine an Autistic hotel? This article was designed to evoke the reader's imagination and innovative thinking. The possibility of an Autistic hotel is not only intriguing; such an idea could lead to changes in how we envision our future as humanity.

### Resumé

Let's Imagine an Autistic hotel » (Imaginons un hôtel pour autistes) est une expérience de pensée qui pose une question scientifiquement curieuse : comment imaginer un hôtel pour autistes? Cet article a été conçu pour susciter l'imagination et la pensée novatrice du lecteur. La possibilité d'un hôtel pour autistes n'est pas seulement intrigante ; une telle idée pourrait entraîner des changements dans la façon dont nous envisageons notre avenir en tant qu'humains.

### Keywords

*autism, humanity, thought experiment, autistic design, hotels*

### Mots Clés

autisme, humanité, expérience de pensée, conception autistique, hôtels

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<sup>1</sup> University of Victoria

Imagine an Autistic hotel. I have a scientific mind and enjoy curiosity. I imagine an Autistic hotel as a practice spaceship for when humans live out in space. I make hypotheses or predictions. What are your ideas about an Autistic hotel? How would the lighting be? What would it look like to enter an Autistic hotel? What sounds would we hear? How would the beds and chairs feel? Would Autism culture produce something completely different?

We could use Autistic hotels to practice niche constructing spaceships for spinning orbits around moons and exoplanets. Niche constructing is when we co-author a continual renewal of our environments to safeguard the maintenance of our human needs and our symbiotic biosystems. Let's keep all our cultures and diversities for at least a billion years and expand them across our galaxy! My humble suggestion for keeping the humans. How could we grow bored with teams of Autistics planning for a livable future? We need Autistics to design Autistic hotels, serve Autistic hotels, and visit Autistic hotels. Autistic hotels are Autistic cultural property if we make them. Autistic hotels are inclusive because of our professional Autistic equity attitude. There are Autistics in all diversities. Our practice spaceships could use gentle AI to optimize our equity needs just in time for Earth repair!

Autistic hotel spaceships could be made climate optimized and designed to return fertile lands to food growing and create separate spaces for Indigenized Peoples tending symbiotic Earth Home. Moreover, an Autistic hotel could transport us by enthusiastic consent and activity transparency agreements embedded in the go button of a distributed transportation system wherein the same AI coordinates multiple vehicles for improved safety over purely autonomous AI-driven vehicles. Autistic hotel procedure manuals could all have an abstract but critical, run-on sentence that displays signs of Autistic monologuing.

We could have minimal bubbled seat cabs that would automatically go to places we connect with meaning together. We could participate using overall cooperative game theory with friendly, transparent, competitive components to keep a sense of fun flowing that supports our wellbeing. Maybe Autistic Hotels could become mysterious.

I am super curious about Autistic hotels. I began this time writing by idea, dreaming about Autistic hotels and sharing thoughts about transport to Autistic hotels to evoke thoughts of Autistic hotels themselves. My curiosity has only begun to grow. Will there be such a glorious place as an Autistic hotel? I certainly believe in Autistic people and how much life they can bring by designing their brilliant creations as gifts to us all.

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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*

<sup>1</sup> Adult Advisory Committee, Kerry's Place

<sup>2</sup> Youth Advisory Committee, Grandview Children's Centre

<sup>3</sup> Mixed Ability Sport Canada Abilities Centre

<sup>4</sup> Youth Advisory Committee, Jays Care

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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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 programs) and succeed in my employment (taking breaks, using a visual schedule, training with a support worker).

### **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.





## The challenge of meaningful work for adults with ASD

Kirk Winter

### Abstract

Individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) face many challenges during their lives that range from decoding the public school system, understanding social cues and surviving the challenges inherent in higher education. Perhaps the most significant hurdle for those with ASD to overcome is obtaining meaningful employment upon finishing school. The levels of unemployment and underemployment for those with ASD is scandalously high and despite some efforts being made by a handful of well-meaning employers, too few individuals are given a fair shake in both the hiring process and the workplace once hired. This reality unfortunately leads to far too many talented and innovative individuals with ASD facing working lives of unmitigated frustration and unfulfilled potential.

### Résumé

Les personnes ayant un trouble du spectre de l'autisme (TSA) doivent relever de nombreux défis au cours de leur vie, qu'il s'agisse de décoder le système scolaire public, de comprendre les signaux sociaux ou de survivre aux difficultés inhérentes à l'enseignement supérieur. L'obstacle le plus important à surmonter pour les personnes ayant un TSA est peut-être de trouver un emploi intéressant à la fin de leurs études. Le taux de chômage et de sous-emploi des personnes sur le spectre de l'autisme est scandaleusement élevé et, malgré les efforts déployés par une poignée d'employeurs bien intentionnés, trop peu de personnes bénéficient d'un traitement équitable tant dans le processus d'embauche que dans le milieu de travail une fois qu'elles ont décroché un poste. Cette réalité fait malheureusement en sorte que beaucoup trop de personnes autistes talentueuses et innovatrices sont confrontées à une vie professionnelle faite de frustration et de potentiel non réalisé.

### Keywords

*autism, employment, underemployment, strategies, role of caregivers*

### Mots Clés

*autisme, emploi, sous-emploi, stratégies, rôle des soignants*

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As an individual with ASD who has a son with ASD and has worked with hundreds of individuals with ASD as a high school history teacher, I believe that we can help the next generation of young people with ASD by recognizing our role as parents in preparing our children for meaningful employment.

While this paper is not scholarly in the truest sense of the word, I believe there is much useful information contained here on how to prepare your child with ASD for the all-important world of work. The lessons I have learned are certainly not easy, but they are worth the effort and tears that have been shed. My son with ASD successfully defended his PhD thesis in November 2021, and is celebrating almost 15 years of employment which put him through school, working a variety of jobs in the challenging and fast-paced service industry.

### **What do the numbers tell us?**

It has often been said that statistics don't lie. If that axiom is still true, then the numbers regarding employment of individuals on the autism spectrum are worth a sober second look.

A study from Drexel University in the United States concludes that individuals on the autism spectrum are less likely than any other disability group to be employed or pursue post-secondary education. (Long and Kearon, 2018) The numbers cited are very stark with 58% of people with ASD working for pay, 74% of people with intellectual disabilities working for pay, and 95% of those with learning disabilities working for pay. (Psychology Today, no date listed)

The Drexel study suggests that young adults with ASD have the highest risk of being completely disengaged from any kind of post-secondary education or employment after high school. (Long and Kearon, 2018)

A British study commissioned by the Office for National Statistics suggests that as many as 78% of adults with autism are underemployed or unemployed. (National Autism Society, 2021)

An American study finds relatively similar data to the British research when they conclude that 85% of Americans with ASD are underemployed or unemployed. (Sparrow, 2018) The American research also indicates that only 53% of young adults with ASD have worked for pay outside the home in the first eight years following high school. (Ciccocioppo and Taylor, 2018)

How can we change this sorry situation? What can we do to better prepare our children with ASD to get a leg-up in the ultra-competitive job market?

### **Be a good role model**

The elephant in the room on the issue of employment for young people with ASD is the role played by the individual's parents/caregivers in preparing them for the world of work. Assuming a young person is living with their birth parents, genetics tell us that one or both of their parents are likely on the spectrum. What are their experiences like in the work world? Do they find themselves frustrated, angry and underemployed? If they have not been successful in the work world what skills, tips, and knowledge do they have to pass on to the next generation? What have they modelled for children about the importance of work?

Young people learn by listening and watching role models they respect, and if their parent(s) have found the work world fraught with disappointment because of their diagnosis, this will most certainly have an impact upon the next generation's outlook on work. Some of those same young adults have also seen parents never work because they have been deemed disabled by being on the spectrum. One wonders what message about their condition young adults take from growing up in those households.

I was very lucky growing up. My father, who worked outside of the family home, was not the parent with ASD. I watched my dad go from promotion to promotion with ever increasing responsibilities. He began his career with one of Canada's largest retailers as an entry-level management trainee and retired 40 years later as a national manager. While my father mastered many different skills, he was a human resources person at heart. He was an expert hirer and his ability to interview, select and retain good people was legendary. Work, for my father, meant providing for his family, a message I took to heart.

I learned at a very early age that “work made the man” and carried the “need” to work with me for decades after leaving the family home. There was never any question about me working; the only question was at what. Not working was a sign of failure for both of my Depression-raised parents, and I wasn't going to be a failure.

From a young age I was expected to help at home. I loved shovelling snow and working in the yard and wondered at other friends who had no chores. As someone who was not identified as having ASD until my son was, my condition manifested first as anxiety and an obsessive need for order. I worried too much about too many things. My desperate need to control the world around me often ended in abject failure.

I watched how hard Dad worked. Work was important to Dad, and that importance was clearly modeled for me when I saw my father put in 60-plus hour weeks and travel across Canada on a regular basis.

When I told my parents as a high school student that I wanted to teach, they were both very supportive and encouraged me in every way they could. They both knew I loved history and hoped that teaching would be my outlet for that passion.

Both my wife and I are retired career teachers, and we consciously modelled a better balance for our kids between work, family and community service than my parents did. We always emphasised that whatever the undertaking, if you gave it a real effort, it was something worthwhile. My son with ASD was brought up in a world where not working because of his condition was never spoken of. We knew he would likely need some time to choose a realistic job plan based on his areas of interest.

### **Start them young**

My father knew I was happiest when I was busy, and as soon as I could I began the world of work with a paper route which soon grew to two different routes. Dad had delivered papers growing up and decided this was a positive way to experience work, get out of the house and earn a little bit of extra money.

I was initially very unsettled about everything that could possibly go wrong with a route. I feared bad weather, vicious dogs or being robbed in some of the seedier apartment blocks I delivered to. There were times I wanted to quit because it was too cold, or the walk was too long. That was not an option in my family. I had made a commitment to my employer and that was sacred in my father's eyes. I delivered those routes for over two years. I experienced every hiccup that a paperboy could face, like papers arriving late or not at all (I thought my customers would blame me). I found the routine of the job was quite relaxing and the seniors, particularly on my route, became friends whose generosity at Christmas was often unexpected.

Our oldest was identified with ASD in grade two. We talked to other parents who were going through similar experiences and as the years went by conversations of applying for a

disability pension became more commonplace. My nephew, also on the spectrum, qualified for and received a monthly pension for his ASD and will receive it for the rest of his life while he lives in Ontario.

My ASD-free wife and I talked for hours about what to do regarding pensions and medications, and whether these were paths we wanted to pursue. We made a conscious decision that our son at 18 could and would make informed decisions for himself about being medicated and applying for the provincial pension. Until then we would try to give him every opportunity to experience life as his friends and neighbours did.

All our children had chores to do beginning with making their beds in early elementary school. They then moved on to doing their laundry. Sometimes it wasn't done until they discovered they were out of underwear, but it was the beginning of taking on work-like responsibilities. My son quite enjoyed shovelling snow and took pride in helping clean our two driveways all the winter long.

We also asked our children to clean their rooms once they reached grade three or four. Two did a relatively decent job but my son with ASD struggled mightily. I will be the first to admit that occasionally I went in and cleaned his room when my OCD dominant ASD could no longer stand the disorder he lived in; but for the most part he was expected to take care of his space.

At the same time the local newspaper advertised that they were looking for carriers and we encouraged my oldest to take it on. He was as hesitant as I was at a similar age, but in some form or another, often with assistance from a brother or two, the papers were delivered. It was a once-a-week commitment, so the workload was not onerous. Not once did Mum or Dad have to deliver the papers and they got to their allotted homes without much complaint. Chores at home and a paper route provided my oldest many of the building blocks that made his entry into the work world much smoother than it would have been otherwise.

### **Interview preparation**

Human resources professionals who regularly interact and have an understanding of those with ASD believe that many of the roadblocks faced regarding job interviews can be overcome with pre-interview preparation. These hiring experts recommend that interview skills need to be role played. Candidates need to be taught how to position their bodies, actively listen, and how to become comfortable asking and being asked open-ended questions in an interview.

Once my oldest began to apply for part-time jobs I can vouch that interview preparation is time well spent. When my child applied for his first job in high school as a cashier at a local drug store, the upcoming interview was clearly concerning him. I asked him if he wanted to go through what he might expect as a potential interviewee. He was thrilled and we spent a couple of hours going through everything from how to enter the room, shake hands, to maintain eye contact, what to wear and how to listen for clues from the interviewer as to what they were looking for in an employee. We also prepared questions that he would ask the human resources person at the end of the interview, so he would appear interested in the job and would know about things like wages, hours of work and job responsibilities that were all unknown and potential stressors.

My son was successful in obtaining that position, and I am proud to say also successful in getting every other job he has applied for since. Athletes often say they are successful on game day because they “put in the work” beforehand. Parenting a child with ASD is very similar. Why will they think work is important if you don't model that? Why will they take on regular responsibilities if they have never been asked to do something as simple as chores? How do you



expect success in a job interview if you don't prepare them for it?

### **Dress code does exist**

If your child with ASD is anything like mine, and many that I taught, they are not well known for their sartorial splendour. It is one of the many things that neurotypical individuals prioritise before they go out in public, but many with ASD often see it as an afterthought. We have worked very hard with our son, with varying levels of success, to make him realise there are clothes appropriate for casual settings, school, church and the work world.

As parents, we had clothing checks before he left for school offering low-key fashion advice that would make sure he wasn't teased for what he was wearing, and his clothing would not single him out in a crowd.

Employers have come a very long way in dealing with potential applicants with ASD, but most potential employers will tell you to arrive looking like you have taken this interview seriously and want to make a good first impression.

I always remember Dad telling me he hired over two hundred people in a week-long hiring blitz for a new store opening based on ability, resumes and whether or not they shined their shoes. Dad associated the attention to detail that potential applicants took preparing themselves for their interview as an indication of how seriously they would take their work and interactions with customers.

There were times our fashion critiques led to conflict with our son, but we held firm and soon he began to realise he couldn't wear woolly work socks with short pants in the summer or his big green sweater to school for weeks on end. While it didn't stop him from wearing running shoes to his wedding, he did look wonderful in his suit and tie on his big day.

Individuals with ASD have told me they prefer when places of employment provide either a well-defined and unambiguous dress code upon hiring or provide the uniform eliminating any chances for fashion faux pas.

Until I entered the teaching profession, every job I had came with a uniform and I appreciated that source of worry being eliminated. My son, a long-time service industry employee while attending school, has had a similar experience at the three businesses he has worked for, simplifying the work preparation routine immeasurably. It hasn't stopped him from losing more name badges and swipe cards than you can imagine, but I can safely say he has never gone to work inappropriately dressed.

I, for one, will be intrigued how easily employees with ASD transition back to the office once all COVID restrictions are hopefully lifted sometime in 2022. I expect there will be some anxiety felt when individuals will no longer be able to work in pyjamas and bare feet.

### **How badly do you want your child to work?**

How badly do you want your child to have a fulfilling and challenging career? How content are you to simply let the child collect a pension, stay home and play video games in their room? These are very important questions that we as parents need to answer and answer honestly.

Are you prepared to fight your child when they initially reject doing household chores or see a paper route as something they have no interest in doing? Are you ready to debate your brilliant neurodiverse son or daughter about the value of preparing for job interviews when they may pretend that they know everything? Are you in it for the long haul, working on proper attire for work with your child?

If you make the decision that a career is a possibility for your child you are all-in until they move out on their own, and even then, you are the first one they call when they have a conflict at work or an interaction at work causes them anxiety. My son has not lived at home for seven years, yet I would suggest that over half the texts my wife and I get from him even today relate to the frustrations and challenges of working in a neurotypical world.

An overwhelming majority of individuals I know who have ASD never achieve their driver's licences for many very good reasons. Most service jobs that are entry level employment for almost all Canadian teens have irregular hours and are open late. While our son enjoyed walking home after 11 pm because of the security he felt in the small town where we live, there are many other circumstances when a parental ride was necessary because of inclement weather. Are there nights you don't feel like getting off the couch to pick your child up from work? I can confess there were a few, but if the absence of a parental drive meant quitting that job, my wife and I were looking for our keys. We were part of his team and committed to ensuring our son was a success at any job he took on.

### **Do you disclose your condition at work?**

There has been considerable debate regarding disclosure (about being on the spectrum) at work, and what impact that may have on employers and fellow employees.

One school of thought encourages sharing your disability in order for neurotypical people to understand the broad variety that makes up the spectrum. They need to see the "full smorgasbord of abilities and challenges that people dealing with the disability truly face."

Dr. Stephen Shore famously said, "If you have met one person with autism, you have only met one person with autism." (Lucas, 2019)

Another individual on the spectrum who did share at work posted her cautionary tale, "After I came out, some at work felt I could no longer do my job. Others wondered why I could talk, did not behave like a child and didn't rock constantly." (Dunne, 2015)

I was always forthcoming with my workmates and bosses about my diagnosis. I felt from day one that there was nothing in my condition that should be secret, and if it explained to the outside world why I behaved like I did I would much rather have that than people thinking I was just "different".

My oldest son has never had a problem telling employers what he needs from them, and because he is a good, honest, forthright employee, they have been good to accommodate him.

When working at a local automotive supply store, the manager wanted to train my son to cut keys. My son engaged his boss in conversation immediately, reminding her that one of the characteristics of his ASD was poor hand/eye coordination and that the key cutting machine looked like an accident waiting to happen. The manager agreed and his career as a key cutter ended before it began. I still see that former manager regularly when I am shopping and she never fails to ask about my son, so excited that one of her cashiers is likely going to be a university professor.

Self-advocacy is a hard thing for many with ASD, but it is so essential regarding employment. My affected son's wife also has ASD, and in preparing her for job interviews we have impressed upon her that in the section of the interview where you are allowed to ask questions, she should tell the employer any special accommodations she will need from them that will allow her to be a good employee. She was initially concerned that people would react poorly to her sharing, but I convinced her that any employer who wasn't willing to accommodate her needs wasn't someone she would want to work for in the first place. She was pleasantly surprised that

in an interview for post-doctoral research the interviewing professor was very complimentary regarding the information she shared and thanked her for making it clear what she needs from the get-go. relatable message, which can also help leaders better understand what it is that individuals with disabilities actually require.

### **The changing work world**

The work world is slowly but surely changing for those with ASD. With commitment and preparation by both individuals and their support networks, meaningful and fulfilling work is more possible all the time.

Autism specific hiring initiatives are being pioneered in the United States by Walgreens, ZenithOptimedia, Microsoft, SAP, Hewlett-Packard, Ernst and Young and Home Depot, often with the support of multiple levels of government looking to assist people with disabilities like autism. (Rudy, 2021)

SAP Software calls this process “recognizing the skills of differently-abled people.” SAP has a 90% retention rate for its staff with ASD and makes it a priority “to value and support the diverse thinking and problem solving that their employees bring to work every day.” (Rudy, 2021)

Jobs like software testing, quality control, stockroom operations, production line assembly, data entry and accounting play to the recognized strengths of those with ASD, and the passions and fixations that are the hallmarks of many with autism can translate into valuable skills in the workforce. (Rudy, 2021)

I would be remiss not to state clearly that not all people with ASD are number oriented. The work these employers are doing to enable those who want to work in accounting and computer programming is wonderful, but what about those who are not interested in numbers? I studied history, as has my son. Others are interested in music or the trades. Some want to enter the workforce right out of high school. Much more needs to be done for those individuals. I also suggest that much of the professional and employment literature ignores one other area of work that many with ASD, me included, have excelled: teaching at all levels.

I only became aware of my own ASD diagnosis when my son was diagnosed, but now as I look back on it, my attraction to teaching makes perfect sense. I have been very fortunate to carve out a satisfying thirty-one-year career teaching high-school history in a large composite rural high school in Ontario. Few jobs have more predictable structure than teaching. There are only so many days in the school year and each period is the same length every day. As a classroom teacher, I was clearly in charge of my workspace, and I did not have to interact with other teachers to be successful in delivering my lessons. I was the captain of my own ship, and interaction with other teachers was often limited to a few minutes in the lunchroom each day. My time was spent in my office and classroom with students who valued me for my expertise rather than my friendship. The power dynamic was all one way, and there was little confusion for someone with ASD as to who was in charge. High school, college and university instruction also feeds a very narrow knowledge band that is so typical for many with ASD. My great love has always been history of all kinds and short of writing or researching, teaching has provided me a wonderful outlet to legitimately feed that appetite without appearing to be odd.

A family friend of ours whose child has ASD has been able to turn an encyclopaedic interest in dinosaurs into a high-profile academic career that takes him around the world as one of the leading experts on Tyrannosaurus Rex.

My son’s interest in military history has caused him to prepare and deliver a well received

Master's thesis and a widely praised PhD paper that will hopefully open doors to him teaching and writing.

It also didn't surprise me that my monthly poker friends, who all worked at my school, made up of teachers and support staff, were overwhelmingly on the spectrum whether they admitted it or not. We felt comfortable with each other's company and accepted each other's ticks and foibles with mostly grace and certainly an understanding of having walked many miles in those people's shoes.

It does not surprise me at all to see that the bulk of my son's friend group is made up of individuals from university and his job at a chain supermarket who are almost all challenged in one way or another. There are individuals dealing with mental health challenges, extreme health issues, and of course, autism. My son says he can spot a fellow traveller with ASD at a distance, and from my experience he is seldom wrong.

I am also very pleased to see him imparting to friends what he has learned about the work world, bosses, and dealing with annoying and ignorant customers. He has become one of the biggest advocates of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union who represent all the workers at his store. He has come to realise the importance of the union acting as an advocate with management who can often appear unsympathetic and unreasonable to the neurodiverse.

My son's ASD has at times benefitted him hugely as a service industry cashier. Once he learns the routine that differs from one employer to the next, he is comfortable with the job. He takes and enforces the store rules seriously and will not be bullied by customers because he knows he has authority on his side, all common characteristics of ASD. Bosses like having him working the late shifts when customers are often the most troublesome, and as a grocery store that sells liquor, his till is the one designated for alcohol sales. If the store policy is to ask for identification of everyone under 25, he will do it even if the line is long and customers are fussing. If the rule is you can't buy liquor for someone else or buy while you are intoxicated, it is enforced meticulously at my son's till much to the chagrin of some shoppers and to the delight of his bosses.

Repeated studies of ASD employees who are properly supported in a full-time job environment indicate that employees like my son bring to their work every day an intense attention to detail, commitment to quality and consistency, creative and out-of-the box thinking, ability to excel at repetitive tasks, have lower turnover rates and are recognized for their honesty and loyalty. (Dunne, 2015)

Companies who have reported success in retaining their ASD employees say clarity in the workplace is a key to building an autism-friendly jobsite. There must be clear directives and deadlines, instructions must be nuance-free, and managers must be quick to clear obstacles that prevent those directives from being met.

Some workplaces have gone as far as normalising the need to negotiate different workplace rules depending upon the needs of the ASD employees and the company. Accommodations will vary from employee to employee and may include the need to wear noise cancelling headphones, have access to a quiet room to work if the office is too chaotic, or ensuring that lights aren't flickering in the employee's workspace to best address the sensory symptoms of autism. In my son's case, insomnia is a serious issue, making early mornings very difficult for him. Employers, after being informed, have, for the most part, been very good to



avoid assigning him morning shifts.

Susan Dunne, author of *A Pony in the Bedroom*, a memoir of life with undiagnosed autism, wrote about finally finding work peace when she was hired by an autism charity in Great Britain, “It really didn’t take that much...just a willingness to allow some time out when I needed, a relaxation room for breaks and a recognition that not everyone wants to be part of coffee time and Secret Santa exchanges. I enjoy working with clear structure and set tasks...in an environment where no one thinks it’s strange if I stick my fingers in my ears at sudden noises. I appreciate when people at least try to give me a warning of changes ahead of time and I feel a great debt of loyalty to the manager who took a near meltdown in her stride and put it within an understandable autism context. I am happier at work and I spend a lot less time requesting sick notes for social overkill.” (Dunne, 2015)

Master’s thesis and a widely praised PhD paper that will hopefully open doors to him teaching and writing.

### **Is activism the answer?**

What do people with ASD and their support networks need to do to further open up the workplace to those who are neurodivergent?

ASD advocates worldwide have reminded those with autism that they are consumers too, and that worldwide people with disabilities, including ASD, are a \$3 trillion dollar market for consumer goods and services. (Long and Kearon, 2018) Advocates in the ASD community have suggested that concerned individuals should actively support firms that provide meaningful employment for those on the spectrum while boycotting companies who do not.

I know as a parent of a child with ASD I make sure I shop at the businesses that employed my son and at the other stores in our community that are willing to employ the neurodivergent.

When I have had the opportunity to speak to people in the positions of responsibility at these businesses, I have complimented them on their hiring practices and reminded them that their decision to hire individuals who are neurodivergent has not gone unnoticed and has changed where I shop.

In the United States alone, a \$220 billion market is controlled by people with disabilities, including autism, their friends, families, and associates. (Long and Kearon, 2018) When polled, the neurodivergent and their allies indicate they prefer to patronise businesses that hire people with all disabilities including ASD.

### **Concluding thoughts**

Too many people with ASD have found themselves marginalised in the adult workforce. While more companies are making a real effort to hire those with ASD, parents and caregivers need to take on a much larger role in helping their children be work ready. Success at work for those with ASD is not an accident. It takes careful planning and a commitment from both parents and the individual to enter a challenging environment that is all too often only understood by those who are neurotypical.

The ASD community must also use their considerable economic muscle to affect change and influence private industry to do a better job of hiring, training, and retaining those with autism, not because it is the socially acceptable thing to do but because it is the profitable thing to do.

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