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USING AUTISTIC ADULTS' PERSPECTIVES TO

IMPROVE SUPPORTS FOR EMPLOYMENT

SUCCESS

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# Background

* About Ian
* Autistic adult
* **Currently:** Social Policy PhD student
* **Previously:** service recipient, vocational rehabilitation consumer
* Interest in employment
* Developed from first-hand experience
* Felt like research, media representations weren’t capturing reality for a lot of autistic people
* Wanted to figure out how to facilitate better outcomes

# Purpose of Project

* Collect data on autistic adults’ **experience finding, getting, and keeping (competitive) employment**
* Investigate autistic adults’ **perceptions of challenges/barriers** to employment
* Understand **what helps autistic adults feel satisfied and successful** in employment

# Three Questions to Think About

1. Do these findings match your experience or understanding?
2. Do these findings suggest other recommendations for policy/practice?
3. What’s the best way to disseminate findings/recommendations?

Who should hear them, and how should we share them?

## The Autism & Employment Experiences Survey

Survey created based on

* Literature, interviews, discussion
* Involved autistic adults, service providers, family, other supporters

Responses from 611 individuals, collected during two time periods:

* August-October 2019 (496 respondents)
* January – July 2020 (115 respondents) Sample recruited from:
* Community and support groups
* Contacts at service agencies, employment programs
* Personal connections

# Sample Characteristics

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Age |  |  |
|  | 18-24 | 19% |
|  | 25-30 | 27% |
|  | 31-40 | 27% |
|  | 41-50 | 18% |
|  | Over 50 | 9% |
|  |  |  |
| Gender |  |  |
|  | Female | 48% |
|  | Male | 23% |
|  | Nonbinary or genderqueer | 20% |
|  | Other gender identity | 7% |
|  | No response | 2% |

16% identify as POC or bi- or

multi- racial

Most commonly

* Asian/Asian-American
* Hispanic/Latinx

19% identify as transgender

# Sample Characteristics

**AGE AT DIAGNOSIS**

**28%**

**Diagnosed**

**before age 21**

**,**

**No professional**

**diagnosis**

**,**

**28**

**%**

Among individuals with a professional diagnosis:

Autism Spectrum Disorder (48%)

Asperger’s Syndrome (41%)

**Diagnosed at** PDD-NOS (5%) **age 21 or older,**

 **44%** Some other diagnosis (6%)

# Sample Characteristics

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Relationship status |  |
|  | Single | 44% |
|  | Married or cohabitating | 41% |
|  | In a relationship (not cohabitating) | 10% |
|  | Separated, divorced, or widowed | 4% |
|  | No response | 1% |
|  |  |  |
| Highest level of education completed |  |
|  | Less than a college degree | 32% |
|  | 2-year degree or post-HS certification |  10% |
|  | 4-year degree | 35% |
|  | Graduate degree | 24% |

Some differences are associated with age; for example:

* more older respondents than expected are married
* more younger respondents than expected have not completed college

# Sample Characteristics

92% report **at least one condition or disability that commonly co-occurs with autism** • Anxiety (77%)

* Depression (64%)
* Auditory processing disorder or delay (38%)
* Sleep disorder/disturbance (37%)
* GI issues (35%)
* ADD/ADHD (35%)

35% report **at least one other disability or condition** not commonly associated with autism

# Employment History

* 93% of respondents had had **at least one paid job**
* 53% had **gone 6 months or more without employment** (when not in school) at least once since first began working
* 60% of those not currently employed had not had a job for over a year
* 33% had **either never held a job for a year or more or only had one** job which they held for a year or more

# Employment Status

**Underemployment:** working

**CURRENT EMPLOYMENT STATUS** fewer hours than desired, doing **No response** work that does not use skills or

**8%**

education, or being paid less than

 **28%** others doing similar work

**Adequately**

**employed**

**Underemployed**

**30**

**%**

**Not employed**

**34**

**%**

**Of those who were currently employed:**

51% full time (35+ hours per

week)

30% part time (34 hours or less

per week) 14% self-employed

12% more than one job

# Disclosure & Accommodations

Of people who have applied to a job in the time that they have known they are autistic:

* 37% **never disclose** their autism **when they are applying** to or interviewing for jobs
* 22% **think disclosing** that they are autistic **makes it harder to get jobs**

Of people who knew they were autistic when they last applied to a job:

* 16% **needed accommodations** for an interview, **but did not request them**
* 25% **did not request accommodations** because they were **not sure if they needed them**

# Perceived Barriers

Top selections for **things that make it hard to *get or keep* a job**:

* Social difficulties (80%)
* Communication difficulties (70%)
* Sensory issues (60%)
* Difficulty with planning, organization, or other executive function challenges (57%)
* Feeling isolated from coworkers (55%)

However, only 48% endorsed being autistic as something that made it hard for them to get or keep a job

# Perceived Barriers are Influenced by Identity

Respondents who identify as POC, bi-, or multi-racial indicated that racial prejudice was a barrier to employment

* 32% for POC overall

Compared to 7% overall

* 50% for Black respondents

Respondents who identify as transgender indicated that prejudice towards LGBTQ+ people was a barrier to employment

* 52% for transgender respondents Compared to 10% for

respondents who do not identify as transgender

# Perceived Barriers

Top selections for **things that *created challenges* for people *in a workplace setting***:

* Difficulty understanding unspoken social expectations (81%)
* Anxiety or depression (79%)
* Difficulty understanding indirect requests or communication (77%)
* Sensory issues due to the physical environment (77%)
* Feeling misunderstood (74%)

# Priorities When Looking for Employment

Top selections for **things that were important to people when *looking for or choosing* a job**:

* Feeling supported by manager(s) or supervisor(s) (87%)
* Value and meaning of the work (84%)
* Distance from home/length of commute (82%)
* Company/organization morals or ethics (77%)
* Work/life balance (77%)

Least common selections:

* Company/organization size (24%)
* Having a mentor or coach at the job (36%)
* Company/organization has publicly supported neurodiversity (36%)

# Priorities for Feeling Satisfied with Employment

Top selections for **things that were important to people to *feel satisfied with* a job**:

* Feeling valued as an employee (90%)
* Work/life balance (82%)
* Supportive manager (80%)
* Opportunities to pursue areas of own interest (74%)
* Getting to solve problems (74%)

Least common selections:

* Public recognition or awards (13%)
* Opportunities to advance within the company/organization or earn promotions (39%)
* A set schedule (43%)

# Proposed Improvements

Top selections for **things that would *improve autism employment programs***:

* Work with autistic-led and self-advocacy groups (81%)
* Involve more autistic people in designing programs (80%)
* Hire autistic people to provide training to employers (77%)
* Survey autistic people about what supports and accommodations they need (77%)
* Hire for a wider range of jobs (75%)

# Key Takeaways

* Employment status alone does not always reflect people’s experiences or struggles
* Job match matters
* Interests, skills, values, etc.
* Need for employer training
* Feeling supported by manager(s) important for satisfaction, resolving challenges/barriers
* Autistic people are complicated, just like all people
* Lots of variety in needs, experiences, and preferences

What Can Policymakers and Agency Leaders Do?

* Consider the whole person
* Identity, context, co-occurring conditions, etc.
* Establish partnerships/collaboration with other services
* Think about autistic perspectives
* Autistic people want to feel valued and included
* Recognize and respect agency, autonomy
* Ensure employers/managers have support *they* need to be supportive
* Lots of potential to influence job satisfaction
* Be thoughtful about how outcomes are defined
* What else can/should be evaluated beyond employment status?

# Three Questions to Discuss

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