Improving Employment Outcomes for Autistic Job Seekers

Leslie Shaw, Ph.D. (leslie.shaw@cornell.edu)
Katie Brendli Brown, Ph.D. (kb726@cornell.edu)
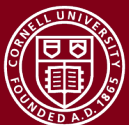Susanne M. Bruyere, Ph.D., CRC (smb23@cornell.edu)
Yang-Tan Institute on Disability and Employment (YTI)
Micah N. Haskins, M.S. (mnh39@cornell.edu) CJI/YTI
Cornell University ILR School

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ILR School

K. Lisa Yang and Hock E. Tan
Institute on Employment and Disability

Effective Practices and Predictors for Autistic Transition-Aged Youth

Katie Brendli Brown, Ph.D. and Leslie Shaw, Ph.D.

Yang-Tan Institute, School of Industrial and Labor Relations

Cornell University

Pause

Identity v. Person-First

(e.g., Autistic v. Person with Autism)

Autism

is a neurodevelopmental disability characterized by "persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts" and "the presence of restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities"

(American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2022, pg. 56-57).

No two Autistic people are the same.

Our Work

Autism Transition to Adulthood Initiative (ATTAIN): A multi-year research project led by researchers at Cornell University's Yang-Tan Institute on Employment and Disability.

PI: Leslie Shaw, PhD

Purpose of ATTAIN: To help improve post-school outcomes for Autistic young adults through:

a) identifying predictors of obtaining a job, pursuing college/university, or living independently after high school

b) Training and coaching pre-service teachers on the implementation of a transition practice to determine its effectiveness with Autistic youth

ATTAIN Homepage

Current Outcomes for Autistic Adults

- About 42%, in their early 20s, have never held paid employment (Roux et al., 2015).

- Experience high rates of unemployment and underemployment (Hendricks & Wehman, 2009; Lipscomb et al., 2017; Ohl et al., 2017; Shattuck et al., 2012).

- Particularly at high risk of not participating in employment the first few years after high school exit (Shattuck et al., 2012; Wong et al., 2020).

Predictors

- In-school experiences correlated with improved post-school outcomes (Test et al., 2009; Mazzotti et al., 2020)

- 23 predictors of employment, postsecondary education/training, and/or independent living for youth with disabilities

  - 21 associated with post-school employment for youth with disabilities (Mazzotti et al., 2020)

23 Predictors for Students with Disabilities

Policy		Career Development	
Inclusion in General Education		Career Awareness	
Exit Exam Req./ HS Diploma Status		Career Technical Education	
Program of Study		Occupational Courses	
Student Skills		Paid Employment/Work Experience	
Community Experiences		Work Study	
Decision-Making		**Collaborative Systems**	
Goal Setting		Interagency Collaboration	
Psychological Empowerment		Parent Expectations	
Self-Advocacy/Self-Determination		Parental Involvement	
Self-Care/Independent Living		Student Support	
Self-Realization		Transition Program	
Social Skills			
Technology Skills			
Travel Skills			

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(e.g., Haber et al., 2016; Mazzotti et al., 2016; Mazzotti et al., 2021; Test et al., 2009)

Our Timeline for Data Collection and Analysis

Year	Project Task	Description
1	Analysis of Existing PROMISE Data	Analyzed existing data from New York State PROMISE (Promoting the Readiness of Minors in Supplemental Security Income), a federally sponsored research initiative focused on removing obstacles to adult success for youth who receive Supplemental Security Income.
2	PROMISE Follow-Up Survey	Create and administer a new survey for young adults who participated in PROMISE to better understand what predictors they experienced in high school and their outcomes now.
3	Longitudinal Nationally-Representative Survey	Create and administer a nationally-representative longitudinal survey to better understand predictors of different outcomes for youth with autism.

ATTAIN Predictor Table

Predictor	Employment	Education	Ind. Living
Career Awareness	X	X	
Career Technical Education	X	X	
Community Experiences	X	X	
Exit Exam Requirements/ High School Diploma Status			
Goal-Setting	X	X	X
Inclusion in General Education	X	X	
Interagency Collaboration	X	X	
Occupational Courses	X		X
Paid Employment/ Work Experience	X	X	
Parent Expectations	X	X	X
Parental Involvement	X	X	
Program of Study			
Psychological empowerment		X	X
Self-Care/ Independent Living	X	X	
Self-determination/Self-advocacy	X	X	
Self-realization	X		
Social Skills	X	X	X
Student Support	X	X	
Technology Skills	X	X	
Transition Program	X	X	
Travel Skills	X		X
Work Study	X		
Youth Autonomy/Decision-Making	X	X	
Total # of Predictors	~~12~~ 20	~~10~~ 17	~~1~~ 6

Postsecondary Experiences and Employment for People with Autism

Category and Predictor	Part-time Odds	p	Full-time Odds	p
Postsecondary Attendance				
Industry Certificate	3.13	.039	6.59	.018
Vocational/Technical School	6.24	.002	-	-
2-yr Community College	2.83	.024	6.17	.002
4-yr College/University	2.74	.040	9.36	< .001
Postsecondary Completion				
Industry Certificate	4.55	.005	-	-
Vocational/Technical School	9.62	.001	13.44	.003
2-yr Community College	5.09	.003	8.12	.029
4-yr College/University	-	-	-	-

Predictors can help us determine effective practices for different areas of need.

Effective Practices

"Provide educators with teaching methods shown to be successful at enhancing specific skills… for specific populations… in specific contexts (Cook et al., 2009; Odom et al., 2005; Rowe et al., 2022), and which can support the development and acquisition of students' IEP [individualized education program] goals and objectives." (Switzer & Brendli Brown, accepted)

Effective Practices: 64

Effective Practices Operational Definitions

Examples:

- **FEAT Curriculum** [Promising for students with autism, intellectual disability (ID), specific learning disability (SLD, multiple disabilities (MD), etc.] (Francis et al., 2013).

- **Person Centered Planning** [Research-based for students with autism] (Rowe et al., 2021).

- **Post-School Achievement Through Higher Learning Skills (PATHS) Curriculum** [Promising for students with autism, SLD, MD] (Lindstrom et al., 2013).

- **Project SEARCH** [Evidence-based for students with autism, visual impairment, Deaf/hard of hearing, emotional behavioral disturbance (EBD), ID, SLD, MD, other health impairment, etc.] (Rowe et al., 2021; Wehman et al., 2014, 2017).

- **Working at Gaining Employment Skills (WAGES) Curriculum** [Research-based for students with autism, SLD, EBD, etc.] (Murray & Doren, 2013; Rowe et al., 2021).

What's the difference?

Predictors	Practices
• Identify different experiences that impact the attainment of different outcomes after high school • Systems-level • Identified through correlational research	• Help students learn specific skills, many related to transition • Student-level • Identified through experimental/intervention research

What's the difference? (Example)

Predictors	Practices
• Self-determination/self-advocacy • Goal setting • Youth autonomy/decision-making • Self-realization • Psychological empowerment	• Self-Determination Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI)

Important Points for Policy Makers

- Districts are urged to embed transition predictors as components of their secondary transition programs.

- Knowledge of predictors can help:

    a. inform and strengthen transition programs and practices in high school,

    b. develop and evaluate transition programs at various levels (including school and district levels), and

    c. guide individualized education program (IEP) team members in creating transition activities in support of the acquisition of students' post-school goals.

ATTAIN Policy Brief (page 1)

Policy Brief

BACKGROUND: The time frame when a young adult exits high school and enters emerging adulthood is often considered one of the most difficult transitions a person can experience. In order to help young adults with this transition, known as the postsecondary transition, effective transition planning and preparation beginning in middle school and continuing during high school is crucial. For students with disabilities, this planning and preparation should include supports tailored to their individual needs and engagement in meaningful activities that helps lead them to postsecondary activities of their choosing. For many young adults with autism, the postsecondary transition is a particular challenge.

Autism is a complex developmental disability that can cause significant social, communication, and behavioral challenges.

CURRENT ISSUES:

- People with autism often experience prejudice, discrimination, & other forms of societal stigma.

- Myths and misconceptions about their job performance, productivity, and safety can lead to employers' resistance to hire autistic applicants. (Scott et al., 2017; Solomon, 2020; Unger et al., 2002)

- Some people with autism may exhibit certain behaviors (like avoiding eye contact or repetitive movements) that others may interpret as problematic and can affect securing a job or achieving other postsecondary goals.

POSTSECONDARY OUTCOME FACTS:

- Fewer than 60% of young adults, ages 21-25, with autism work in paid employment, outside the house hold—their paid employment is often part-time and at low wages. (Roux et al., 2015)

- Only 36% of high school graduates with autism have attended any form of postsecondary education (such as college or university) before their early 20s compared to more than 60 percent of all high school graduates. (Roux et al., 2015)

- People with autism are less likely to live on their own leaving high school compared to people with learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, or emotional disturbances. (Anderson et al., 2013)

RESEARCH-BASED RECOMMENDATIONS:

The overwhelmingly lower postsecondary outcomes experienced by people with autism compared to all high school graduates has led researchers to take greater interest in understanding predictors of positive postsecondary outcomes:

Predictors: Experiences in high school that are empirically linked to different post-school outcomes, like getting a job, enrolling in college/university, or living on one's own or with roommates after high school.

ATTAIN Policy Brief (page 2)

Evidence from Cornell University's Project ATTAIN (Autism Transition to Adulthood Initiative) Year 1 findings, along with prior predictor research, empirically document that the majority of known predictors of successful transition for youth with disabilities hold true for youth with autism, including:

Predictors	Outcome Areas		
	Employment	Postsecondary Education	Independent Living
Career Awareness	X	X	
Career Technical Education	X		
Goal Setting		X	
Inclusion in General Education		X	
Interagency Collaboration	X		
Paid Employment/ Work Experience	X		
Parent Expectations	X	X*	
Psychological empowerment		X*	
Self-Care/ Independent Living	X	X*	
Self-determination/Self-advocacy	X	X	
Social Skills	X	X	
Transition Program	X	X*	
Travel Skills	X		
Work Study	X		
Youth Autonomy/Decision-Making	X	X	

Note: *An asterisk indicates the entries that apply to the PROMISE data used in Project ATTAIN*

A Call to Action

Districts are urged to embed transition predictors as components of their secondary transition programs. Knowledge of predictors can help a) inform and strengthen transition programs and practices in high school, b) develop and evaluate transition programs at various levels (including school and district levels), and c) guide individualized education program (IEP) team members in creating transition activities in support of the acquisition of students' post-school goals. For more information, access the following three resources:

National Technical Assistance Center on Transition: Predictor Implementation School/District Self-Assessment Instructions and Action Planning Guide

National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center: Predictor Implementation School/District Self-Assessment (PISA)

Complementary tools to use alongside the PISA can be found on Project ATTAIN's website

Districts are urged to engage in research to evaluate their transition programs to determine the extent to which these programs incorporate predictors, how they incorporate predictors to benefit the individual needs of each autistic student, and to learn whether newly created programs/changes to existing programs based on predictor research improves outcomes for young adults with autism.

Project ATTAIN is a multi-year research initiative, designed to obtain a greater understanding of transition predictors of positive post-school outcomes for youth with autism. Year 1 of ATTAIN used existing data from New York State (NYS) PROMISE (Promoting the Readiness of Minors in Supplemental Security Income). NYS PROMISE was one of six model demonstration projects funded by the United States Department of Education dedicated to encouraging positive post-school outcomes for youth and their families receiving SSI.

Tips for Employers

- Partner with schools to offer work-based learning and training opportunities at your business/organization

- Conduct guest lectures or be involved in job/career fairs at schools

Common good practices for workplace inclusion that can contribute to success for neurodivergent youth:

- partnering with an organization that specializes in disability services,

- supporting or initiating a skills training program;

- establishing recruitment and job placements services; and

- developing a policy of inclusion and non-discrimination (International Labor Organization [ILO], 2014).

Additional Resources

ATTAIN:
https://autismtransitiontoadulthood.org/

NTACT:C (National Technical Assistance Center on Transition: The Collaborative): https://transitionta.org/

Online Sites/Landing Pages

- Youth.gov

- Youth Engaged 4 Change

- CAPE-Youth

- YouthRules!

- Safe Work for Young Workers

- Apprenticeship.gov

Online Tools

- GetMyFuture

- My Next Move

- O*NET

National Programs in Your Area

- YouthBuild

- Job Corps

Local Programs

- Your local WIOA Youth Formula Program

Future Work of ATTAIN

- *Self-Determination Learning Model of Instruction* (SDLMI) pilot with 2 teachers entering the workforce (i.e., pre-service teachers)

  - **Analyzing findings: Spring – Summer, 2025**

- Disseminating findings

  - High school completion and employment

  - Postsecondary attendance and completion

  - Independent living experiences

- Further analysis of national survey data

  - Compare parent to youth responses on predictors of postschool success when those from same household responded to the survey (98 dyads)

  - Examine parent/caregiver data (516 respondents)

Thank You For Your Time!

If you have any questions, please contact Dr. Katie Brendli Brown at kb726@cornell.edu

Please visit our social media accounts for updates on our research!

- **Twitter**: https://twitter.com/AutismATTAIN

- **Facebook**: ATTAIN-Autism Transition to Adulthood Initiative

ATTAIN Homepage

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Presentation Overview

- Why is the interview process an important area for focus?

- Focus of the research

- Findings—ways to improve the interview experience of neurodiverse job candidates

    - The role of the job applicant

    - The role of community employment service providers and career counselors

    - The role of the employer

- Considerations in supporting neurodivergent workers across the employment process

- Resources for future reference

Why a Focus on Autistic Jobseekers?

Autistic individuals have:

- Higher levels of employment and underemployment than both people without disabilities and people with other types of disabilities

- Disparities in employment, even for Autistic individuals who have above-average education and qualifications to the rest of the workforce

- Difficulty with employment interviews, which remain the most widely used hiring selection methods

(Saleh, et. al., 2022)

Why a Focus on the Interview Process?

Traditional employment process and interviewing methods often present barriers to Autistic individuals

- **Autistic individuals** have not necessarily been well-equipped to navigate this process

- Many **service providers** have not known how to mitigate the issues; cost- and time efficient and effective measures are needed

- **Employers** have historically not been aware of these barriers and need assistance in changing protocols

Research Purpose

- Understand the lived experience of Autistic individuals in interviews

- Explore he perception of employers, community employment service providers, and educational institution representatives in interviewing or interacting with Autistic individuals in the interview process and socially in the workplace

Use of Participatory Research

- Solicited 8 community researchers to inform the study

- Identified representatives from the target populations of informants

  o (4) Autistic students or recent graduates pursuing STEM careers who have had job interview experience

  o (2) Career counselors in higher education supporting these individuals

  o (2) Employer representatives involved in the business job interview process who had experience with Autistic individuals pursuing STEM positions

- Essential role in each step of the research planning, participant recruitment, research methodology, and data collection processes

Participant Characteristics

- <u>Autistic individuals</u>—working age; interview experience; those that have customer-facing jobs

- <u>Employers</u>—Autism at Work hiring programs; experience interviewing Autistic individuals; experience in supervising those in customer-facing positions

- <u>Educational institutions</u>—career counselors; support job interviewing skills

- <u>Community organizations</u>—employment organizations serving Autistic individuals, coaching interviewing and customer service skills

Methodology

- Semi-structured individual and focus group interviews
  - Preliminary field testing
  - 23 individuals participated in the initial study; 30+ in Phase II
  - Current research targeting an additional 16-20 Autistic job seekers in STEM careers with interview experience

- Content analysis to capture key themes on data to date
  - Triangulation and inter-rater reliability to establish agreement

- Identified barriers to and facilitators of successfully navigating the interview process to obtain employment

Barriers in Job Interview Process and Interview Environment

- Types of questions asked:
  - Open-ended, hypothetical, personality profiles
- Interview structure:
  - Large groups, multiple sequential interviews, long day(s)
- Environment:
  - Noisy, overstimulating
- Recruiters, interviewers, and hiring managers rarely aware of affirmative hiring and trained to address interaction needs

Chang, H-Y, Saleh, M., Bruyere, S., & Vogus, T. (2023). Making the employment interview work for a neurodiverse workforce: Perspectives of individuals on the Autism Spectrum, employers, and service providers. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 59, 107-122. DOI:10.3233/JVR-230031

Barriers for Autistic Job Seekers

- Little prior experience in job interviews

- Perhaps little prior work experience

- Lack of familiarity with workplace setting

- Challenged in addressing what was perceived to be ambiguous questions (e.g., What would you do if …?)

- Difficulty explaining how skills address job requirements

- Perhaps awkward with expected social interaction

- Anxiety due to "camouflaging" or "faking" socially-appropriate responses

Chang, H-Y, Saleh, M., Bruyere, S., & Vogus, T. (2023). Making the employment interview work for a neurodiverse workforce: Perspectives of individuals on the Autism Spectrum, employers, and service providers. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 59, 107-122. DOI:10.3233/JVR-230031

How Applicants can Better Prepare

- Pre-interview preparation

- Preparation on how to present skills in interview process

- Preparation in how to demonstrate skills or build a portfolio of examples of demonstrated expertise

- Prepare for select social interface expectations

- Build self-advocacy skills

Chang, H-Y, Saleh, M., Bruyere, S., & Vogus, T. (2023). Making the employment interview work for a neurodiverse workforce: Perspectives of individuals on the Autism Spectrum, employers, and service providers. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 59, 107-122. DOI:10.3233/JVR-230031

How Community Service Providers can Better Assist

- Work with employers/recruiters to build their knowledge of neurodiversity and explore willingness to alter the traditional interview process

- Get access to typical questions being asked to help candidates prepare

- Explore portfolio and demonstrated skills presentations with applicants (and employers)

- Encourage internships and work experience

- Support employees and supervisors, once hiring occurs

Chang, H-Y, Saleh, M., Bruyere, S., & Vogus, T. (2023). Making the employment interview work for a neurodiverse workforce: Perspectives of individuals on the Autism Spectrum, employers, and service providers. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 59, 107-122. DOI:10.3233/JVR-230031
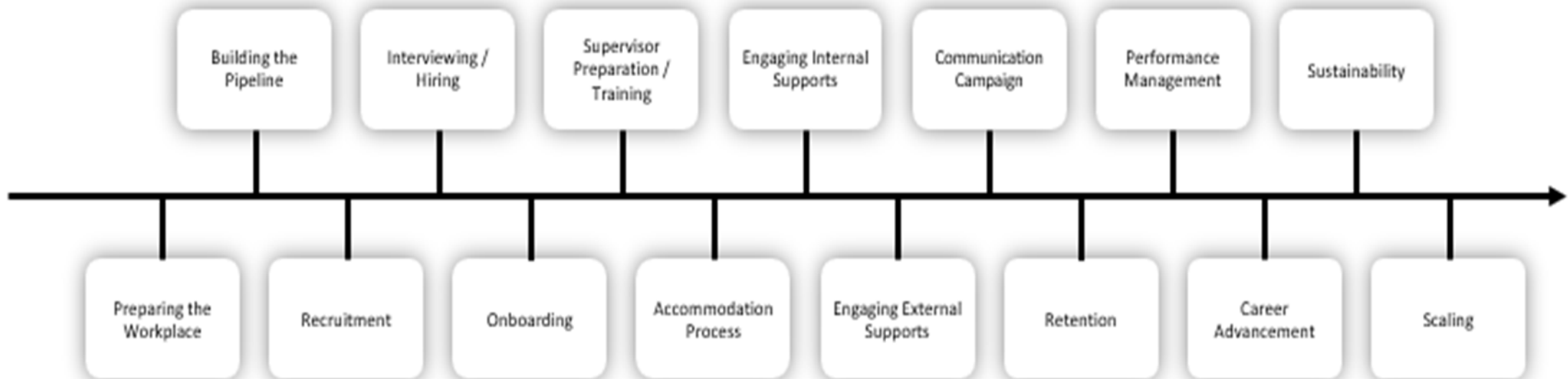
How Employers can Assist (1)

Examples of possible interview changes included:

- Providing interview questions to interviewee in advance

- Introduce applicants to the work environment prior to starting the interview as an "ice breaker"

- Consider replacing interview panels with shorter, 1:1 or 2:1 interview settings

- Avoid "rapid-fire" questioning strategies

- Eliminate "open-ended" and "vague" interview questions

- Allow opportunities to show technical skills by solving a specific, work-relevant problem

How Employers can Assist (2)

Employer strategies for more inclusive practice

- Autism-awareness and sensitivity training for HR and hiring professionals prior to interviews

- Modifying or replacing existing interview protocols

- Develop targeted internships for potential applicants

- Provide mentorship and career coaching

- Reach into local area secondary and post-secondary settings to encourage early career exploration

Chang, H-Y, Saleh, M., Bruyere, S., & Vogus, T. (2023). Making the employment interview work for a neurodiverse workforce: Perspectives of individuals on the Autism Spectrum, employers, and service providers. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 59, 107-122. DOI:10.3233/JVR-230031

Designing for Neurodiversity Across the Employment Process

Building the Pipeline · Interviewing / Hiring · Supervisor Preparation / Training · Engaging Internal Supports · Communication Campaign · Performance Management · Sustainability

Preparing the Workplace · Recruitment · Onboarding · Accommodation Process · Engaging External Supports · Retention · Career Advancement · Scaling

Support Considerations Across the Employment Process

- Readying the workplace

- Recruitment, interviewing, hiring, orientation, training

- Supervisor role, preparation, and support

- Retention, career development, progression

- Workplace neurodiversity and inclusion

- Use of external community resources

- Use of internal organizational resources

- Internal and external communication

- Sustainability and scalability decisions

Bruyere, S. Yang-Tan Institute on Employment and Disability, Cornell University, 2025

Disability at Work and Neurodiversity at Work eCornell Courses

Disability at Work provides a broad overview of the role HR professionals play in addressing this issue by maximizing fair disability workplace policies and practices and minimizing disability discrimination across the employment process. The implications for effective HR policies and practices in recruitment and hiring, career development and retention, accessibility and accommodation, compensation and benefits, and metrics and analytics will be covered across the course modules.

Neurodiversity at Work provides an overview of emerging Neurodiversity at Work employment programs and outlines the implications for HR policies and practices. Course topics include background information about autism and neurodiversity; models of effective recruitment, screening, and onboarding; supervisor training and support; best practices for career progression, advancement, and retention; and strategies for building a broad array of internal and external support systems.

https://ecornell.cornell.edu/custom/yti/

Neurodiversity Related Resources (1)

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Neurodiversity Related Resources (2)

DXC Technology Dandelion Program Online Information at Cornell University eCommons, available from https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/72826.

Neurodiversity in the Workplace Tool Kit. Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion. Available from https://askearn.org/page/neurodiversity-in-the-workplace.

Neurodiversity@Work Employer Roundtable, Disability:IN. Available from https://askearn.org/page/neurodiversity-work-employer-roundtable

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Acknowledgements

Activity: Ask it Basket

When I think about improving employment outcomes for Autistic job seekers, one question or concern I have is…