



Technical Brief #8

Focus group findings from vocational rehabilitation (VR) staff and adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD): Improving VR counseling services for adults with ASD

Overview

The Knowledge Translation for Employment Research (KTER) Center (<http://www.kter.org>) at American Institutes for Research (AIR) is funded to test, in vocational rehabilitation (VR) agency settings, a knowledge broker model in which individuals are positioned to bridge the worlds of research and practice (Long, Cunningham and Braithwaite, 2013). As part of preparing the VR knowledge brokers, who will be known to the agency staff as “research liaisons,” the KTER Center will recruit and train VR supervisors on specific areas of research, one of which is assisting adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in identifying and maintaining employment.

To guide content development for the upcoming training, the KTER Center engages in several forms of outreach to VR stakeholders. The Center works closely with members of its [Technical Working Group \(TWG\)](#), consults regularly with its partners at the [Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation \(CSAVR\)](#), and presents at conferences VR staff attend. As part of this set of activities designed to identify informational needs, KTER conducted focus groups with individuals receiving vocational rehabilitation (VR) services and counselors in State VR agencies.

From October to December 2016, researchers from KTER conducted two telephone focus groups, one with five VR counselors and a second focus group with five adults with ASD. Four of the adults with ASD participated on the telephone. One adult wrote responses to the questions asked during the focus group. Researchers recruited adults with ASD who had received VR services. However, none of them had ever worked with any of the VR counselors in the focus group. To take part in the focus group, VR staff had to have worked for a State VR agency and provided counseling services to adults with ASD. To garner interest, KTER publicized the focus group among a group of 30 VR counselors with expertise in ASD who had been assembled for a previous project from AIR, [Vocational Rehabilitation Service Models for Individuals with Autism](#).

The focus group of adults with ASD gathered data on the challenges they and other people with ASD have when finding and holding jobs, what services VR counselors can provide, and what training VR counselors and employers need. The focus group of VR counselors addressed the services, training, and resources that could enhance the services that the counselors provide to adults with ASD. The facilitator of each focus group recorded the audio of the session. The audio was transcribed to text. Two members of the research team analyzed the content and organized the data into themes (outlined below). Project leaders from KTER and members of [KTER's Technical Working Group](#) reviewed and finalized the analyses.

Major Themes Identified by Adults With **ASD**

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), ASD is a term that encompasses a group of developmental disorders. People with ASD often find it difficult to communicate, interact, and engage socially with others. They also tend to have narrow interests and/or repetitive behaviors. Symptoms emerge within the first 2 years of life and are ongoing. Sensory sensitivities are common, and symptoms and levels of severity vary widely (National Rehabilitation Information Center, 2014; NIMH, 2016).

Desire to be treated as an individual Given the great variation in how ASD is experienced, the prevailing theme of this focus group was the need to understand that people with ASD have unique interests, goals, and capabilities, *“the sensory differences between autistic people is like asking somebody what their favorite color is. It’s going to be different for each person. And a different level of each sensory issue.”* For example, the functional limitations associated with atypical sensory reception vary from person to person. This poses implications specific to each workplace setting. Even odors can lead to overstimulation, as one adult described: *“[It was] all I could do not to scream in agony ... Because of the sensory overload, the smells, and so on, it was torture.”* Talking with employers about how to maximize the productivity of employees with ASD has to be done on a case-by-case basis, because the way having ASD will affect performance will be unique to each job site.

Vocational aspirations extend beyond technologically oriented occupations. Adults with ASD reported feeling stereotyped into specific roles when VR counselors attempted to place them in jobs. According to many of the adults in this focus group, VR counselors generally believe that people with ASD prefer computer jobs. This limited view underserves many people with ASD. One adult expressed concern about this: *“They said because I was autistic, I had to work with numbers or computers. I wanted to work with people.”*

Have patience with the vocational process. Adults with ASD in this focus group knew other adults with ASD whose VR counselors appeared to have felt pressured to fill a position so they could claim a success, rather than target employment that was a good fit and would last beyond 90 days. Some barriers specific to ASD—such as challenges with communication, filling out applications, and preparing for interviews—may get in the way of quickly landing a job. Increased understanding of these difficulties could help VR counselors support individuals with ASD as they manage common frustrations associated with finding work.

Educate employers about behaviors. Adults with ASD in this focus group reported success when their bosses and coworkers understood the idiosyncrasies with how ASD manifests. The adults advocated that VR counselors should communicate with potential employers the strengths and the weaknesses of a person with ASD. Certain personal traits may be an asset in the right workplace. They also recommended that Human Resources departments contact organizations or programs, such as the Job Accommodation Network (<https://askjan.org>), that can provide resources and support for accommodating people with ASD or other disabilities.

Request for continued support once a job is obtained. Without using the term “supported employment” (Wehman et al., 2016, Rehabilitation Act Amendments, 1992), adults with ASD in this

focus group requested such an approach. They indicated that it would be helpful to have an advocate, counselor, or an ASD specialist who could advise employers whenever an issue arises. A person in such a role could explain personal expressions of ASD (such as different kinds of self-stimulation) and educate employers, protecting the person with ASD from feelings of embarrassment or being ostracized.

Adults also suggested it would be helpful to discuss with VR counselors how they should disclose their ASD status to the employer. Some believed they would be treated differently in some circumstances, but it could be beneficial at other times. Disclosure may justify the use of particular equipment. For instance, as one adult pointed out, a VR counselor might coach an adult with ASD *“how to explain to an employer what these headphones are for [or] ... why I need to wear them.... And ... find a way...for a co-worker to get my attention.”*

Employment can happen without VR assistance. Participants in this group reported that they identified and obtained employment independently, and most of them had more success finding jobs on their own rather than through VR services. Many of the job opportunities came through community centers or universities. The focus group participants may not represent the various levels of independence or capabilities among all people with ASD since their very willingness to participate in a group interview may suggest their communication skills are particularly strong. However, adults often felt that their VR counselors ignored or did not listen to them, or that the counselors did not find them employment that matched their interests or abilities. Adults with ASD perceived being stereotyped as having a specific set of abilities and not being able to achieve certain types of employment, such as customer service positions, or success in postsecondary education.

Major Themes Identified by VR Counselors

Customize strategies. VR counselors stressed the importance of a needs assessment in developing customized strategies. To design an engaging intervention, they used different processes and models to better understand the social environment and job context. For example, one VR counselor stated,

“When we get to that point of helping them identify a job goal, we’re able to leverage those things and do a good job of putting them in a job that fits with anything related to maybe environmental strategies, sensory challenges, social challenges, or specific strengths and interests.”

Building rapport is critical. In the context of job placement and assessment, VR counselors stressed the importance of building rapport and trust with the employer and other staff for the success of the employee within an organization. Counselors mentioned that candid conversations are essential when setting up the necessary supports, for example: *“What I think that they need to make sure is that the coworkers and the employers are educated about autism. And ... it does help if you educate the parents.”*

Understand a person’s interests, strengths, and weaknesses. VR counselors pointed out that understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the adults with ASD that they serve allows them to identify a job that is a good fit. Careful thought about the adult’s capacities and interests allows VR counselors to tailor job search and workplace strategies that are intrinsically motivating.

“A lot of times we try and focus on the strengths, just because that’s a more positive thing to do. But with folks with autism, the weaknesses are really what causes them a lot of times to lose a job. And if we can understand the employers, or our job developers can understand the employers that they’re trying to place these people with, and try and help them to get that good fit, I’ve seen some really great, successful outcomes.”

Consistent themes across participants in the focus groups. Across the groups, VR counselors consistently agreed with the concerns expressed by the adults with ASD who had received VR services, even when those concerns reflected somewhat negatively on the VR system. The VR counselors in these focus groups clearly understand the needs of adults with ASD, even if they may not always be able to fulfill them. VR counselors expressed that they do not always have time to implement what they know. This limitation may be related to constraints that agencies also face, where resources are stretched thin. Another possible reason for this apparent contradiction—where recipients of VR services perceive a deficit of awareness and knowledge where there may not be one—is that some of the VR counselors in the focus groups were known to the adults with ASD to be experts in VR service delivery, while the counselors who actually worked with the adults who participated in the focus groups may not have had such expertise. The KTER Center’s upcoming knowledge broker intervention, which seeks to position research liaisons in VR settings, aims to provide VR counselors with similarly knowledgeable mentors who can help to build skills that respond to the issues the adults with ASD highlighted.

References

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