

ESSENCE SUMMARY 14

Employment support for autistic adults: economic evidence

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BACKGROUND

Autistic adults may face challenges in accessing and maintaining employment. For example, they may have difficulties in understanding nuances in job advertisements and interviews, experience a lack of support before and during work and face employer discrimination. Despite these

challenges, 77% of unemployed autistic people want to work. However, when receiving assistance in seeking employment, most autistic individuals rely on employment programmes targeted to individuals with learning disabilities which may not be well suited to their needs.

KEY POINTS

- Employment support interventions provide individualised training and workplace support for autistic adults with the aim to enable autistic people to gain and maintain employment.
- Research shows that supported employment for autistic adults can be successful. However, the research is based on a small number of small-scale studies targeting a subgroup of autistic people.
- There is also a strong economic case for supported employment from both a health and social care perspective and a broader societal perspective, which includes productivity gains (based on employment support for the general population). In addition to being cost-effective, the intervention may also be cost-reducing.
- There is a need to examine whether the outcomes of supported employment for autistic adults from current studies can be replicated on a larger scale and to a wider subgroup of autistic people.
- The Lynx Resource Centre in Weston-super-Mare and EmployAbility in Surrey are two examples of successful implementation of employment support interventions for adults with autism. The former appears to be primarily funded by the local authority and the latter by Jobcentre Plus..

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CONTEXT

Obtaining and maintaining employment can be difficult for adults with autism. For example, 41% of autistic adults with average-range IQ aged 55 or over in the UK have been unemployed for more than 10 years (1). Additionally, among autistic people out of work, the majority do not believe or do not know if they will ever be employed (2). In terms of accessing employment, autistic individuals may have difficulties in understanding nuances in job advertisements and interviews, and may experience lack of support before landing a job. When autistic adults are in the workforce, they may experience additional challenges in maintaining employment, such as in travelling to work because of sensory overload, or lack of support in the workplace (3). Furthermore, discrimination against autistic adults may affect their chances of obtaining a job and keeping that job (4).

Despite these challenges, 77% of autistic people who are unemployed want to work (5).

Employment has a positive impact not only on an individual's income, but also and on their quality of life, cognitive functioning, and well-being (6).

Furthermore, autistic people can demonstrate particular strengths, such as intense focus and attention to detail, if they are in the right working environment (7, 8). Specifically, they may perform especially well in socially isolated or repetitive jobs (9). In fact, some high-profile companies have recognised the potential value of autistic employees and have launched recruitment campaigns specifically targeting autistic people (10). However, when receiving assistance in seeking employment, most autistic individuals rely on employment programmes targeted on individuals with comparable disabilities which may not be well suited to their needs (3).

WHAT IS EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT?

Employment support interventions refer to a range of programmes that aim to enable individuals with autism to obtain and maintain employment.

Traditional arrangements are usually training and placement programmes, which offer job training and supported employment options. Over the past couple of decades, there has been a growing interest in placement and training programmes that offer on-the-job training and support. Many of these interventions share these common features (11):

- consideration of the individual's strengths and interests when matching employers and employees

- vocational training involving structured techniques, such as behavioural therapies, natural support or simulation
- a job coach to provide individualised training and workplace support
- involvement of families, partners, carers, employers and colleagues to provide long term, comprehensive support and follow up to ensure job retention.

Despite the fact that 53% of individuals with autism in the UK would like access to such comprehensive employment support, only 10% of these individuals receive it (12).

IS EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT EFFECTIVE?

There is a small, but consistent, body of literature indicating that employment support programmes for individuals with autism are effective in helping them gain and retain competitive employment (13). The only UK study was a 2-year pilot investigation of the effects of a supported

employment scheme, called Prospects, on high-functioning, autistic young adults (14). Overall, two-thirds of young adults who used Prospects (n=19; 63.3% of 30) had found employment. The majority of those in employment had permanent contracts and were engaged in administrative,

technical or computing work. At the end of the study period, those using Prospects were significantly more likely to be employed than those getting usual services (63% compared to 25%). They also spent a greater proportion of time at work (27% compared to 12%) and obtained higher-level jobs than those the control group. When researchers examined the group in the follow-up period, 13 of the 19 adults from the Prospect group that found employment were still employed 7-8 years later. Furthermore, those that received employment support experienced a rise in salaries, contributed more in taxation and claimed fewer benefits (15).

Another study on employment support was a randomised controlled trial of Project SEARCH

with Autism Spectrum Disorder Supports (PS-ASD; referred to as intervention group), a 9-month, transition-to-work programme for young adults with autism that included employment support. The study compared participants in the intervention group (n=25) to participants who were provided with educational support (n=20). The study found that 88% of the participants in the intervention group acquired employment compared with only 6% of participants in the control group (16). A retrospective study of administrative records on PS-ASD showed that the PS-ASD group achieved higher wages and had better employment retention rates than a similar group of autistic adults who received supported employment only (17).

IS EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT COST-EFFECTIVE?

In 2012, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) published a clinical guideline providing evidence-based recommendations on employment support (18). Their systematic review identified only one study (19) as meeting the quality criteria to inform an economic evaluation (20) of the cost-effectiveness of employment support. Under the assumption that the benefits of employment for autistic people were the same as the benefits for the general population, the economic evaluation concluded that supported employment was cost-effective. The cost for each additional quality-adjusted life year (QALY) was

£5,600 (2005/06 prices), which is well below the threshold set by NICE for recommending treatments (£20,000 to £30,000 per quality-adjusted life year).

Further analysis as part of the National Autism Project looked beyond the health and social care perspective adopted by NICE. By taking additional account of the productivity gains from supported employment, including the types of jobs that people secured and carers' increased productivity, the intervention was found to be even more cost-effective. The analysis also showed that supported employment was also cost-reducing (21).

HOW IS EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT IMPLEMENTED?

The UK National Autistic Society provides guidelines for local authorities and local health bodies to make sure that care planning for autistic adults considers employment as a key outcome

(22). The downloadable guideline also provides examples of good practices in Weston-super-Mare and Surrey.

OTHER INFORMATION

The case study reported here was sourced from The Autism Dividend: The Report January 2017 (23).

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