

Invited Submission

Advancing vocational opportunities for adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Proceedings from the 1st Annual Canadian ASD Vocational Conference^{1,2}

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Abstract

Along with limited employment opportunities and vocational resources supporting adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), there is a corresponding lack of literature guiding best practices. Gaps in services appear to leave individuals with ASD isolated and inadequately equipped to find stable work. In an attempt to foster advancement, the first annual Canadian conference focusing on vocation and ASD was convened in Toronto, Canada on February 2-3, 2012. Presentations and panel discussions identified salient issues including challenges and innovative strategies. Speakers highlighted the benefits of greater vocational and post-secondary educational participation among adults with ASD, and called for proactive program and policy development in meeting these aims. This paper summarizes conference proceedings and builds upon an emerging base of promising practices and guidelines.

¹ We acknowledge with gratitude the insight of the following speakers at the vocational conference whose presentations are summarized in this manuscript: Dr. Ellen Badone, Dr. James Bebko, Robin Brennan, Dr. Heather Brown, Dr. Susan Bryson, Chris Dedde, Frank Gavin, Penny Gill, Jennifer Hope, Randy Lewis, Dr. Paul Malette, Melissa McNeil, Dr. Glenn Rampton, Thorkil Sonne, Margot Stothers and Dr. Lindy Zaretsky. Our sincerest thanks are conveyed to each of these presenters for their commitment and generosity in seeking to advance vocational opportunity in Autism Spectrum Disorder.

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Introduction

In February 2012, the first Canadian national conference focusing on vocation and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) was held in Toronto, Canada. A total of 260 stakeholders attended the conference representing all provinces across Canada as well as the United States and Europe. This paper outlines keynote presentations and panel discussions, with recommendations emerging from this meeting.

Background

Individuals with ASD as well as their families and service providers describe a lack of employment opportunities and insufficient support for persons with ASD. A general lack of evidence and models for vocational support limit understanding about how adults with ASD navigate these processes. Unemployment rates among persons with ASD remain unacceptably high, with employment rates ranging from reports of 10 to 50% (Autism Speaks, 2012; Hendricks, 2010; Levy & Perry, 2011; Shattuck, Narendorf, Cooper, Sterzing, Wagner, & Taylor, 2012). Shattuck and colleagues (2012) report that greater than half of sampled young people with ASD are not in paid employment or post-secondary education two years after high school. This number fortunately drops to 11% by four years after high school exit. However, young persons with ASD have significantly lower rates of employment and higher rates of “no participation” relative to peers with speech language impairment, learning disability and mental retardation (Shattuck et al., 2012).

Studies describe that on balance, individuals with ASD experience difficulty both finding and maintaining stable employment (Hendricks, 2010; Howlin, 2000; Howlin & Moss, 2012; Hurlbutt & Chalmers, 2004; Nicholas & Roberts, 2012; Shattuck et al., 2012). Findings are mixed but suggest that adults with ASD and a higher IQ generally achieve more favorable outcomes and/or employment relative to adults with ASD and an intellectual disability (Graetz, 2010; Howlin, & Moss, 2012; Levy & Perry, 2011; Seltzer, Shattuck, Abbeduto, & Breenberg, 2004).

Challenging vocational environments

The job setting may present multiple barriers for the individual with ASD such as non-conducive physical, social, and sensory environments, and insufficient supports (Richards, 2012; Van Wieren, Reid, & McMahon, 2008; Van Wieren, Armstrong, & McMahon, 2012; Kreiger, Kinebanian, Prodinger, & Heigl, 2012). For individuals with ASD in either educational or workplace settings, environmental contexts may impose

challenging impediments to productivity and functioning (Kreiger et al., 2012) such that these placements may not coincide with sensory needs, skills and/or interests (Taylor & Seltzer, 2011; Levy & Perry, 2011). Negative impacts on individual and family quality of life may result (Shogren & Plotner, 2012), which further potentially exacerbates labour market barriers.

Advancing understanding and action via knowledge translation: Development of a vocational conference

With initial funding from NeuroDevNet, a Canada Network Centre of Excellence, and subsequent funding from other donors², the conference was designed to engage individuals, families, service providers, advocates, researchers and trainees in dialogue related to vocational issues related to ASD in Canada. Specific aims of the conference were to (i) reflect on current practices including resources, challenges and opportunities for vocational development, (ii) consider priorities for capacity building, and (iii) identify emerging components of a proactive vocational ASD strategy.

Components of the Conference

To achieve conference aims, presentations focused on challenges, existing innovative services, and potential paradigms for vocational opportunity and success. Vocational programs and their outcomes were reported along with critical deficiencies in practice and policy as well as potential strategies in moving forward. Thanks to a strong cadre of presenters including regional, national and international leaders in vocational innovation in ASD, evidence-informed dialogue was advanced in identifying vocational needs, resources and priorities. Keynote speakers were Dr. Susan Bryson of Dalhousie University, Canada; Thorkil Sonne of Specialisterne (Specialist People), Denmark; and Randy Lewis of Walgreens, United States. Additional panelists included a range of distinguished individuals working in this area and/or directly experiencing vocational issues related to ASD.

This paper summarizes each presentation, organized as a series of case studies that identify ASD-related issues and innovation. These are arranged according to several overarching themes: (A) challenges in vocation and ASD, (B) means by which individuals or organizations mediate challenges, and (C) issues and promising solutions related to post-secondary education for young adults with ASD. We conclude the paper with discussion about potential pathways for advancing vocational opportunity for adults with ASD.

A. The Challenges

Supporting Vocational Opportunities: Dr. Susan Bryson

Dr. Bryson focused on current areas of vocational marginalization of the ASD population. She introduced her topic by recounting an anecdote early in her career in which a young boy with ASD was participating in a research project. The child was having a difficult time engaging in the tasks assigned to him. After a research assistant failed to draw him into the project, Dr. Bryson asked for his assistance and observed that once he was asked to contribute and help within clearly specified boundaries, he was able to complete the required tasks without problem. Through this example, Dr. Bryson emphasized the importance of being needed and engaged and, to that end, finding ways to nurture meaningful involvement in vocational activity. This often requires accommodation and support in addressing communication, language and social awareness/reciprocity difficulties commonly experienced by persons with ASD.

In promoting such vocational goals in this context, Dr. Bryson emphasized that ASD often heightens certain cognitive and personality strengths. Persons with ASD sometimes have tremendous attention to detail, excellent pattern detection skills, and superior visual search skills, yet they also face many challenges in the job market. Negative attitudes toward disability may cause fear about disclosing one's condition, as exemplified by a man with ASD who was interviewed for numerous jobs without receiving a single employment offer. Additionally, after finding a job, many adults with ASD have difficulty retaining that job, often not due to the demands of the work itself but rather the social demands in the workplace and resulting anxiety.

Dr. Bryson asserted that all stakeholders, including government, business and community leaders, must take responsibility for working toward solutions. Need abounds for education regarding the benefits of hiring adults with ASD. Numerous anecdotal accounts identify situations in which persons with a disability elicit positive experiences and outcomes. To render work palatable and move to such widespread positive outcomes, Dr. Bryson emphasized the importance of accommodations and treating persons with ASD with dignity, respect and acceptance. Her vision for the future was described to encompass a more just society, and a greater number of equal opportunity employers. She anticipated that this would inspire positive attitudes regarding disability and difference, and likely reflect (and result in) increased appropriate, need-oriented supports. She concluded with a provocative statement that, "a nation is (and should be) judged by how it treats its more vulnerable citizens."

The Canadian Experience of Vocation in ASD: Drs. Wendy Roberts and David Nicholas

Drs. Roberts and Nicholas presented findings from a Canadian study examining service needs in the transition of persons with ASD to adulthood. Findings contrasted service *needs* versus those services *actually accessed*. In order to transition successfully into vocational roles, persons with ASD reportedly required intensive support largely not available within existing service models. Accordingly, models were found to be lacking, and participants sought continuity of adult services that: (i) build on the foundation of therapeutic services provided in childhood, (ii) are customized and tailored to an individual's unique strengths and needs, and (iii) reflect evidence-based approaches supporting transitional and vocational success for adults with ASD. Such seamlessness of services was reported to be integral to well-being in adulthood.

This project underscores the need to increase employment capacity in ASD, promote values of inclusivity, and build new models (e.g. private/public alliances) for vocational support. Such arrangements may be crucial in ensuring the breadth and integration of services for optimal vocational outcomes.

B. Proactively Meeting the Challenges

The Dream of One Million Jobs for Persons with Disability: Thorkil Sonne

Thorkil Sonne, founder of Specialisterne or Specialist People Foundation in Denmark, began his presentation by discussing his son who had been diagnosed with ASD in childhood. Mr. Sonne discovered that there were few resources for his son; hence, he eventually left his work and initiated Specialisterne. With the ultimate goal of enabling one million jobs worldwide for adults with ASD, Specialisterne employees include persons with ASD, ADHD, Tourette's syndrome and depression. Mr. Sonne introduced his presentation in metaphor, questioning whether a dandelion is a weed or a herb. From this analogic base, he called for a major cognitive shift in our society in terms of how people with ASD are viewed and treated. In relation to ASD, the modus operandi of Specialisterne is two-fold: (i) to change societal attitudes, practices, and opportunities, especially within the corporate community, and (ii) to provide a holistic set of living skills to adolescents and adults with disability. These processes of mutual adaptation are reported to highlight

the strengths of the person, often overlooked by employers, including perseverance through repetitive actions, pattern recognition, ability to identify deviances in data, and acute attention to detail.

Such strengths, contended Mr. Sonne, not only render persons with ASD ideal for niche labour markets, but also allow them to fulfill such roles more effectively than the general population while simultaneously providing meaningful vocational roles. In capitalizing on the uniqueness of persons with ASD, Mr. Sonne stated that he looks forward to a day when persons with disabilities experience greater equality through societal values of respect, accommodation and accessibility.

Making it Happen: The Walgreens' Experience: Randy Lewis

Randy Lewis, former vice president of Walgreens focused his presentation on a company initiative designed to provide employment opportunities to persons with ASD and other disabilities. Inspired by personal experience with ASD and by significant learning moments in other facets of his life, Mr. Lewis set out to shift Walgreens' employment model. In the 2007 opening of a new distribution center in Anderson, South Carolina, the company aimed to have a third of its workforce comprised of people with disabilities; furthering an aim of greater equality in the Walgreens' workforce. By 2011, Walgreens had reached a ratio of 1 in 10 disabled employees nation-wide, many of those with ASD.

This presentation challenged pervasive vocational discrimination that exists against people with ASD in the job market as well as its ideological foundation. There is an inadvertent disconnect between job descriptions and what it actually takes to perform the job well. Mr. Lewis argued that his company's new equal opportunity initiative contributes to dispelling myths which underestimate the capabilities of people with ASD and dismissively convey their employment only as acts of charity. Conversely, within this model, he identified an extremely capable and enthusiastic cadre of employees with ASD who have something valuable to offer. Mr. Lewis concluded that employers need to re-conceptualize their thinking in order to harness this potential.

Kerry's Place Autism Services, Aurora, Canada: Dr. Glenn Rampton

Dr. Rampton's discussion of the development of Kerry's Place Autism Services highlighted the importance of a holistic service model that is catered to the unique needs of individual program users. Such a comprehensive service model, Dr. Rampton contended, must contain: (i) adequate attention to the high prevalence of mental health issues in ASD

populations, (ii) vocational training immersed within a context of social and emotional development, and (iii) a cost-effective gradient of support that continuously strives to foster the highest possible quality of life and independence for each person, while providing a sufficient range and intensity of support, when and as required, to meet his or her evolving needs.

In outlining this model, Dr. Rampton advocated for effective problem prevention and early intervention strategies across an expansive continuum of support that pays closer attention to the unique and often overlooked needs of individuals with ASD. For instance, he argued that adults with higher functioning ASD are at risk for “falling through the cracks” due to their challenges often being difficult to recognize, which in turn, may result in their social and emotional needs not being sufficiently understood or addressed.

Good Foot Delivery, Toronto, Canada: Melissa McNeil

Melissa McNeil recounted the start-up of a delivery company designed with ingenuity and entrepreneurial spirit. This project, entitled ‘Good Foot Delivery’, was developed as an inclusive, healthy work environment where people with developmental disabilities can succeed. This model redresses what was described as a prevailing misunderstanding and devaluation of people with developmental disabilities. Importantly, the initiative exemplified a means by which these harmful misperceptions can be transformed. In this case, such a transformation resulted in the growth of Good Foot Delivery within the corporate community, serving to help redraw the conceptual boundaries surrounding people with disabilities, and their vocational and entrepreneurial place within the community.

Cooking with Autism, Hamilton, Canada: Penny Gill

Introducing her cooking class for people with ASD, Ms. Gill outlined essential features of a successful learning process for persons with ASD. Such features include: (i) one-on-one instruction in order to address fine and gross motor deficits as needed, (ii) attention to the sensitive and perfectionist disposition of some participants, and (iii) clearly laid out curricula and learning materials. This initiative demonstrates the importance of targeted instruction and nurturance relative to individual need and learning style, as well as focused curriculum planning for persons with ASD.

Autism Society of Newfoundland and Labrador, St. John's, Canada: Chris Dedde

The Autism Society of Newfoundland and Labrador has developed a vocational program that highlights and builds upon personal skills and interests of individuals with ASD. Individuals in this program are facilitated through a five-phase development plan where, with the close guidance of support counselors, they acquire necessary knowledge and skills to be successful in the workplace. Essential features of the program include: (i) access to vocational training in a fully functioning restaurant and a greenhouse, (ii) a closely guided year-long vocational search process, (iii) one-to-one job coach support during the initial phase of employment (typically two months), and (iv) a workplace mentor matched to support the individual with ASD in the work setting. Mr. Dedde emphasized the need for increased government funding for similar types of services as well as increased awareness and receptivity from the business community regarding the needs and capabilities of the ASD population.

McMaster University, Hamilton, Canada: Dr. Ellen Badone

Dr. Badone highlighted several pressing challenges facing persons with ASD, especially those who are higher functioning. Such challenges include: (i) a lack of understanding about adult-based ASD issues within the medical community, (ii) susceptibility of persons with higher functioning autism to mental illness, and (iii) scarcity of resources particularly available for higher functioning ASD populations to constructively deal with their unique challenges. Overall, these factors locate higher functioning ASD populations at substantial risk for poor quality of life outcomes.

In order to successfully meet these challenges, Dr. Badone proposed four essential components of an ideal service model: (i) a flexible educational dimension that emphasizes anxiety-reduction and social skills development (e.g., learning to read facial cues of neuro-typical adults), (ii) occupational therapy, (iii) life skills training geared towards independence within a strong continuum of support, and (iv) respect for the diversity and the uniqueness of individuals across the autism spectrum within highly malleable and targeted program frameworks.

Canadian Family Advisory Network, Centennial College, Toronto, Canada: Frank Gavin

Mr. Gavin similarly focused on the challenges faced by persons with high functioning autism, particularly pervasive anxiety. Such anxiety, manifested in complex interactions between the innate tendencies of many persons with ASD and the societal structures that individuals find to be rigid, opaque, and sometimes punitive, may be exacerbated in higher functioning populations where expectations and pressures to perform become extremely difficult to manage. Initial success on the job or in the classroom can lead to heightened expectations, greater stress, and often a longer fall if failure results. A significant part of these harmful pressures, argued Mr. Gavin, results from relatively recent and rapidly spreading stereotypes, including apparently “positive” ones that can be as reductive and ultimately as harmful as “negative” ones. In response, Mr. Gavin called for recognition and understanding of the many paradoxes inherent in the lives of people with high functioning autism and for a readiness and a willingness among teachers and employers in particular to anticipate and to work with and through the apparent contradictions that cannot be wished away if the members of this population are to achieve their full potential.

Common Ground, Toronto, Canada: Jennifer Hope

Common Ground is a social care cooperative which provides support to a range of social enterprise initiatives including three coffee shops, a cookery, and a toy sanitation company. It is operated by adults with developmental disabilities, with a primary function of vocational activity. It provides ‘coop’ members with support via training, fiscal management, communication and business connections, while simultaneously delivering training in business and life skills. Its social enterprise-based orientation promotes equality in participation and decision-making. Common Ground serves as a striking example of the ability of persons with ASD to achieve vocational growth while making important social and economic contributions to their community.

Geneva Centre for Autism, Toronto, Canada: Dr. Lindy Zaretsky

The Geneva Centre for Autism has developed youth and adult services in the context of lifespan planning. New project initiatives, with initial small samples, have comprised two summer employment programs for 16-18 year old youth in connection with partner agencies in the Greater Toronto Area. The Centre is also pursuing grants for university students

to train young adults with ASD, and the Centre offers an employment readiness initiative that focuses on students with Asperger's Syndrome. Given a commitment to support early preparation for employment, Geneva Centre's high school initiative for students with Asperger's Syndrome has brought together job coaches and teachers to foster personal management and life skills. Of further note, a café serves as a place of employment and second tier apprenticeship.

Woodview Mental Health and Autism Services, Hamilton, Canada: Robin Brennan

Woodview is a multi-focused organization that offers a supported employment model as one of many program options available for adults with high functioning autism and Asperger's Syndrome. Generally, this population experiences difficulty finding and maintaining employment, resulting in a devastating cycle of seeking employment, disappointment and rejection. Yet, this program has redressed this negative outcome by offering employment opportunities with long-term retention. Specifically, Manor Personal Deployment Inc. (MPD), as a social enterprise of Woodview, offers a variety of work options, with 80% of its employees diagnosed with ASD and 50% having comorbid mental health challenges. Work options include lawn maintenance, flyer collation, cleaning services and data entry positions. The work sites are set up to be sensitive to the employees' needs, with more time for breaks and extra support as needed. Trained staff are either on site or communicate regularly with customers to fine-tune work place accommodations and support social learning. MPD also offers incentive programs to make work more enjoyable such as social events (e.g., draws for prizes, employee banquets twice a year for social engagement).

CBI Consultants, Vancouver, Canada: Dr. Paul Malette

CBI Consultants assist individuals with ASD to find customized employment. Customized employment was identified as the next generation of employment practices in that it identifies the best possible employment for an individual. There is no exclusion of individuals in customized employment as all individuals are deemed to be employable. Consultants identify the strengths of the individual and then identify how those strengths can be capitalized upon and supported in the context of the business culture. The goal of customized employment is to create a mutually beneficial job and role within the business. To that end, some positions may not have a traditional job description.

CBI Employment Specialists support individuals across the life span, in areas of vocation, recreation, relationships and socialization. The notion of customized employment thus encapsulates what CBI Consultants view as holistic support.

C. Post-Secondary School Issues and Solutions

Transitioning to Post-Secondary Education: Margot Stothers, Dr. Heather Brown and Dr. James Bebko

The final focus of the conference was effective transitioning to post-secondary education (post-high school). Ms. Margot Stothers initiated this discussion by speaking about the use of disability services in post-secondary educational settings. She noted that in Ontario, services for students with ASD have been based on an accommodation model designed for students who have learning disabilities. As more students on the spectrum earn high school diplomas and transition to post-secondary education, disability service providers and their professional associations have recognized the need to gather more information about challenges unique to students who have ASD. She emphasized that disability services act as a ‘translator’ in navigating difficult post-secondary (university or college) scenarios for students with ASD. For instance, when faced with a surprise quiz in class, a student with ASD may have extreme anxiety. Ms. Stothers contended that such a student may not deal well with such surprises, and hence may need a more predictable environment. She highlighted that each situation must be dealt with in the context of its unique characteristics, but that a constant process of openness to learning must take place on the part of both the professor and student, facilitated through educational resources such as those provided by campus disability services. Ms. Stothers argued that engagement with such a learning process would allow the professor to more readily understand why students with ASD might react negatively to aversive situations, and how such difficulties potentially could be eased. She recommended that universities become more flexible and responsive to the needs of students with ASD as well as mild intellectual disabilities in the aim of facilitating an environment that fosters success for these students.

In another presentation, Dr. Heather Brown discussed university life as encountered by students with ASD. She identified challenges facing students with ASD that consisted of: (i) persistent anxiety permeating many aspects of campus life, (ii) difficulties with communication and related misunderstandings of expectation, (iii) difficult planning and

organizing demands, and (iv) sensory issues such as distraction in the classroom environment.

In order to overcome these challenges, Dr. Brown suggested the need for greater self-awareness, perhaps through therapy, to personally better understand and deal with such stresses of student life. Further, she recommended that students with ASD obtain support from a learning strategist in order to devise strategies and plan to avoid sensory overload in the classroom (e.g., wearing noise cancellers, sitting away from others when noise or commotion may be problematically distracting). Lastly, Dr. Brown suggested intense physical activity for students with ASD to help release excess energy and better cope with difficult stress.

Areas of exceptional strength among students with ASD were exemplified. Such examples of strength included a strong memory for facts and details, ability to focus for extended periods of time, and substantial learning capacity which enables some students with ASD to achieve grades that are comparable or better than neuro-typical peers.

Dr. James Bebko focused on innovative student support programming at York University in Toronto, Canada. The program, entitled the Asperger's Mentoring Program, consists of three main components. First, it offers one-on-one meetings in which mentee-mentor dialogue focuses on issues related to university-related stress, social life, employment, family, and available resources to help navigate associated challenges. Second, peer support is offered through a wide range of recreational activities. Third, educational workshops assist students in the areas of sexual health and relationships, stress management and vocational preparedness. The program aims to offer students a greater sense of belonging, satisfaction and success in their university experience, ultimately decreasing the risk of university withdrawal. Initial response to the program has been very favorable with 80% of participants reporting improved student experience. Dr. Bebko concluded by emphasizing the importance of increased service provision in the areas of ASD-related mental health support and vocational planning.

Discussion

These case studies and thoughtful commentary identify concerning vocational issues yet conversely offer important strides forward in proactively addressing the complex challenges facing individuals with ASD. Clearly, there are significant barriers facing this population, with substantial work yet to be done in rendering 'welcoming' vocational and post-secondary environments and optimal outcomes. Employment and post-secondary educational opportunities and supports are critically

important. Achieving best outcomes merits ongoing practice and program innovation.

Conclusions from this conference reflected a renewed conviction among attendees that adults with ASD offer important skills and contributions to vocational settings and more generally to their communities, yet they are often excluded from such opportunity. Vocational and post-secondary resources are underdeveloped, and evaluation is notably absent.

Two crucial areas of marginalization were noted. First, individuals with ASD are largely excluded from vocational and post-secondary educational opportunities and, in particular, they lack customized opportunities and supports that are tailored to their areas of ability and interest. Second, there is a dearth of available services to more broadly and holistically assist persons with ASD as they transition to adulthood. These gaps appear to reflect insufficient service provision and possibly a deeper lack of societal appreciation for the simultaneous pervasiveness of ASD in adulthood yet potential for vocational success when sufficient supports are in place.

We contend that this complex interplay of prevailing beliefs, supports and ingenuity ultimately can culminate in vocational opportunity or conversely, if not proactively addressed, can result in vocational misfortune, as was repeatedly exemplified by conference presenters and corroborated in the ASD literature (Graetz, 2010; Holwerda et al., 2012; Shattuck et al., 2012).

The potential for better outcomes warrants proactive shifts related to attitudes, policies, practices and ultimately, opportunities for persons with ASD. Dispelling harmful myths and heightening opportunities for people with ASD are priorities of pressing urgency. Accordingly, conference presenters illustrated that with appropriate support, persons with ASD can be vocational contributors who in turn derive immense personal benefit from meaningful vocational activity.

It thus seems critically important that we, as a national and international community, cast our collective effort on effectively supporting persons with ASD in post-secondary education and employment access and retention. To that end, capacity-building and advocacy efforts are underway in varying regions in Canada including initiatives with individuals and families, employers, vocational supports and governments. In these efforts, it seems important that the multi-layered challenges facing persons with ASD (including sensory difficulties, language/communication barriers, anxiety, and risks for mental illness) are framed as difficulties that can be addressed and mediated, rather than dismissed as irreconcilable to vocational engagement and success.

Developing Supports for Vocational Success

Several conclusions emerge that are consistent with the literature. Evidence-informed yet largely practice- and action-grounded methods of vocational development and support for persons with ASD are needed (Nicholas, Attridge, Zwaigenbaum & Clarke, 2015; Robertson & Emerson, 2006; Westbrook et al., 2012). The heterogeneity of ASD must be considered in supporting a range of vocational options, while also attending to core challenges (e.g., anxiety reduction, sensory accommodation, etc.). A ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach is deemed to be insufficient; instead, the functioning, skills, interests and affinities of the individual with ASD need to be carefully assessed and targeted in seeking complementary vocational opportunities and supports. Emphasizing strengths and a person-centred approach emerge as central, including respect and support for the critical role that assistants (e.g. job coaches) and families play in vocational success. Moreover, these case studies suggest that supporting an individual with ASD is not solely about charity, but rather reflects recognition of ability and citizenry, and correspondingly furthers a vibrant labour force and community at large.

Action at regional, provincial and national levels is needed given current gaps and the pressing volume of adults with ASD entering adulthood. This likely invites new partnerships with key stakeholders in industry, government and philanthropy, thereby moving beyond traditional ‘silos’ of service delivery and organizational jurisdiction. We need to integrate ‘seamless’ lifespan approaches that address ASD holistically with corresponding attention also given to associated areas such as health, housing, recreation, community participation and transportation. For instance, trying to find a job, but not having the means to navigate one’s community or access transportation, imposes a debilitating impediment to employment or post-secondary education. A careful examination of the social determinants of health and well-being in this context can inform advocacy efforts for resource development and integrated networks of support.

Finally, renewed priorities are needed in adult educational and vocational sectors that emphasize proactive practice and policy development. The current lack of evidence-based vocational training curriculum and support models warrants urgent attention in better supporting adults with ASD. This invites greater resources within secondary and post-secondary schools and community services, hence effective, well-funded programs facilitating transitional and vocational success for youth and adults with ASD.

Conclusion

The work that lies ahead is certainly monumental, yet the information presented at this conference offered multiple examples of innovation and possibility in moving toward meaningful, sustained vocational opportunity for adults with ASD. Despite obstacles, we are embarking on a path with apparent momentum for better vocational choice and support. May it be so!

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