

Autism Spectrum Disorder and Professional Job Interviews

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Abstract

Autism spectrum disorders pose daily challenges to those who are diagnosed. In the workforce young adults with autism may face more adversity when seeking employment than those who are not diagnosed on the autism spectrum. This research sought out to find if traditional interviewing methods pose more of a barrier to success with people on the autism spectrum. The research included a survey that was issued to a sample population to identify the specific interviewing challenges. The researcher utilized survey data to detect the specific barriers young adults with autism face in professional job interviews. Based on results of the research specific challenges in the interview process were identified. Tools and strategies to overcome some difficulties were suggested.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), job interviews, interview strategies

Introduction

This exploratory research attempts to better understand what role autism plays in the interview process. This research entails a study of the specific behaviors of the interviewees with autism and how this can impact the outcome of the interview. The hypothesis of this research is that young adults with an autism spectrum disorder have less successful outcomes at job interviews than young adults who have not been diagnosed on the autism spectrum.

Adults with autism spectrum disorders have been employed more by lower paid occupations they also struggled with long term employment and obtaining high skill level positions. Those adults in the study have been observed overtime and displayed obstacles to their success. The participants in Hendriks study had a variety of vocational needs and difficulties that played a major role in contributing to the barriers to their success in long term employment and higher level occupations (Hendricks. 2010 p. 127).

There are many barriers to success with autism, and many people may not be aware that a job interview and occupation search process may

be more difficult for adults on the spectrum. The goal of this research is to improve the lives of people with autism by using the information for further research. In hopes of developing alternative interviewing strategies and making employers more aware of the challenges that individuals on the spectrum face.

This research has valuable information that will expand awareness to help the lives of young adults on the autism spectrum. The research will be used to conduct follow up research and there is a likelihood that future programs and educational tools that can be utilized by employers, educators, and professionals. With future tools and programs there can be additional research to educate autism spectrum adults and non-autistic adults on how it affects people in work, education, and life. One of the intended outcomes of this research is to educate employers on how to create an environment where autistic individuals can overcome their challenges and succeed in interviews. Employers, human resource staff, coworkers, and interviewers can be educated on autistic behaviors and better understand when coming into contact with an autistic applicant and/ or employee. Further, this research seeks to inform employers the benefits of hiring autistic persons. The very optimistic outcome from this research is to encourage educational programs, workshops, and future research to achieve a labor market that can provide better opportunities for adults on the autistic spectrum. Those opportunities not just pertaining to minimum wage and part time employment; rather more skilled occupations such as teachers, sales, accountants, engineers.

Table 1

Terms and Definitions	
ASD Autism Spectrum Disorder	Big Picture label for all autism related disabilities
DOL Department of Labor	US Government department for providing labor information
DVR Department of Vocational Rehabilitation	US Government department for providing information and assistance with disabilities
High Functioning Autism	A term to explain persons who may function average or above average while having an ASD.
Low functioning autism	A person who is heavily effected by autism and cannot perform average task
Mild Autism	A person with a diagnosis high functioning autism or a disability that is lower on the spectrum
Severely disabled Autism	A person who is clinically disabled with an autism spectrum disorder
SHRM Society of Human Resource Management	Professional organization in handling items related to human resources
Young Adults with or without Autism	The age group explained is 17 to 29 some are full college students and others are fully employed, part time or unemployed.

Literature Review

The background literature helps identify useful strategies, tools, and techniques that might help young adults living on the autism spectrum to perform well in job interviews. Cohan (2001) advises "persons with autism

should practice better eye contact and verbal communication in order to be more comfortable in average social settings" (p. 247).

One alarming statistic in regards to adults with autism is that (Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM) researchers found that "According to department of labor statistics, since 2009 less than 20% of disabled persons who were autistic were hired for higher skilled employment (SHRM, Owens 2010, p.9).

In addition the article by SHRM Hiring Employees with Autism "The labor market of today is enforced by laws such as ADA Aging and Disability Act, Civil Rights Acts, and anti- discrimination laws in regard to mental and learning disabilities" (p. 6). There recently has been more effort into achieving a more autism friendly labor market. More employers are hiring candidates with autism for higher positions than ever before. Even though there are more high functioning autistic adults entering the work force, there still are challenges those on the autism spectrum face every day (pg. 3).

Hendrik' (2010) explains in *Employment with Autism Spectrum Disorder* that "Adults who have been diagnosed as high functioning autism have better employment outcomes than autistic adults who fall into the mild and or severely disabled spectrum area" (125). Adults in the high functioning portion of the autism spectrum can be socially challenged meanwhile being talented. As for the autism spectrum as a whole, they all face every day obstacles such as social interactions and adult independence (Hendriks, 2010, pp. 126-131). The challenges autistic adults face may not always negatively affect the interview outcome.

Following high functioning autism, the mid-autism spectrum range includes adults who are more affected and may have more challenges with their disability in everyday life than high functioning autistic adults. As explained by Cohan's (2001) reading the *Minds in the Eyes Test Revised Version* "high functioning autism young adults had better eye contact and social scores than the mid spectrum and severely disabled autistic adults" (p. 242). If a non-autistic job candidate has better eye contact and social interaction this may result in better job interview outcomes. The high function autistic candidates may struggle to remember to keep eye contact and catch on to social cues such as head nods and handshakes. (Cohan 2001, p. 248). The mid spectrum job candidates may with have more improper social interactions and poor eye contact than those who are high functioning.

As explained in Cohan's research, one of the primary challenges autistic individuals face is social interaction with others. In a job interview, this creates a disconnection between the interviewer and the participating interviewee. Cohan (2001) states "most of the population of adults on the autism spectrum have major difficulties in eye contact, attentive behavior and facial recognition in body language" (p. 241.). Cohan explains that a majority of autistic adults face social challenge in daily life and those challenges may

also have an effect on job interviews. However, SHRM provides that "there are strategies to improve employment odds in autistic job candidates by having them participate in exercises such as practicing simulated interviews, mock social situations and eye contact concentration" (SHRM, 2010). High functioning autism spectrum adults should be aware that "practice makes perfect" (SHRM, 2010). They should be instructed to use such tools and strategies to improve their odds at a professional job interview. It is common knowledge that a firm handshake with eye contact is key at any interview, but this seemingly simple task for non-autistic adults can be a major obstacle for those who are on the autism spectrum.

In any occupation the autistic candidates will face many different types of interviews and some interviews can be more challenging. Many adults who are not disabled may find it less challenging to participate the different types of interviews. According to SHRM's webpage on job interview techniques "most adults will participate in a phone interview prior to an in person interview, this method is most common" (SHRM, 2010). Various job interviews may take the form of in person, in person with a panel, internet with audio, internet with video, phone, and web chat. All methods are common in the modern labor market especially with the advancement of web and phone technology. These methods may be less difficult for modern adults because there is more flexibility to choose the method that is most convenient. For example if a non-disabled adult is interviewing for a job that is far away from home they will likely choose a phone interview or an online video chat interview.

Most adults have anxiety and fears prior to the job interview that may have an impact on that interview experience. SHRM explains "most adults can be optimistic, hopeful, and nervous, have difficulty sleeping, feel stress, fear of failure, and lack of confidence" (SHRM, 2010). When the average adult is at the interview their behaviors change somewhat but are similar to the behaviors prior to the interview. SHRM list behaviors at the job interviews and gives tips on what to do at a job interview. The SHRM web page explains the behaviors and strategies in job interviews as follows "in a job interview the interviewee is often nervous but they attempt to hide their feelings"(SHRM, 2010). The candidate also may struggle to pay attention and speak confidently. In addition the candidate may have sweaty palms and fidgety body language. (SHRM, 2010).

The strategies that help most people in interviews is to take deep breaths, and think positive before the interview. It is strongly suggested that candidate research the company prior to the interview. This will result will be more positive experience (SHRM, 2010).

The behaviors and specific challenges that negatively affect interviews for high functioning autistic adults include eye contact, body language, nonverbal communication, facial expression recognition, and speech. Ac-

According to the research by Cohan (2001) eye contact and body language shows more than actual verbal language in first impressions' (p. 241). Therefore autistic interviewees may have trouble with proper eye contact and body language. Eye contact and non-verbal communication is a major barrier for autistic adults in both everyday life and in interviewing. The lack of eye contact, lack of confidence in verbal communication and, lack of proper body language has a direct cause on how the interviewer sees the autistic interviewee. The interviewer will see the high functioning autistic adult candidate as non-attentive, disrespectful, not socially intelligent, and uninterested in the job. The same autistic candidate may be highly intelligent, interested, and well qualified for the job but because of the autistic behaviors in the interview their chances at obtaining the position are decreased.

Because there is a negative stereotype they may not feel comfortable disclosing this sensitive personal information to the interviewer. The interviewer not knowing that a candidate is autistic will not be able to understand their behaviors in the interview. Yet, there is also a chance that if the interviewer is informed that their interviewee is autistic then negative stereotypes of autism may influence their decisions. Also, in studies on statistics of autism and behavior of autistic adults by Wheman (2012) states

"Stereotypes of autism is damaging for all who are on the autism spectrum. When a person is labeled autistic they can be seen as severely disabled. Stereotypes of autism include incompetence, unreliable, and social isolation (p. 16)

The stereotypes that may in the mind of employers can cause more challenges for autistic job seekers. If there is more awareness of autism and the potential benefits of autistic employees, then the future for autistic job seekers can begin to look more promising.

Improving job interview experiences for high functioning autistic adults includes many useful tools and strategies. SHRM stated on their web page

There are many useful tips and tricks people generally can use for most interview types. It benefits the job seeker to practice questions and responses for the interview. Also it helps to practice body language and eye contact in a mirror. Simulated interviews and role playing are also suggested. (SHRM, 2010).

Prior to the job interview it helps to research the company and job position. Researching the job will better prepare the person for the interview. While preparing for the interview it also helps to take notes on the research of the job and use those notes to come up with possible job related questions that can come up in a job interview. With the questions the person should practice their responses both alone and with a role play person. In role playing an interview the autistic candidate can practice eye contact, confident speech, and non-verbal communication. When participating in job interviews

the person should be prepared for any method such as in person or over the phone. It always helps to know what method will be used when the company schedules and informs the candidate. It is also an individual preference to which method is easier to be successful with. The candidate should also practice and prepare for interview methods that are difficult and strange to them. Preparing, practicing prior to interviews and staying alert attentive, and calm while participating interviews will make for better success.

The spectrum of autism-related disabilities ranges from severely disabled to high functioning. The group of mild spectrum and high functioning autistic adults face many challenges and adversity on a daily basis. In the work force these challenges will have an effect on the success of job interviewing when an autistic adult attempts to gain a professional and skillful occupation. There are existing programs to aid the severely disabled but there is only a small amount of assistance available to high functioning autism spectrum adults. There is a need to aid high functioning autistic adults to find more skilled, higher earning occupations. There also is the need to educate professionals on autism and to discredit the negative stereotypes that the autism label can bring. The purpose of the research is to explore tools, programs and strategies to aid those young adults on the autism spectrum to be more successful and face fewer challenges when seeking professional employment.

Methods

There was a sample of full time students at the University of Wisconsin Stout who participated in the survey. College students from the university were divided into two groups. The control group was made up of the students who were not diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. The experimental group consisted of the students who were diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. The method of data collection was using identical Qualtrics surveys given to the two groups. The surveys asked questions about previous interview experiences, outcomes of those interviews, and autism related personality factors as well.

The survey was entirely confidential. The researcher had no names and/or any identifiers of subjects in each group. In order to reach the autistic spectrum experimental group the disability service office at University of Wisconsin Stout was assigned to anonymously send the autism spectrum students the survey via their email. The data was collected through the use of Qualtrics survey software. The control group consisted of randomly selected college students with the help of the PARQ office at UW-Stout, and the experimental group data was also to be collected through Qualtrics using identical surveys.

The participants consisted of a random selection of non-autistic college students at university of Wisconsin stout and autistic students who were

diagnosed. The control group was a sample size of 22 with 20 completed surveys. The experimental group has a sample size of 8 students with autism spectrum disorder and 7 completed surveys.

The survey was conducted after receiving IRB approval. The materials and facilities were used at University of Wisconsin Stout. The researcher received data from Qualtrics, a survey computer program that was used to manage and distribute the surveys via email. The surveys were analyzed and conclusions were made.

Results and Discussion

The results of both control and experimental groups were analyzed and compared. Numerical data related to the Likert scale responses were reported using Qualtrics and statistic software. Most of the survey was found to not have statistical significance due to small unmatched sample sizes. Some survey questions that showed noticeable differences between the control and experimental group are shown on Table 1.1.

The Likert scale based sections of the survey were analyzed using the T-test. The T-test showed that there were too many variables and the sample sizes were small and unmatched. The decision to use Fisher exact method to re test the data and find significance on a few items.

Figure 1

question	section number	question number	P-Value	Significance level
I understand facial expressions	4	12	0.009027	1%
I can make friends easily	4	4	0.007091	1%
I can read interviewers facial expressions	3	5	0.03752	5%
I get along with co workers	4	5	0.05819	10%
I can handle my temper	4	7	0.06298	10%

The usual cut-off for significance is 5%, but questions showing 10% were listed. The remainder of all survey questions showed P-values and Significance levels that were unacceptable for the research. The question "I understand facial expressions" showed significance and correlates to the autism spectrum disorder. It is known that the ability to recognize facial expressions is one of the many challenges of autism. This suggests that facial expressions can be one of the major barriers that young adults with autism will face in a professional job interview. The question that specifically correlates facial expressions to performance during job interviews is "I can read interviewer's facial expressions". The experimental group scored noticeably low on the Likert scale for this question. This suggests that the experimental group's lack of understanding the interviewer's facial expression may have caused them not connect socially. Without successful social connection in an interview the

chances of employment may be decreased.

Personality and behavior based questions that correlate to autism that showed significance were listed. The question "I can make friends easily" and "I get along with co-workers" showed notable differences between group responses. The control group data suggests that they can make friends easily and get along with co-workers more so than the experimental group. This correlates to the social aspects of Autism Spectrum Disorder which is known to affect social interaction and performance. People living on the autism spectrum struggle with connecting with others and forming relationships. In the professional job interview such social challenges may negatively affect the ability to connect and share with the interviewer on a personal professional level. When the survey asked "I can get along with co-workers" was another way of evaluating the two survey groups about relationships in a work environment. The experimental group responses also reflected that getting along with co-workers is an additional challenge for them. In the professional job interview this lack of relationship with co-workers is a sign that connection with the interviewer is a major obstacle. The final question shown on the table ask "I can handle my temper" was listed due to the significance level, but it is over the acceptable limit for P-Values, the acceptable value is $P = X < 0.05$.

The Likert scale survey questions overall were not statistically significant and future research will be needed. The main research question was "what are the major barriers to success in the professional job interviews for persons living with an autism spectrum disorder?" That question proved a challenge for surveying, but the beginning of some trends can be seen from the results. The trends that were found in the results were that survey participants who were young adults on the autism spectrum have more difficulty in social situations and connecting with interviewers. The specific barriers that were found were understanding facial expression, connecting with the interviewer, and making friends. Other factors that could have affected the professional job interviews, but did not show statistical significance were eye contact, proper handshake, confidence, and level of nervousness.

Future research should include expanding the survey. A new version of the survey can be made after more research to find better specific questions to ask. A survey can also be condensed to ask fewer questions meanwhile being more specific

In addition to the research results there can be suggestions made to improve interview performance for young adults with autism. As explained by SHRM elsewhere there are tools and strategies all adults can use prior to interviews. SHRM stated that "preparedness, practice, researching the company, staying calm, and connecting with proper body language are key in professional job interviews" (SHRM, 2010). Training programs and workshops can be created to teach young adults with autism spectrum disorders

how to improve their success in professional job interviews. Other than working with young adults on the autism spectrum, professionals and others can be educated on the challenges of autism.

Young adults with autism who are seeking employment can minimize the obstacles by practicing and preparing for professional job interviews. Future workshops and trainings can be designed to help with confident communication and facial expressions. Simulated interviews can provide one on one practice with autistic adults. In simulations non-verbal communication, eye contact, and facial understanding can be routinely worked until they are confident and prepared for interviews.

Professionals can be educated about autism and the daily challenges in other workshops. Those living with autism spectrum disorder can spread awareness by sharing their challenges, experiences and methods of overcoming obstacles. The awareness of autism can help professionals recognize the possibility that their interviewee may be autistic. Increasing the interviewers' knowledge of autism may help them make more educated hiring decisions.

Conclusion

The research regarding autism spectrum disorder and professional job interviews has shown some significance. The data suggests that additional research is needed. The results from Qualtrics survey participants were not statistically significant due to a small sample size. Future research projects will require larger sample sizes of participants and a restructured survey that is better designed.

Workshops, education programs, and training seminars can be created to assist young adults with autism spectrum disorders to improve performance in professional job interviews. Other than adults with autism, people in general can be educated on autism in the workforce. Though such educational events the audience can be made aware of the potential of employing high functioning autistic adults. Human resource professionals also can improve their ability to interview a potential autistic interviewee.

The lessons for autistic job seekers can include interview preparedness, career management, and professional social relationships. Workshops can provide a safe academic environment for autistic adults to learn to communicate effectively in job interviews. In workshops specific social hurdles such as eye contact and handshakes can be improved upon. Future research and programs will strive to create a more autism friendly workforce of tomorrow.

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Child Life Specialist: The Chief Executive Officer Perspective

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Abstract

Within the pediatric hospital environment, child life specialists are changing the practice of pediatric medicine, turning traumatic encounters into growth promoting experiences with lasting effects on the health and well-being of hospitalized children (Tobin, 2013). Child life specialists are invaluable members of the health care team trained specifically in addressing the psychosocial needs of young patients, through an assortment of techniques aimed at creating a sense of normalcy in the young patient's life during hospitalization. Sadly, the general population doesn't understand the importance of a child life specialist until they witness first-hand the invaluable support they provide to a child. The lack of knowledge of the child life field has caused child life specialists to be seen as supplementary to other professionals within a pediatric hospital. This qualitative case study investigated the perceptions of the child life field from the perspective of a decision maker, a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of a pediatric hospital in urban Minnesota. The purpose of this study was to gain more knowledge from a primary decision-maker about the value a CEO places on child life in an age of austerity. This study found crucial implications for practitioners; it's vital that child life specialists are aware of how others within the hospital view them, particularly those that are making decisions about budgets. They will be able to address these perceptions and assist health care professionals in better understanding the value and goals of the child life department.

Keywords: child life specialist, child life department, child life council

Introduction

Almost 200,000 children visit the hospital in emergency situations per day (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). Often these situations include fast paced painful procedures that most children are not prepared to endure on their own. Luckily, around 480 hospitals in the United States utilize child life specialists to help children and their families through emergency procedures (Child Life Council, 2015). Child life specialists are trained to build rapport quickly with children while educating each child about their procedures and the hospital environment at their cognitive level. These inter-