

Long/Extended Abstract

Aim

It is estimated that 50–75% of adults with autism are unemployed (Wehman et al., 2012). Most of the available research on employment for individuals with autism has been with persons who are described as “high functioning” or as having Aspergers Syndrome (Wehman et al., 2012). Although there is typically only limited information on the communication status of these individuals, it appears that many of those individuals who are employed use speech to communicate. It has been estimated, however, that 20–30% of individuals with autism will have few or no spoken words and will require AAC to support participation in society (Wodka, Mathy, & Kalb, 2013).

Persons who use AAC often experience difficulty in obtaining and maintaining employment (Bryen, Potts, & Carey, 2006). These challenges may be especially acute for individuals with ASD who make use of AAC (McNaughton & Richardson, 2013). At present we have only a limited understanding of the factors associated with positive employment experiences for individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) who make use of augmentative and alternative communication.

Past research provides evidence that community-based employment can yield both positive and negative impacts for individuals who use AAC (McNaughton, Light, & Arnold, 2002). Identified benefits have included: the self-esteem associated with employment, wages, and participation in work activities that benefit society (McNaughton & Bryen, 2007). It is clear, however, that these positive outcomes are only infrequently observed. Hamm and Mirenda (2006) surveyed 8 adults with complex communication needs who used AAC, and gathered information in three major areas: (a) their educational, employment, residential, and leisure outcomes; (b) the modes of communication they used after leaving school; and (c) their level of satisfaction with their ability to communicate. Two of the participants were diagnosed with ASD as well as intellectual disability. These individuals had the lowest reported quality of communication. Neither of these participants pursued post-secondary education or held community-based jobs.

In addition to the need for a better understanding of employment from the perspective of the person who uses AAC, we also have only a limited understanding of the perspectives of employers and co-workers (Bryen, Potts, & Carey, 2007) and of family members. Information is needed from all three groups (i.e., the person with ASD who uses AAC, the employer, the family members) in order to achieve a better understanding of how best to support persons with ASD and complex communication needs who are seeking community-based employment

There are a growing number of individuals with autism and complex communication needs who expect to live as full participants in the community and the workplace (Smith & Lugas, 2010). Given the limited information on strategies to support employment for individuals with ASD who use AAC, there is a clear need to better understand the experiences of individuals with ASD who use AAC, and who are successfully employed in community settings.

Method

The proposed presentation will describe the outcomes of a multiple case, case study design (Yin, 2009) that investigated the employment experiences of seven individuals with ASD who use AAC and who are successfully employed in community settings. A total of 21 semi-structured interviews have been completed with: (a) seven individuals with ASD who use AAC; (b) the seven employers of participants with ASD who use AAC; and (c) seven parents/family members of individuals with ASD who use AAC. Results will be discussed in terms of positive and negative factors associated with employment; characteristics of the workplace; AAC systems; and supports and barriers to employment. Video recorded interview clips will be shown to illustrate themes.

Results

Initial analysis of the data provides evidence that the three stakeholder groups identified a wide variety of benefits and challenges. Frequently identified benefits included income from employment activities, as well as opportunities for interaction with familiar communication partners. Key challenges included: communication breakdowns, changes to familiar activities, and interactions with unfamiliar communication partners.

Conclusion

The experiences of these seven individuals with ASD who use AAC provide evidence that, with appropriate instructional activities and communication supports, successful community-based employment experiences can be achieved and maintained over time.

Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors disclose they have no financial or other interest in objects of entities mentioned in this paper.

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Course Title: Successful Employment of Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder who Use Augmentative and Alternative Communication

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