



The Missing Voice: A Comparison of Autistic Young Adults’ and Inclusive Employers’ Perspectives of Work Readiness Skills Needed to Enter the Calgarian Workforce

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Introduction

- Autistics have the lowest rates of employment in comparison to persons with other disabilities in Canada¹⁻³
- Research has described work readiness in various ways, with current theories mostly identifying two to eight common employer-reported skills required for one to be work-ready⁴⁻⁸
- Service providers have sought to improve these employment statistics through work-readiness programs by consulting with stakeholders⁹⁻¹⁰, although autistic voices have been largely absent from the literature. However, recent literature¹¹ has started to ask autistics what skills they feel they need to be successful in the workplace
- This study was guided by the following research questions:
 - How do autistic individuals’ and inclusive employers’ opinions of work readiness compare to current research on work readiness?
 - What are autistic individuals’ and inclusive employers’ opinions about how we can improve work readiness in autistic individuals?
- It is hoped that the findings of this research will benefit both the autistic and autism communities, inclusive employers, and other autism support providers who work with autistic adolescents and adults by providing information that may result in the creation and/or modification of programs and services to improve employment outcomes further

Methodology

- Semi-structured interviews with inclusive employers and autistics
 - Employers** – Have inclusively hired autistic individuals in the past or present, must hire in the Calgary area, and be in a position responsible for hiring individuals for their company ($N = 3$, $M = 67.67$ years old)
 - Autistics** – Over the age of 18, must have a formal diagnosis of autism, never participated in an employment preparation program, have average or above intelligence, are employed currently or have been employed before, seeking employment in the Calgary area ($N = 6$, $M = 31.80$ years old)
- Interviews were analyzed through inductive reflexive thematic analysis¹²⁻¹³

A Note about Terminology Used in the Study

The terms ‘autistic,’ ‘on the autism spectrum,’ and autism will be used interchangeably throughout this thesis in alignment with current perspectives on language and labeling and to respect the recommendations and views of self-advocates¹⁴⁻¹⁵

Results

Autistic Perspectives

THEME	SUBTHEME	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLE QUOTE(S)
HOLISTIC PERSPECTIVE OF WORK READINESS		To be considered work ready, one needs not only to feel ready and be prepared with the skills for employment but have a positive overall well-being (i.e., mental, physical, and environmental well-being).	"I think it's a pretty holistic approach that needs to be taken [for work readiness]." "I think work readiness means being prepared skill-wise, emotionally prepared, and just genuinely ready to be able to do a job or join a workforce." "[Work readiness] should just be how you feel. I think personally like how someone feels if they feel ready or not if they feel prepared to work."
WORK READINESS IS NOT A STATIC CONCEPT		One does not stay work ready throughout their career; it is a "process of learning" and continues to develop.	"[Work readiness entails] a process of training." "I don't think there's any way you can say ... they've reached this point they're ready. I think that they could get close to that point, but there shouldn't be a cut-off saying they're ready. It should be they can do ... most of it or can still learn ... we're still learning always."
WORK READINESS CONSISTS OF POSITION-DEPENDANT SKILLS	Social and Teamwork Skills	The skills a person needs to communicate and work with other people of varying positions effectively.	"I think the social aspect is really important ... the basics social skills of like what sort of things are and aren't polite." "There is a very strong social component that goes beyond ... the skill set, [like] being able to navigate a group of people and sometimes working together."
	Self Awareness and Advocacy Skills	The skills a person needs to understand themselves and articulate their needs	"Teaching ... self-advocacy" "I don't feel like I needed much help, but I did need clarification and then ... know whom to ask for clarification." "to be honest, [it's] about tailoring [yourself] to an employer or a job situation that's going to be good for you [strengths and weaknesses]."
	Motivational Skills	The skills a person needs to have a positive outlook and dedication toward one's job.	"[Having an] strong work ethic." "Someone who would want to do the job and want to do it to the best of their ability, whatever that looks like."
	Basic Job Skills	The skills a person needs to know the basic standards and laws of being employed.	"Good knowledge [of] the laws surrounding how you should be treated in a workplace." "Just understanding ... what your general rights as a worker are." "A general idea of expectations of [the] workplace. What sort of expectations [do] employers generally have about what employees should be doing?"
INCREASING WORK READINESS FOR AUTISTIC INDIVIDUALS	Technical Skills	The skills a person needs for a specific occupation.	"Technical skills [for the job]." "Understanding all of the technical aspects of the job."
	Continual Learning and Education about Autism	Employers and coworkers need to continue to learn about diversity and autism to decrease stigma stereotypes and thus create a safe and accepting workplace.	"[Community agencies say] you can always ask for help, you can always ask for accommodations, and [autistics] go to their inclusive employer, they ask for these accommodations, and their employers are shocked that they're actually disabled that they need help, and they need accommodation as in their not the ... Sheldon Cooper stereotype that they were expecting."
	More Flexible Support	Employers and community support need to work with autistics to provide more practical, varied, individualized, and continued support to help improve autistic work readiness.	"When you're late diagnosed getting that support in terms of just support but also employment support ... there's zero [support]." "[Supporting autistics] it's such a case-by-case basis."

Inclusive Employer Perspectives

THEME	SUBTHEME	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLE QUOTE(S)
WORK READINESS INCLUDES A HOLISTIC VIEW OF THE PERSON		An employer needs to look at the whole person and what they have to offer when determining if a person is work ready.	"When looking at work readiness, [you have to] know the person ... you got to take all that information [into account]."
WORK READINESS CONSISTS OF THE SAME STANDARDS WITH ADJUSTMENTS		Although the standard of work readiness should be the same for all employees in the same position, each person has a different pace or adjustments to reach that standard.	"[Work readiness] expectations should be the same ... [but] there might be a different approach to get to that point." "[For work readiness], if you look at the high end, or the lower end of the autism spectrum ... there's probably going to be some adjustments [that] have to be made." "[Work readiness] depends on the type of position and the skills required for that position."
WORK READINESS CONSISTS OF POSITION-DEPENDANT SKILLS	Technical Skills	The skills a person needs to do a specific occupation.	"A basic interview process ... [knowing] some of their positive characteristics that they may have." "Working [the] right job ... you know [some] people are better fit for warehouse jobs ... some people can work with the public ... some like to work alone."
	Knowledge of Competence Skills	The skills a person needs to ensure that they know and present their skills and abilities.	"Being prepared to do the work that's generally required of you." "You need to be able to react to situations in your position, be it with other people around or something that pops up." "You need to be comfortable talking to others, communicating with customers ... other staff, [or] people above or below your position. Your communication needs to be clear, [and] ... concise, so people understand what you're trying to tell them."
	General Preparedness Skills	The skills needed to understand the general expectations and changing expectations of a position.	"[A person that is not work ready] has no interest in asking questions." "You know it doesn't matter when you're working for ... you're going to need to ask questions [for clarification]." "Someone needs to be open to learning. They have to be open to being coached. They have to be interested in the job they're looking at." "To help prepare [for work readiness], we [need to work] with high school students. [We'll] sometimes go to schools, and we'll do mock interviews." "During work readiness programs, it would be helpful to have people from the different industries come out [and] maybe do a half-hour talk on the industry." "You give them some instruction and say this is what you need to do, this is how you do it, and then let them attempt it and check back to see how they're doing. [Then,] if something isn't right, you make those assessments and give feedback."
	Social and Teamwork Skills	The skills a person needs to communicate and work with other people of varying positions effectively.	"Everybody has a different learning capability, and not everybody is [good at] using their hands ... where other people are more visual thinkers ... everyone is different." "[Working with autistics] gives everybody an opportunity to see things differently, and that's what we're all about. Any chance to learn is great." "And [it was amazing] to watch them progress through the weeks and gain skills."
	Efficiently Skills	The skills needed for a person to advocate for themselves.	
	Motivational Skills	The skills a person needs to have a positive outlook and dedication toward one's job.	
IMPROVING WORK READINESS FOR AUTISTIC INDIVIDUALS	Work Readiness Programs	Work readiness programs need to target high schools and utilize various methods to teach work readiness.	
	Increased Training	Employers and agencies need to work with autistics to provide an individualized training approach suited to their needs and ensure comprehension of the material.	
	Working Together	All stakeholders need to learn from each other and focus on the positive/benefits of inclusive hiring.	

Similarities

- Stakeholders endorsed looking at the whole person to see if they are work-ready
- Depending on the position, stakeholders agreed that work readiness consists of different skills and potentially different levels of skills. Stakeholders agreed on most skill domains required for autistic people to be considered work-ready, with social and teamwork skills being the most crucial
- Both groups talked about ensuring that various methods are used to train and teach work readiness skills to autistics, and the importance of explicit instruction and feedback to ensure that autistics understand work expectations

Differences

- Autistics talked about the importance of managing one's sensory needs, mental health, and strategies to cope with these in the work environment
- Autistic participants talked about self-care skills and the need to understand diagnostic disclosure to make the best choice for themselves
- Autistics stated that work-readiness is a continual process, while inclusive employers focused on expectations of employees to be work-ready and adjustments that can be made to help autistics succeed
- When looking at the ways to improve work readiness, autistics focused on more support, breaking down stereotypes, and accepting diversity. Inclusive employers discussed the benefits of hiring autistics and how work-readiness programs can increase work-readiness
- Inclusive employers spoke to autistics' skills in completing an interview or resume to be work-ready

Novel Contributions

- This study allowed autistics to use their preferred language in describing their perspectives of work readiness
- Free expression provided an avenue for autistics to conceptualize how someone becomes work-ready rather than using pre-determined terminology
- Even though previous literature and this study were consistent with the perspectives of stakeholders' work-readiness skills, these findings provide a novel understanding and glimpse of what autistics feel they need to be considered work-ready and successful in navigating the neurotypical world

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