



Key points:

- **Sample variety of jobs with student early on in high school**
- **Educate employers about student's unique behaviors**
- **Switch autism conversation from deficit to differences**

Job training tips to help students with autism thrive in the workplace

Individuals with autism generally are hard-working and detail-oriented, and don't get caught up in workplace drama, sources say.

So why is it that, according to one [study](#), only half of young adults with autism in the U.S. have ever worked for pay after graduating high school?

Peter Gerhardt has a few ideas. "My biggest concern is that we're afraid of risk. We have become so risk averse that we don't allow kids to be independent out of fear," said Gerhardt, president at Peter Gerhardt Associates LLC and Scientific Counsel chairman at the [Organization for Autism Research](#). Second, he said, "We still hold on to this idea of academic competence as the grail when it's not."

In fact, researchers at the University of North Carolina's TEACHH Autism Program recently [found](#) that having daily living skills and adaptive behavior "prove more important than language, intellectual ability, or the severity of autism symptoms when it comes to maintaining employment and achieving life satisfaction."

Create fertile ground to teach these essential skills to students with autism in employment settings. First, gauge whether a work site will be appropriate for the student. Then, foster clear communication with employers to make sure they're committed to the student's success.

Follow these tips:

- **Expose students to wide array of work sites:** To determine if a workplace is suitable for a particular student with autism, focus on the physical, social, and safety environments in addition to the tasks he will perform, Gerhardt said.

Experiential learning is key to address each of these factors, he said. Consider sampling a variety of jobs with students to give them hands-on experience in different employment settings, and note any patterns or work habits that emerge, he said.

For instance, does the student like to work standing up as opposed to sitting down? Does he have a tougher time working in the morning than in the afternoon? Does he like to have music on in the background while on the job? If so, what kind of music? Is this a person who likes people around her or not?

The transition team may have to sample three or four jobs with the student before answering these types of questions. Yet, Gerhardt said, "all of these things are going to help decide whether this is the right job for this person at this point in their life."

Get to know the people who will be working with the student as well when deciding if a work site is a good fit, said Patty Pacelli, author of [*Six Word Lessons for Autism Friendly Workplaces*](#). Ask yourself, "What are their personalities and can they work with somebody who is a little different?" she said.

Finally, start job sampling early, Gerhardt said. The transition team will get a much clearer picture of the ideal job for a student who starts sampling jobs at age 15 versus age 21, he said.

- **Facilitate open communication between student, employer:** Work together with the student's employer to make sure all necessary accommodations are in place, Gerhardt said. Physical and neurological accommodations -- such as lighting adjustments and task lists -- generally are easy to address. The more difficult "accommodation," Gerhardt said, is educating employers and coworkers about who the student is.

Keeping this in mind, discuss with relevant supervisors and employees how the student communicates best, what he likes, and how he receives information, he said. Make sure such personnel know how to interact with the student to get feedback, he added. For example, if the student responds only when someone says "hi" *and* waves, make sure people know that. If coworkers just say "hi" and the student doesn't respond, then they may stop engaging him, he said.

What's more, advise employers to use plain language when speaking to students with autism, Gerhardt said. For instance, the employer should say, "John, hand me the bucket, please," as opposed to, "John, see that bucket over there? Could you hand that bucket to me so I can wash my hands?" he said.

Similar accommodations may apply prior to employment as well. For example, if a low-verbal student with autism interviews for a job, the student or transition team may request that the interviewer give him a test or quiz rather than having him describe everything verbally, Pacelli said.

"Historically, we have put all the onus on the person with autism," Gerhardt said. "If I look at any skill set at 100 percent, and my client has 60 percent of it -- yes, I may want to get him to 80 percent. But in the meantime, maybe I can teach the people around him to pick up that 40 percent difference," he said.

- **Shift perspective of autism from epidemic to asset:** People need to stop seeing autism as an epidemic that needs to be cured, Gerhardt said. "We have done more autism awareness in 2015 than we have done in the entire history of autism, but 90 percent of that awareness is negative," he said.

The conversation needs to shift from deficit to differences, he said. Sure, maybe this particular student has autism. But he's a really cool guy with a great sense of humor. He likes NASCAR -- he doesn't understand it, but he loves watching the cars go around in a circle, and that's a really cool, unique thing, Gerhardt said.

"I tell people that if you want to understand real human emotion, hang out with somebody with autism. They don't have that social veil that the rest of us have," he added.

Now, on the employment side of things, Gerhardt continued, "You have to go in with a confident approach. Say to employers, 'Listen, I'm trying to help you by giving you access to competent workers. Yes, they may need some training, but that's my job. I will do all the training for you.'

"If it is not the right job for this person, then we also agree to move on to something else. No harm no foul," he said.

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Philip Barnes covers postsecondary transition and charter school topics for LRP Publications.

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