Employment of People with Autism and Asperger's Syndrome: Evaluation of the Pilot Program at Beit Eckstein

Rania Jarrar Basheer • Dori Rivkin • Yoav Loeff

The study was initiated by and funded by the Service for the Care of People with Autism and PDD at the Ministry of Social Affairs and Services
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Executive Summary

This report presents the findings from the evaluation of a pilot program of the Service for the Care of People with Autism and PDD at the Ministry of Social Affairs and Services (MOSAS) to promote the employment of people with autism and Asperger's Syndrome. The program is implemented by Beit Eckstein.

1. Description of the Program

In recent decades, there has been increasing recognition of the importance of employment in the lives of people with disabilities, including those on the autism spectrum. The Service for the Care of People with Autism and PDD at MOSAS is implementing a pilot program designed to help integrate people with Asperger's Syndrome and high functioning autism into the open labor market. Implementation of the pilot began in 2007 through Beit Eckstein in Tel Aviv and was subsequently extended to Haifa and Jerusalem.

In its original format, the program consisted of two main stages: The first stage – training – lasted 6-12 months and included a course of group meetings focusing on labor market skills such as discipline, the rights and obligations of employees, social understanding and interpersonal communication. The training stage also included unpaid work experience. Participants then progressed to the placement stage, in which they were given assistance finding and integrating into work. Following placement, the program continued to provide ongoing support both to the participants and to their employers.

In 2011, the program was modified. The training year, including the unpaid work experience, was discontinued, as it appeared to be lengthy and ineffective. In the new format, each participant accepted to the program undergoes a comprehensive assessment. Next, the program staff builds an individual work plan for the participant based on his or her needs, with individual and group support elements (workshops, guidance, etc.). The staff works to ensure prompt placement in employment and trains the participant concurrently with seeking a job and starting work. If the participant is in need of unpaid work experience, it is provided for a short time (3-6 months). The new format was first introduced in Tel Aviv in 2011 and in Jerusalem and Haifa in 2012. Note that this report relates to the program in its original format only.

2. The Evaluation

The study was intended to provide information to help develop and improve the program. It examined the program staff, recruitment and characteristics of the participants, the training program and work experience component, the placement process and the support provided to the participants during employment. The study also examined the program outcomes, mainly with regard to employment, but also in other areas of life such as independence and social skills. The study was primarily qualitative, but some information was gathered systematically from all the participants – mainly about their background characteristics and their employment or studies following the program. The study included semi-structured interviews with:
16 professionals from MOSAS and Beit Eckstein – these interviews focused on implementation and other related aspects of the program.

33 of the 34 participants admitted to the program in 2008 (13 from Jerusalem, 10 from Tel Aviv and 10 from Haifa). The interviews focused on the participants' perception of the program outcomes and contribution and on their satisfaction with the program and their subsequent employment. The participants were interviewed at 3 points in time – about six months after joining the program, at the time of placement in employment, and about 2.5 years after joining the program. At every stage, 25 or 26 participants were interviewed; there was no complete overlap of respondents at every stage.

25 parents of the participants were interviewed with the consent of their children. The interviews focused on the program inputs, contributions and outcomes and the parents' view of their children's employment. The parents were interviewed twice – at the start of placement and two years after the program began.

9 employers – the direct superiors of the participants were interviewed with the consent of the participants. The interviews examined the assistance offered by the program, the integration of the participants into employment and the employees' satisfaction with the job as perceived by the employers. The employers were interviewed around 2 years after the employees joined the program.

The information from the interviews with or about each of the participants was assembled in case studies, which formed the basis of the analysis. The stories of 4 of the participants, with their identities concealed, appear in the appendix to this report (in Hebrew).

3. Findings

a. Staffing
The program staff in each of the cities included a director, a social worker, training course facilitators, a work experience coordinator and a placement coordinator, as well as counselors and workshop facilitators on a part-time or temporary basis. The employees received informal training. Some of them reported that they felt the need for additional training and many expressed the need for more supervision. They noted the need for more training and supervision on autism and Asperger's Syndrome and enrichment on group facilitation and therapeutic tools as well as on employment placement. Most of the program staff expressed high satisfaction with the work and in particular with the teamwork. However, many complained about the low salary and the part time employment; in their opinion, these were reasons for a high turnover of staff.

b. Program Participants
The program was intended for high functioning people on the autism spectrum who were considered capable of integrating into the free job market with the help of training and support. The admission criteria for the program included independent mobility, a reasonable level of communication abilities and the ability to integrate into normative society. They were also required to join the program of their own free will, to have conventional behavior and be free of
abnormal emotional problems. However, the criteria were applied more flexibly in Jerusalem and Haifa since these cities do not have employment possibilities for people with medium-function autism.

Most of the participants were men and the dominant age range was 18-26. In the group of college graduates that was formed in Tel Aviv, most participants were ages 28-38. At the time of joining the program, most of the participants were living with their parents; however, during the course of the program, about a third of those living with their parents moved into a hostel or supported apartment. In addition to high functioning autism or Asperger's, most of the participants had been diagnosed with additional disorders. The most common diagnoses were: anxiety, depression, health problems, ADHD and learning difficulties. Other problems reported that had not been professionally diagnosed were: anger, aggression, lack of self-control, stammering and speech disorders, tardiness and difficulty obeying orders. The additional disorders were sometimes the main obstacle to integrating into the program and, subsequently, into employment and were sometimes more significant than the difficulties generally associated with autism.

c. Training Course
The goal of the training course was to improve the work practices and the interpersonal skills of the participants through sessions on topics such as work relations or the importance of hygiene. The facilitators noted some of the participants' difficulties: Difficulty participating in a group with people with disabilities, disciplinary problems, difficulty internalizing the contents of the program, and a failure to understand the importance of the contents. The facilitators also noted their own difficulty establishing relationships with the participants.

Nevertheless, many of the participants were satisfied with the course because they acquired skills that helped them to write their resumes, seek employment, prepare for job interviews, communicate with colleagues and accept orders. Some of them acquired skills for independent living, such as being able to do their own shopping and cooking and travel by bus, and some managed to modify their hygiene habits. A few participants reported improvement in communication, in their relationships with parents and friends, in their independence and in their self-image. In contrast, some felt that the group training had not helped them and a few expressed a wish for one-on-one work based on individual needs.

d. Unpaid Work Experience
A few months after the training began, the participants were placed in unpaid jobs of various kinds, including work in offices, warehouses, kitchens and shops. The work experience coordinators tried to match the jobs to the participants' interests and skills. During the first month of unpaid work experience, they provided intensive support, including assistance with getting to know the place of work and the job itself and with communication. When necessary, they explained to the "employer" how to adapt the work to the participant's ability. Subsequently, in addition to the coordinator's visits, the participants were offered one-on-one discussions and group meetings. The coordinators also completed periodic evaluation forms on the progress of the
participants in areas such as communication, appearance and responsibility, based on feedback from the "employers." Most of the participants expressed satisfaction with the support and guidance during the unpaid work experience.

Most of the "employers" were satisfied with the participants' work, although some found it hard to devote the time necessary for guiding and supervising them. Some of the participants did well at their work experience and after the period of unpaid work experience were asked to stay on as paid employees. Some participants were very satisfied with their unpaid work experience; over time, they were given more complex assignments, which increased their sense of self-worth. The main factor affecting their satisfaction was the feeling that they were respected by their "employer" despite their difficulties.

In contrast, other participants had difficulty coping with the demands of the job, with the need to arrive punctually and with their employers. Some were "dismissed," mainly due to irregular attendance and tardiness. Some of them chose to quit out of frustration at not being able to advance at the job or because of disagreements with their "employers." Some were placed elsewhere with more success. Some of the participants felt they were being exploited and given unpleasant and boring tasks that the permanent employees did not want to do and resented having to work for an extended period without pay.

The unpaid work experience generally lasted between several months and a year. In two cases, it lasted about two years. The lengthy duration of the unpaid work experience was evidently the reason why several participants quit the program. Some of the participants noted that they felt the program did not help them with the transition from work experience to paid employment.1

**e. Placement Stage**
Placement at paid work was meant to take place after the participants had been in the program for about a year, including about six months of unpaid work experience.2 The decision that the participant was ready to switch to paid employment was reached in staff discussions based on his/her performance at the work experience, and on other aspects such as behavior, dress, responsibility, perseverance and punctuality. If participants were not considered ready for paid employment, they were assigned to extended unpaid work experience in order to improve their skills. In cases where the staff decided that a participant was not capable of working in the open market, he or she was referred to sheltered employment.

The placement coordinators used a variety of strategies to find work for the participants, including the Internet, personal connections, and contact with employers for whom previous participants had worked (unpaid and paid). Sometimes they simply went from door to door to ask about jobs. About half of the paid positions that were filled started out as unpaid work

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1 As noted, the unpaid work experience element has been removed from the program in its new format apart from a few cases where it is considered essential.
2 In the new format, placement is scheduled to take place during the first few months of the program.
experience. This was particularly common in Haifa. While the placement coordinators hoped that
the participants would participate actively in the job search, in practice most of them waited until
the coordinators found them a position. On average, the job search lasted 3-4 months, but in some
cases it lasted nearly a year, while the participant continued at the unpaid job, which was
frustrating for the participants and their parents. Some of the placement coordinators asked and
encouraged the parents to help them with the job search, while others preferred not to involve
them on the grounds that the parents were not always aware of the low level of functioning of
their children. The placement coordinators prepared the participants for their job interviews, and
were usually present at the interviews where they presented the participants to the employers, and
often explained the difficulties associated with autism and Asperger's Syndrome.

Most of the participants were placed in large companies or organizations, mainly in office or
warehouse jobs; a few were placed in jobs that required a higher level of skill. The placement
coordinators reported that they tried to accommodate the participants' preferences. Some of the
participants reported that their jobs suited them, but others were disappointed.

In most cases, the placement coordinators provided intensive support during the first days at
work. In addition to assisting the participants, they provided guidance to their bosses about
communicating with the participants; in some cases they also prepared the coworkers. After the
initial period, the meetings with the coordinator became less frequent – at first once a week, then
every two weeks, and eventually once a month, depending on how the participant was adjusting.
As a rule, both the participants and the employers were satisfied with the support from the
 coordinators. A few of the employers reported that they gained a lot from the support; others
noted that they did not feel the need for support or that they were too busy to meet with the
coordinator regularly.

f. Employment of the Participants at the Time of the Follow-Up Interviews

The follow-up interviews with the participants were conducted 2-2.5 years after they first joined
the program – i.e., 12-18 months after completing the year of training. At follow-up all 26
participants were working or studying.3 Eighteen of them were working in the open market, six
were in sheltered employment, and two were studying.

Out of the 18 participants working in the open market at the time of the follow-up interviews, 11
had retained the jobs that the program found for them. The other 7 had left their placement and
found other jobs with the help of their family or other professionals. Most of those working in the
open market were earning minimum wage. One participant was earning more than the minimum
wage and four were earning half or a third of the minimum wage (under the "adjusted minimum

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3 One participant refused to be interviewed in-depth, but gave a short report on his employment status. Another participant who was accepted into the program and had been rapidly placed did not participate in the interviews but information on his employment status was provided by the program staff.
wage” law). Some of the participants were receiving full social benefits from their work, but others were employed through a manpower agency under less favorable conditions. Some reported that they were satisfied with their work, particularly with the sense of belonging to a place of work that was suitable for them and where they were appreciated. Others were functioning well at work, but found the work was boring and that they only stayed on due to the lack of other options. Most of the employers were satisfied with the participants' work, but noted that they needed much more attention than their other employees. The participants also noted that support from their superiors was central to their job retention. At the time of the follow-up interview, two participants were not working; one was studying at the university and the other was in a vocational training course. Both hoped to find skilled work in the future.

At the time of the follow-up interviews, six participants were working in sheltered employment; three of them had been referred directly to the framework without an attempt at placement in the open market because the program staff came to the conclusion that they did not have the necessary skills. All three had emotional problems or ADHD and they had all had evident difficulties during the unpaid work experience in the program. Their difficulties were mainly in their relationships with their superiors. The other three participants working in sheltered employment had made several attempts at placement through the program, but had quit or been dismissed and had eventually been referred to sheltered employment. The parents of the three participants who had not succeeded at their placements in the open market recognized their children's difficulties. However, they also mentioned the program's lack of adequate guidance, absence of contact between the staff and parents and high turnover of placement coordinators as factors that contributed to their children's failure to remain employed in the open market. Some of the participants working in sheltered frameworks felt disappointed and frustrated, but most considered the frameworks suitable for them, at least at that stage, and some were hoping to be able to work in the open market in the future.

4. Conclusion and Discussion

1. Program achievements: At the time of the follow-up interviews, all of the respondents were either working or studying. Most of the respondents (18 out of 26) were working in the open market and most of them were still working at their original placement. In other words, there was significant job retention among those placed. Two of the other participants were studying and six were in sheltered employment. A significant proportion of the participants and their parents reported other changes since participation in the program, such as developing independence and initiative, an increase in self-esteem, and improved social skills.

2. Participants with low-level abilities: The program was intended for people with Asperger's Syndrome and high-functioning autism. This criterion was somewhat relaxed in Jerusalem

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4 In order to encourage employment of people with disability, in certain cases Israeli law allows employers to pay less than the minimum wage to employees with disabilities whose work abilities are diminished, based on an official evaluation of their capacity.
and Haifa since there is no employment program for people with medium-functioning autism in those cities. In fact, some of the participants were admitted even though there was no realistic expectation that they would adjust to work in the open market. This fact reinforces the significance of the findings about the high level of employment and helps to explain why some participants were placed in sheltered frameworks.

3. Additional disabilities and emotional problems: Like most people with autism or Asperger's Syndrome, many of the participants in the program had an additional disability or emotional problem. The most common emotional problems were anxiety, depression, anger, aggression and lack of self-control. The most common disabilities were ADHD and learning difficulties. It was the additional difficulties that usually constituted the main barrier to integration in the program and at work and were more problematic than the difficulties associated with autism.

4. Difficulties with the training course: There were many difficulties associated with the training course, among them: Reluctance of the participants to participate in peer groups, problems of discipline and setting limits, and the participants' difficulty internalizing the contents of the program and understanding/accepting its demands. The facilitators also had difficulty establishing contact with the participants. Some of the participants felt that the training did not help them and some preferred to receive one-on-one assistance based on their own particular needs.

5. Contribution of the training course: Despite the difficulties, a substantial proportion of the participants and their parents reported that through the training course they had acquired skills for the workplace – such as how to write a resume, how to prepare for a job interview and how to accept orders from superiors. They also acquired life skills such as doing their own shopping, cooking, traveling by bus and improving their personal appearance. Some of the participants reported improvement in their communication skills and social relationships, their ability to take on responsibility and be independent, their self-image, their emotional state and their relationship with their parents.

6. Unpaid work experience during the program: Some of the participants benefited greatly from the unpaid work experience and were pleased with it, and some were able to continue working at the same place on a paid basis. Others felt frustrated at having to do the "dirty work" and work for an extended period without pay. In most cases, this part of the program lasted from several months to a year and in two cases lasted for about two years. Apparently, the lengthy duration of the unpaid work was the main reason that several of the participants left the program at all three centers.

7. Finding jobs: The program staff noted the difficulty in finding employers willing to employ the program participants. Ultimately, it took on average about 3-4 months – not considered a very long time – to find work. In some cases, the search took almost a year, which was frustrating for those participants and their parents.

8. Need for vocational training: The program imparts the soft skills necessary for employment. However, more highly skilled work generally requires vocational training or further education. Because of lack of vocational training or higher education participants
with normal intelligence (and, in some cases, particularly high intelligence) were placed in unskilled positions. Only a few found work that matched their intellectual abilities and areas of interest. Many of them complained of boredom and a desire to leave the job. A few participants applied for higher education or vocational training programs in order to find skilled work.

9. *Should people with Asperger's adjust to the job or should the job be adjusted to people with Asperger's?* Evidently, the program worked mainly to help the participants adjust to the demands of the labor market and did less to adapt the places of work to the particular characteristics of the participants. This approach is understandable given the how hard it is to find employers willing to hire people with disabilities. However, it is possible that adapting the work framework by, for example, allowing flexi-time or the possibility of working at home, would enable people with autism or Asperger's to work at jobs suitable for their skills and areas of interest where they can make a greater contribution and have greater satisfaction with their work. Clearly, taking steps in this direction would require the involvement of additional agencies in the government and of employers.

10. *Staff turnover:* The unpaid work experience coordinators and placement coordinators support the participants when they start working. This role is defined as paraprofessional and is a poorly paid, part-time position with no prospects for promotion. The role does not include formal training and qualification in a higher education framework or through the program. However, the coordinators are college graduates with many personal skills and are highly motivated. It may be that the disparity between what the coordinators have to offer and what is offered to them explains the fact that they do not remain in the positions for very long. The high turnover of staff is detrimental to their work in the program at several levels: new staff members need to gain experience working with people with autism or Asperger's Syndrome and familiarize themselves with the labor market and potential employment directions. Mostly, the high turnover does not allow continuous contact with the participants and employers.

11. *Support at work following the placement:* In most cases, the participants and employers were satisfied with the support of the placement coordinators. The parents whose children had left their jobs or been dismissed recognized their children's difficulties, but pointed out several other factors that may perhaps have prevented the termination. These included more support, more contact between the staff and parents, and lower turnover of the coordinators.

Finally, as noted, the program has undergone substantial modification since the training stage was considerably reduced. The study findings are not conclusive regarding the necessity of this change. Some of the participants and their parents considered the training course useful; others felt that it was superfluous. Opinions on the unpaid work experience stage were also divided: some participants believed that the work experience was very valuable and in some cases it led to a permanent paid placement. Others believed that extensive unpaid work experience was frustrating. It is therefore important to examine the outputs of the program in its new format.
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