



Testimony of
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Help Wanted: Small Business Providing Opportunities for All
Before the Small Business Committee
United States House of Representatives
May 19, 2016

Hello Chairman Chabot, Ranking Member Velázquez and Members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about a topic that is of great importance to the autism community: advancing the role and impact of small businesses in employing individuals with autism.

I am Lisa Goring, Executive Vice President of Programs & Services at Autism Speaks. Autism Speaks is the world's leading autism science and advocacy organization, dedicated to funding research to improve the lives of people with autism; increasing awareness of autism spectrum disorders; and advocating for the needs of individuals with autism and their families. Our goal is to connect and empower people with autism and their families with information and resources to improve their quality of life today and into the future. Although we focus on the entire lifespan, Autism Speaks places a significant emphasis on supporting adults on the spectrum, in part by providing tools and resources to expand employment opportunities and workplace supports for individuals with autism.

As the largest wave of children with autism have aged out of school, one of our community's most daunting challenges — finding employment — is being tackled by entrepreneurs and small businesses. Across the country, small businesses are utilizing their unique flexibility to create accommodating and innovative business models that sustainably employ individuals with autism, expose students earlier in their education to real-world work experience, and provide opportunities for work-based learning and technical skill attainment.

Based on current best estimates, evidence suggests that as many as one percent of the adult population have autism. National data indicate that the vast majority of adults with autism are unemployed or underemployed. Moreover, it is estimated that a half million individuals with autism will enter adulthood over the next decade. But while approximately 50,000 young adults with autism reach working age every year in the United States, only a fraction of those individuals are gainfully employed in jobs that match their capabilities.

Employment is a critical component of building a full and productive adult life. Many individuals with autism are fully capable of employment and can have the skills to excel in their chosen field — including in a small business. The barriers to employment for many people with autism often stem from difficulties with communication and social interaction inherent in autism

spectrum disorders. As such, traditional job interviews and the acquisition of the "soft skills" needed to succeed in the workplace can be especially challenging. Small businesses are uniquely positioned to adapt quickly to the needs of these job seekers – including changing traditional interviewing and hiring practices – and then to benefit from the many strengths they have to offer.

Employing individuals with autism yields considerable benefits to the economy at-large, including decreased support costs for this population.¹ Estimated lifetime costs for supporting an adult with autism range between \$1.4 million to \$2.3 million, and the degree to which adults with autism fail to achieve independence contributes to increased lifetime care costs.² Research shows that employing individuals with autism, even with publicly-funded, intensive personal job supports, actually saves government costs by reducing the number of benefits that people with autism need when they are unemployed.³ In addition, employing individuals with autism alleviates some of the pressure on the over-burdened adult service system; when employment supplants traditional adult day supports, we can achieve greater cost efficiency in these programs.⁴

Autism Speaks is working with an integral part of our nation's economy – small businesses – to improve employment outcomes for individuals with autism, increase chances for self-sufficiency and independence, and help businesses improve their bottom line. Over the past three years, our collaborative efforts with the small business community and relevant stakeholders strived to spread awareness about the benefits of employing individuals with autism, develop innovative and sustainable business models and hiring practices, and provide technical assistance to implement best practices. What we have learned is clear—**the innovation and flexibility unique to small businesses and entrepreneurs enable them to lead the way in employing individuals with autism.**

Small businesses are in a position not only to develop new models that employ individuals with autism, but also to innovate in a way that directly responds to local labor market needs. The connection many small businesses have with their community is vital to creating the partnerships necessary to transition young adults into the local workforce, share best practices with other local businesses, and nurture a workforce comprised of people with varying abilities.

Autism Speaks is currently undertaking a small business-focused employment initiative, *Advancing the Role and Impact of Small Businesses in Employing Adults with Autism*, which aims to increase these employment opportunities by connecting entrepreneurs with autism and other small business owners with autism-specific employment consultants who can provide customized technical assistance and help those businesses expand. **Autism Speaks believes the**

¹ Jacob, Andrew et al. "The Costs and Benefits of Employing an Adult with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Systematic Review." Ed. Nouchine Hadjikhani. 2016.

² David Mandell, Sc.D., of the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, and Martin RJ Knapp, Ph.D., of the London School of Economics and Political Science, 2012.

³ Jacob, Andrew et al. "The Costs and Benefits of Employing an Adult with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Systematic Review." Ed. Nouchine Hadjikhani. 2016.

⁴ Ibid.

small business community is uniquely fit to overcome the historical barriers many adults with autism face in their efforts to join the workforce. The first step small businesses can take is to help change the narrative from one of charity to a business-centered representation of the value workers with autism bring to a business.

Changing the Narrative

Despite the low employment rate of individuals with autism, research indicates that they are willing and able to work.⁵ A crucial barrier to these individuals being hired by businesses is low expectations. Too often employers and educators have low expectations about the employment capabilities of individuals with autism. The result is a lack of planning for the future, unavailable accommodations and supports, segregated working conditions, work at noncompetitive pay or no wages at all.

Businesses hire employees to fill a need and support their business' bottom line. However, the popular business narrative for hiring individuals with autism has largely been based on a sense of corporate social responsibility. This narrative must shift to be business-centered and represent the worth, capabilities, and efficiencies that individuals with autism bring to the workforce.

Small businesses with workforces that include employees with intellectual or developmental disabilities consistently report that these employees' performance equals or exceeds that of their coworkers without disabilities. The narrative must be changed to portray workers with autism as a valuable asset to the business, not a risk.

Businesses of all sizes and from all industries are beginning to recognize that hiring individuals with autism can be a cost-effective way to build a diverse and inclusive workforce. Changing the narrative means holding high expectations for individuals with disabilities to achieve employment success after graduating high school and investing in the training and preparation necessary to be a valuable employee. Beginning in secondary school, educators must consider employment as an option for the future and take the proper steps to plan for it – including working with local small businesses.

Invest in the Future

The lack of future planning creates a significant barrier to employment for individuals with autism. Over one-third of young adults with autism do not transition into employment after high school, which is much lower than young adults with other disabilities.⁶ Career and technical skill development are often not prioritized for students with autism. This could be a result of the traditionally low expectations for students with autism to succeed in a career after graduation and other systemic barriers.

Many young adults with autism face a “service cliff” on the last day of high school, when the legal requirement for special education and support services ends and access to needed supports and services drops off dramatically. Federal special education law requires schools to help

⁵ Roux, Anne M., Shattuck, Paul T., Rast, Jessica E., Rava, Julianna A., and Anderson, Kristy, A. *National Autism Indicators Report: Transition into Young Adulthood*. Philadelphia, PA: Life Course Outcomes Research Program, A.J. Drexel Autism Institute, Drexel University, 2015

⁶ Ibid.

transition students with disabilities from school to work in the student's education plan starting at age 16, taking into account the student's strengths, preferences, and interests. A student's transition plan is a roadmap for the future. This is the time in a young person's life to develop the skills needed for employment that are matched with local labor force demand.

Historically, employment services for individuals with disabilities has not been centered on the strengths, interests, or preferences of the individual seeking employment. The focus has been on filling the jobs available rather than building skills around a career pathway. As for other working adults, individuals with autism deserve to follow and prepare for a career path matched with their skills, interests, and preferences.

Unfortunately, many young adults with autism do not have the opportunity to participate in structured high-quality programs designed to help them make informed choices about what careers they may want to pursue.⁷ Youth with autism are frequently channeled into inadequate education or work programs because of low expectations and discriminatory assumptions about disability.⁸

The role of small business during this transition planning process can be monumental, as it connects students with autism to employment within their community. Small business can provide career exploration, internships, apprenticeships, skill development, and real-world work experience for students preparing for adulthood and employment.

Although these experiential learning opportunities have proven to be a huge predictor for employment success, nearly 26 percent of young adults with autism did not receive any services that could help them become employed, go on to post-secondary education, or live independently.⁹ Small businesses can provide work-based learning experiences for students with autism as they commonly do with students without autism. Existing programs including vocational rehabilitation, special education and career and technology education can be leveraged by students with autism to help support them working in a small business. Without equitable access to these on-the-job learning experiences, students with autism will continue to face barriers accessing career pathways that lead so many other students to employment.

As part of the local and regional economy, small businesses provide an array of career pathway options for individuals with autism. If more small businesses provided work-based learning and employment opportunities, greater numbers of students with autism could match their interests and skills with the labor market demand to secure sustainable employment.

⁷ Luecking, R., & Fabian, E. S. (2000). Paid internships and employment success for youth in transition. *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals*, 23(2), 205-221.

⁸ Fairweather, J.S., & Shaver, D.M. (1990). A troubled future? Participation in postsecondary education by youths with disabilities. *Journal of Higher Education*, 61, 332-348.

⁹ Roux, Anne M., Shattuck, Paul T., Rast, Jessica E., Rava, Julianna A., and Anderson, Kristy, A. *National Autism Indicators Report: Transition into Young Adulthood*. Philadelphia, PA: Life Course Outcomes Research Program, A.J. Drexel Autism Institute, Drexel University, 2015

Effective job matching between the person and their environment, when combined with the use of appropriate supports, allows adults with autism to be productive and valuable to their employers, ultimately maintaining their ongoing employment.¹⁰ Educating businesses on the use of accommodations and supports could lead to more recruitment and hiring of individuals with autism.

Benefits of Employing Individuals with Autism

Autism Speaks and many other organizations are working hard to educate the business community about people with autism and what they are truly capable of. Employers are often unaware of the common strengths shared by many people with autism, including intense attention to detail, commitment to quality and consistency, creative and "out of the box" thinking, excelling on repetitive tasks, lower turnover rates and absenteeism, honesty and loyalty. These qualities have been verified by business that have benefited from recent autism-specific hiring initiatives. Such companies have also recognized the need to better identify with their customer base, a growing percentage of whom is personally impacted by autism. Employers are also often unaware of the low cost and high impact of workplace accommodations and benefits of hiring individuals with autism. All employees need the right tools and work environment to effectively perform their jobs. Similarly, individuals with autism may need workplace adjustments, or accommodations, to maximize their productivity. Enhancing the opportunities for individuals with autism to find sustainable employment is beneficial from a societal perspective, but also from an economic perspective. Employers benefit by retaining valuable employees, improving productivity and morale, reducing workers' compensation and training costs, and diversifying their workforce. These benefits can be obtained with little investment. Employers report that a high percentage (58%) of job accommodations cost absolutely nothing to make, while the rest typically cost only \$500.¹¹ Adults with autism can maintain consistent hours worked per week for significant periods of time, demonstrating reliability.¹² Employers have also found workers with autism to be their most loyal and dedicated employees.

Autism Speaks' Small Business Initiative

While research shows that people with autism make excellent employees, not all small businesses know how to effectively recruit, retain, and advance individuals with autism. From Autism Speaks' Small Business initiative, we learned that creating communities of experts and invested partners who share information about accommodations and best practices is essential to helping small businesses utilize this untapped workforce.

Our goals for this continuing initiative are simple: first, we aim to increase employment opportunities for all adults with autism in the United States; and second, we are committed to becoming a central resource where employers – both small and large – can share models and best practices, find useful resources to help enhance and grow their own initiatives, and provide

¹⁰ Hagner D, Cooney BF. "I Do That for Everybody": Supervising Employees With Autism. Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities. 2005

¹¹ Job Accommodation Network. "Workplace accommodations: Low cost, high impact" Original 2005. Updated 2015.

¹² Schaller J, Yang NK. "Competitive employment for people with autism: correlates of successful closure in competitive and supported employment". Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin. 2005

support and information to individuals and families, service providers, schools, community partners and committed employers who are hiring adults with autism.

We developed a database on AutismSpeaks.org and another platform where interested parties can share information, learn from one another and grow their networks in order to create greater opportunities for workers with autism. Our Family and Adult Services Team hosted a series of Town Hall-style meetings across the country to spread the word about small businesses that had promising practices for replication and engaged members of each community in dynamic discussion about opportunities that small businesses have in their local areas. At each town hall, the panelists and employers in the audience spoke of the strengths and achievements of their employees with autism and the success of their businesses as a result. The Town Halls convincingly demonstrated that small businesses and entrepreneurs are uniquely positioned to respond to the increasing numbers of adults with autism who are eager to work.

Autism Speaks sought to replicate the successes of promising small businesses and to help implement best practices in different regions of the United States. Our goal was to mobilize technical assistance experts and disability employment consultants across the country, and make their expertise more accessible to the autism and small business community. Rather than a “one size fits all” approach, this technical assistance program is based on the individual needs, goals and financial resources of each small business. Our aim is to replicate best practices for small business employers in order to increase employment of people with autism.

Last year, Autism Speaks established pilot initiatives in the Midwest Region and in South Florida. The Small Business Accelerator Programs features an 8-session curriculum that focuses on different topics and exercises designed to help participants define the steps they need to take in order to build sustainable jobs and plan for long-term success. A crucial goal for the project was to build a strong, regional community of experts who can continue to share knowledge and help others long after the pilot project concluded.

We learned from successful business models that community support is critical to getting the word out about a business. Marketing style also played an impact on success. Businesses marketing the quality and usefulness of their product—as opposed to marketing the fact that the staff are people with autism—proved to have more successful campaigns. We also learned that staff and/or business owners with autism must find meaning in the tasks involved in order to put in the hard work required for sustained success.

Due to the overwhelmingly positive response to the Small Business Accelerator pilot programs, Autism Speaks will fund additional grants to technical assistance experts or disability employment consultants in three new regions in 2016. The program seeks to build capacity and scalability by addressing the significant knowledge gap that prevents more small businesses and entrepreneurs from starting their own businesses, or developing existing businesses, that employ individuals with autism; build an engaged network of subject-matter experts who can provide technical assistance and support for other small businesses around the country; and provide opportunities for interaction of entrepreneurs and build a community of businesses who serve as models and inspirations to others.

Looking Forward

Spreading awareness about the benefits of hiring individuals with autism and the low cost of providing accommodations is crucial. To do this, strong, regional and local communities of experts who can continue to share promising employment practices and sustainable business models that support the hiring of individuals with autism and other disabilities must be built throughout the country.

Business associations, local chambers of commerce, local industry associations or other employer networks are in a powerful position to help their small business members learn about best practices and take steps toward hiring qualified individuals, specifically at the local level. Business associations can help develop disability inclusion initiatives that are region or locale specific and engage their members in this important workforce development issue. Business associations, in partnerships with schools and employment service providers, can perform a range of activities to promote hiring, such as formal job placement programs and business education events.

Leveraging small businesses as a key partner in workforce development strategies could better prepare youth with autism for employment and provide employers with a pipeline of skilled workers. National, state, and local workforce development strategies should collaborate with small businesses to increase access to work-based learning and work experience for secondary school students to raise employment and independent living aspirations of youth with autism and their families while demonstrating to local employers the value individuals with autism bring to the workforce.

A job is more than the key to independence enjoyed by most members of our society; it is in large part the way we as Americans identify ourselves. Individuals living with autism deserve the opportunity to contribute as productive workers and actively improve their quality of life. And businesses today have a tremendous opportunity to access a largely untapped labor pool of qualified job candidates who happen to have an autism spectrum disorder diagnosis.

Autism Speaks remains dedicated to connecting individuals with autism to employment opportunities and looks forward to the small business community utilizing this untapped, valuable, and dedicated workforce.