




Support in the workplace for adults with autism

Peter F. Gerhardt, Ed.D.
Organization for Autism Research




I first met Max about 10 years ago at a meeting to determine employment options. “So tell me Max,” I said after the introductions were completed, “what type of job do you think you would like?” He thought for a moment and then proceeded to describe what he envisioned as the perfect job. “First” he said, “I don’t want to get up early. Second, I don’t want to sweat.” He thought a minute longer then added, “Oh yeah, and I want to make a lot of money.” Fine, I thought, he wants the same job as I do.

Main Entry: in·de·pen·dent

Pronunciation: "in-de-'pen-dent

Function: *adjective*

1 : not dependent: as a (1) : not subject to control by others : (2) : not affiliated with a larger controlling unit <an *independent* bookstore> **b (1) : not requiring or relying on something else : not contingent** <an *independent conclusion*> (2) : not looking to others for one's opinions or for guidance in conduct (3) : not bound by or committed to a political party **c (1) : not requiring or relying on others (as for care or livelihood)** <*independent of her parents*> (2) : being enough to free one from the necessity of working for a living <a person of *independent* means> **d : showing a desire for freedom** <an *independent* manner>



Does an individual have to be independent to be employed? Certainly not but there does need to be some degree of interdependence.

Main entry: interdependent

Pronunciation: In-ter-di-pen-duh nt

Function: *Adjective*

1. mutually dependent; 2. depending on each other.

Some relevant research

Hagner & Cooney (2005) interviewed the supervisors of 14 successfully employed individuals with autism to examine their supervisory practices and their perceptions of employees with autism. Supervisors evaluated their employees with autism highly, and qualitative analysis found that a set of specific supervisory accommodation strategies were commonly associated with successful supervision. These included:

- maintaining a consistent schedule & set of job responsibilities; (activity schedules/task analysis)
- using organizers to structure the job (visual supports)
- reducing idle or unstructured time (DRA)
- being direct when communicating with the employee, and (present a clear and accurate Sd)
- providing reminders and reassurances (prompting and reinforcement)

Considerations toward successful employment for learners with ASD

- There is a need to redefine work readiness
- Job sampling with sufficient instructional intensity to develop competencies is critical
- Developmental jobs v. Career Development
- A service economy requires one to be proficient at job carving
- Co-worker training and/or personal advocacy
- Autism Awareness needs to promote competence over disability
- Attend to the social dimension of the job
- Job match considerations

What is Job Match?

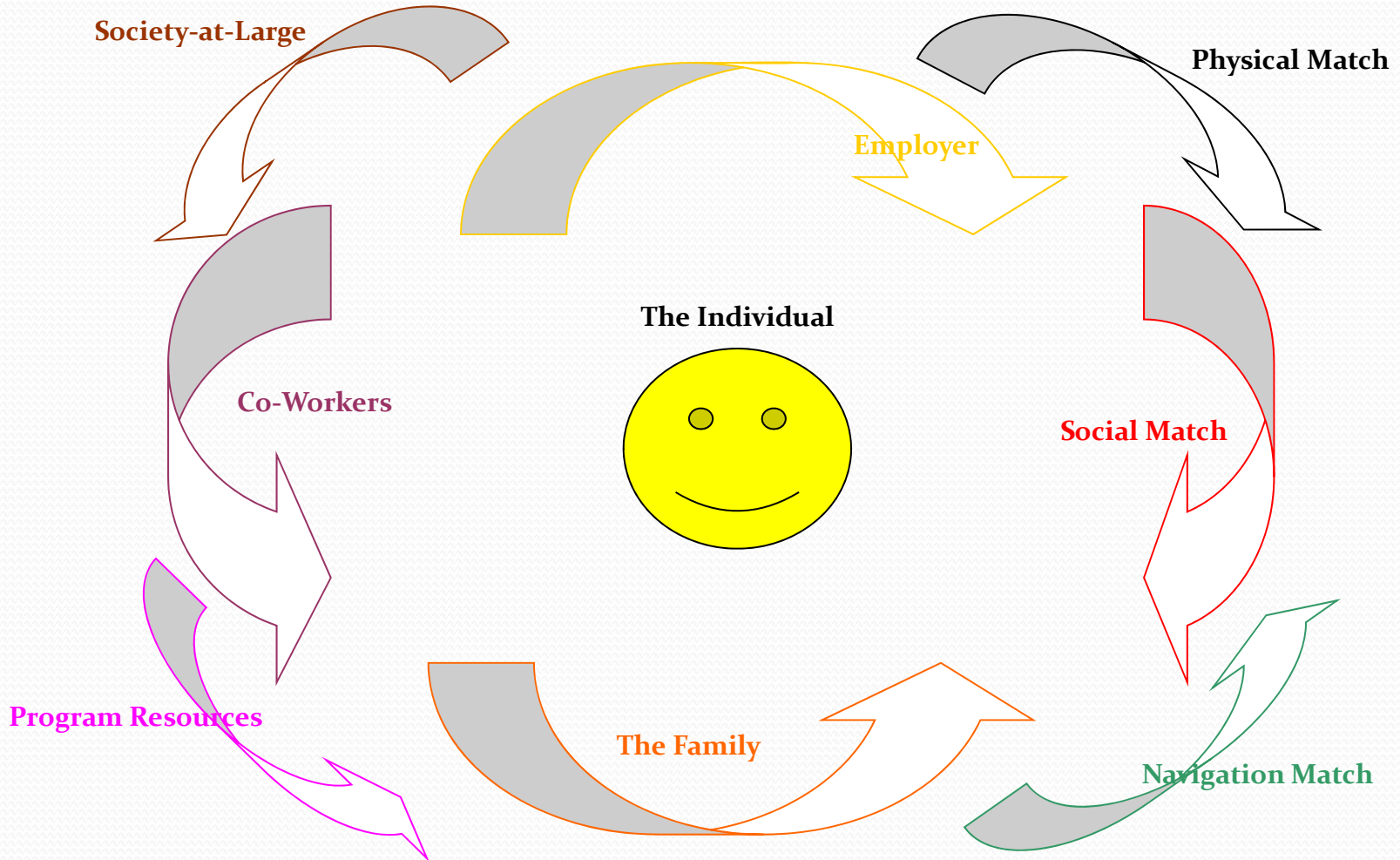
- Job Match (or goodness of fit; environmental congruence, etc.) is the extent to which a particular job meets the individual's needs in terms of challenge, interest, comfort, camaraderie, status, hours, pay & benefits. Ideally, as we move through the job market, we get closer and closer to our ideal job match.



In the end, effective employment development and support requires a reconceptualization of who our constituents are to include:

- *Individual with an autism spectrum disorder*
- *Their family*
- *Their employer and coworkers*
- *The community-at-large who benefits from their work.*

A few of the relevant factors...



The Individual

- Was there adequate and intensive transition programming provided prior to graduation?
- What are the individual's interests?
- What are the individual's areas of strength? Of deficit?
- What are their current communicative competencies?
- What level of support will the individual need in the areas of life, social, and navigation skills?
- What safety skills do they possess?
- What job experience (if any) does the individual possess?
- What was the experience of the employer and the individual prior to graduation.

The Physical Match

- Is the space accessible and other individuals willing to accommodate
- Challenging work that is, in effect, “doable”.
- Job site that will not make the individual anxious..such as loud noises, smell, lights etc.
- Does the job require the individual to stand or to sit? Walk or remain in one place? Start early or start late?
- Is the job environment too hot, cold, loud, dark, etc.?
- Are the physical demands of the job compatible with the abilities/preferences of the individual (i.e. heavy lifting, etc.)?

The Social Match

- What social skills need to be assessed prior to employment (based upon on-site observation)?
- Will there be ample time for social interactions with other employees?
- Does the job require too much social interaction with co-workers? Customers?
- Does the employer offer after hours social activities such as softball, bowling, etc.
- What type of dress code does the job require?
- How might the physical environment affect the social demands of the job (cubicle vs. desk, seat near a doorway, etc.) Can they be modified?

The Navigation Match

- Safe and manageable environment
- Close proximity to home or accessible by reasonable transportation options.
- Can the individual navigate all components of the environment (elevators, stairs, cafeteria, restrooms etc.)?

The Family

- Families are full partners in the process
- What is the family's overall vision of employment for the individual?
- Maintain high (yet reasonable) expectations for their son or daughter in terms of employment
- Support and encourage the individual to remain employed
- Assurances and commitment of attendance
- Keep channels of communication open
- Be willing to provide transportation in a pinch.
- Is there someone in the family who has an "in" at a potential place of employment (ex. Family business)?

Program Resources

- Highly trained, dedicated and qualified staff and administration
- Commitment to career development v. job placement
- Able to offer training to employers and co-workers
- Understands that businesses are not nonprofits.
- Commitment to data-based decision making and evidence-based practice
- Reasonable staff to client ratio
- Access to reliable transportation
- Assurances and commitment of attendance
- Intensive support in early stages of employment followed by data driven and structured fading
- Clear, high expectations of the individual.

The Employer

- Willing to commit to time and sensitive to accommodations
- Does the employer have experience of employing individuals with disabilities?
- Is willing to be part of the team on a regular basis
- Are able to define clear expectations and duties for employee.
- Able to promote equality and fairness to all employees.
- Able to empower the individual
- Does not look at this job as a “Token” or favor (i.e., Realistic and needed job, not one made up for the individual)
- Is willing to allow training for co-workers?
- Can identify areas of need for the employer/business?

Co-workers

- Willing to participate in training
- Are there co-workers who can be counted on for support if needed (i.e. “natural supports)?
- Willing to treat all coworkers the same
- Willing to be honest and candid
- Sensitive to, and accepting of, any special accommodations.

Society-at-Large

- Accept the individual as a contributing member of the community
- Avoid “feeling sorry” for the individual.
- Empower the individual
- Accept the “gifts” the person has to offer
- Respect the person as any employed adult in a job that is job socially significant, of value to the community, and personally fulfilling/significant for the individual?