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Overview

Persever8 is a North Carolina 501(c)3 nonprofit organization founded to address the widespread and persistent problem of unemployment/underemployment among adults with High-Functioning ASD.

- Late 1980s: Dramatic increase in ASD diagnoses begins; these individuals are now adults and need targeted job training programs.
- Lack of employment training programs focused on developing skills commensurate with abilities; this leads population to rely on part-time, minimum wage jobs that are better suited to others with ASD.
- Limited employment opportunities leads to increased pressure on families to save money to last the life span of the adult-child with ASD. Lifetime cost of HFA is \$859,000/person (Sharpe and Baker, 2011)
- Current public education system doesn't prepare for independent living (NLTS 2 Study)

Opportunities: Technology Industry

Persever8's goal is to provide technology instruction that will prepare our trainees for living-wage employment opportunities in the tech sector, job skills education to help navigate the workplace culture, and life skills to educate and prepare for the responsibilities and demands of independent life.

- The technology industry faces significant challenges: Finding and retaining talent, high turnover, and error rates in jobs that are repetitive and monotonous (software testing, data cleansing)
- Skills that are in demand in this industry are those possessed by many in the H-F ASD population:
 - Affinity for and understanding of technology
 - Excellent memory skills
 - Ability to concentrate for extended periods of time on repetitive activities
 - Sequential, logical thinking skills
 - Ability to deal with subtle details and changes
 - Visual thinking and learning skills
 - Persistence and comfort with repetition and routine tasks
 - High levels of integrity and loyalty

Innovations in Training

Innovative and comprehensive program that addresses the challenges many adults with ASD face transitioning to both employment and independent living. This model addresses significant areas of need for the population.

- Moving away from traditional model of part-time, low-skill, minimum wage jobs.
- Recognizing skills/abilities of the population and that there are employment opportunities in the tech sector commensurate with their abilities.
- Understanding that the inclusion of supports/accommodations helps with success in the workplace and job-retention.



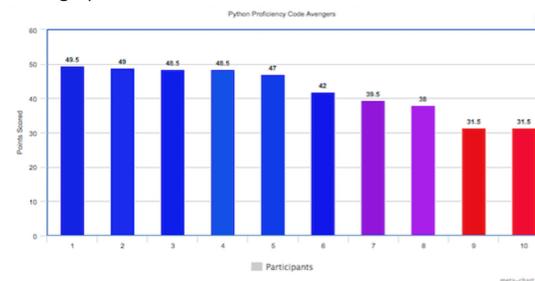
- Ongoing direct support for supervisors and Persever8 graduates will help ensure a smooth transition to the workplace..
- Persever8 staff welcomes feedback from the employer and the staff at the worksite, as this helps to ensure that everyone has a positive, supportive work experience.

Pilot Programs

There is much anecdotal evidence that technology jobs can be a good fit for persons on the autism spectrum. Because it was not clear to us - even after studying similar companies - whether the majority of people with high functioning autism have an aptitude for these jobs, we decided to look more closely at this question.

Winter 2016 –Summer 2016: Launched (more formal) second pilot program

- 5 months in duration, 11 students, ages 18-25
- Donation of virtual classroom from Code Avengers
- Students learned Python programming language, team building and life skills
- 91% of students completed the program
- Results in graph below



Blue Range: 40-50 = Proficient

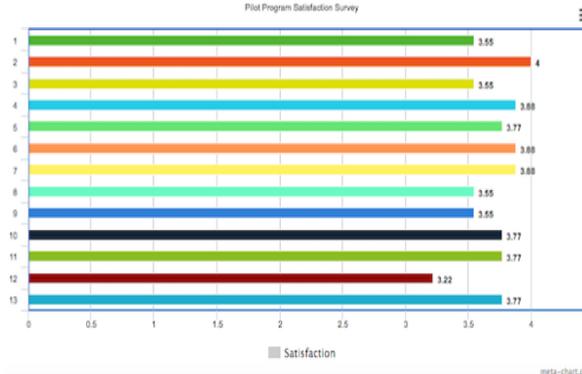
Purple Range: 35-39.5 = Average

Red Range: Below 35 = Poor

Above are the results of student performance in the technical aspects of the pilot program for those who completed the program. Based on these results, 60% of the participants who completed the program were able to learn the course material and apply the concepts proficiently. The students who struggled with the technical part of the curriculum continued to attend each week and participate in the technical, team building and life skills portions of the program.

Pilot Program Satisfaction Survey and Results

1. Online learning is a good way for me to learn things.
2. Learning Python online has been a good way to learn a coding language.
3. The online lessons make sense to me.
4. I felt comfortable asking the class volunteers for help when I got stuck.
5. Knowing there is someone to help me with questions makes me less anxious about online learning.
6. The class volunteers were helpful when I had a question.
7. The team building exercises helped me get to know the other participants.
8. I enjoyed the team building exercises.
9. I understand why team-building exercises are important for the real world.
10. It was helpful to have visitors with ASD speak to us.
11. I feel I know more about my ASD because I attended the pilot program.
12. I feel I know more about my thinking and learning style because I attended the pilot program.
13. I enjoyed meeting new people in the pilot program.



Training Program Impact

Financial

- Income range for software testing: \$38,000-\$66,000
- Higher incomes to better standard of living; increased access to goods, services, and community.

Emotional

- Establishing support system (beyond family) with other trainees with ASD is critical for transition success.
- Employment provides a forum that promotes personal dignity and has been demonstrated to improve quality of life in individuals with ASD as well as improve cognitive performance. (Hendricks, 2010)
- Taking part in the pilot program was a positive experience for the participants.
- Jobs commensurate with skills leads to greater job satisfaction and more emotional stability.

Physical

- Higher income allows greater access to health care.
- Stronger connections in the community can lead to fewer mental health problems.



Collaborations



The CIDD recognized the need to address the employment crisis in the ASD population, and identified Persever8 as a strong pilot for the community. Support and participation of LEND Fellow and Trainee enhanced program experience.



Both Code HS and Code Avengers donated virtual classrooms for Persever8's pilot programs and provided technical support for program participants.

The TEACCH Autism Program at UNC Chapel Hill is collaborating with Persever8 in the development of Adaptive Skills curriculum.



Launch Chapel Hill and The CUBE both provided access to essential services in Persever8's early stages. This included consultation with attorneys, CPA's, marketing and public relations professionals, access to interns and collaborating with other departments on campus for help with business development.

Impact and Challenges

Impact: Training and placing people with ASD in technology jobs can have a significant financial impact on the state (in which the individual resides), families, and members of the ASD population.

- Lifetime cost of HFA is \$859,000/person (Sharpe and Baker, 2011)
- With increased access to professional jobs in technology, these **costs** can be converted to **income**, and positively impact the high unemployment/underemployment rate among this population.
- In NC, the annual state income tax for an individual making \$50,000/year is \$2,465. Over the duration of a 35-year career, this converts to \$86,275/person in revenue for the State.
- The typical employee with ASD working 25 hours/week in a minimum wage job contributes \$110 in state income tax annually. Over a 35-year career, this individual will only pay \$3,850.
- Living-wage jobs lead to greater inclusion in workplaces and communities, less dependence on government benefits and family support, and greater opportunities for self-determination.

Challenges: While the AUCD community realizes the skills this population possesses, we are ahead of the rest of society in this regard.

- Significant barrier to entry into the market: Lack of understanding of skills many members of this population possess, fear and anxiety about ASD.

References

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