What We Know About Employers' Perspectives on Successfully Integrating Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorders in the Workplace

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the research question "what do we know about organizational leadership behaviors or characteristics that create positive employment outcomes for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)?" Multiple studies have reviewed the experiences of individuals with ASD, disability and vocational service providers, teachers, and family members to try and improve employment outcomes for individuals with ASD by identifying factors associated with successful transition to work. Research demonstrates that job activities that encourage and support independence reduce ASD symptoms and increase daily living skills in adults. However, there are very few empirical studies that investigate the role of organizational leadership in integrating adults with ASD into the workplace. The limited studies available indicate that there are four key leadership behaviors or characteristics that are important for those leading individuals with ASD: providing clear and direct communication, knowing about ASD, providing individualized consideration, and creating a work environment accepting of neurodiversity.

Keywords

Autism Spectrum Disorders, Primary skills, Awareness.

Organizational Leadership: Behaviors and Characteristics That Create Positive Employment Outcomes for Individuals on the Autism Spectrum

Our societies, already struggling with the political complexities of employment, financial crisis, and migration issues, in the next decade will have to confront another challenge: how to employ and care for the wave of individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) about to enter adulthood. According to Autism Speaks' 2017 report on Autism and Health, in the US alone 500,000 individuals with ASD will enter the workforce by 2027. Leigh and Du [1] found that the annual medical, non-medical, and efficiency costs of ASD combined were estimated to be $268 billion for 2015 and $461 billion for 2025. If the numbers of individuals with ASD continue to grow, ASD will likely become more costly than diabetes and ADHD by 2025 [2].

Research demonstrates that job activities that encourage and support independence reduce ASD symptoms and increase daily living skills in adults [3-5]. However, most organizational cultures and leaders are ill-prepared to integrate the coming influx of individuals with ASD into the workplace because modern organizational cultures and authority figures rely on social and communication skills - skills that individuals with ASD struggle to master-to manage and lead teams. Compounding this issue, most leadership training programs and academic research into successful organizational leadership practices emphasize relationship, emotional motivation, and communication skills as the primary skills of leadership, perpetuating the challenge for individuals with ASD [6-8].

As the coming wave of individuals with ASD enter adulthood it will become increasingly important for leaders in communities, companies, and governments to understand and appreciate the differences in leading individuals with ASD versus their neurotypical peers in order to create positive outcomes for individuals with ASD and reap the anticipated benefits of a neurodiverse workforce. This article addresses the research question "what do we know about leadership behaviors or characteristics that create positive employment outcomes for individuals with ASD?"

State of the Literature on Leadership, Autism, and the Workplace

Multiple studies have reviewed the experiences of individuals

with ASD, disability and vocational service providers, teachers, and family members to try and improve employment outcomes by identifying individual factors associated with successful transition to work [3,9,10]. However, few empirical studies examine employer perspectives on employing individuals with ASD [11] and even fewer studies examine the relationship between leadership and employment outcomes for individuals with ASD. The few studies which had been done prior to 2015 were limited by poor methodology, poor description of participants, small sample size, and a lack of randomization [12].

The limited research available on employer perspectives on adults with ASD in the workplace found that employers were concerned about their ability to appropriately communicate and interact with individuals with disabilities [13]. Employers lacked confidence in their organization's ability to integrate and accommodate individuals with disabilities and frequently did not know how to communicate appropriately with employees with ASD [13,14]. Rashid, Thompson-Hodgetts, and Nicholas' review of grey literature found that workplace accommodation was the predominate theme in employers' published communication about individuals with ASD.

Organizational Leadership Theory and Autism
Modern leadership research supports the idea that leadership that engages employees as whole human beings increases productivity for the business [15]. Positive leadership theories, which are the basis of modern leadership research, are characterized by an increased focus on followers and the relationships between leaders and followers [8]. The root of the positive leadership theories, transforming leadership (also called transformational leadership), was introduced by James MacGregor Burns in his 1978 book Leadership [6]. Burns described transforming leadership as "the reciprocal process of mobilizing, by persons with certain motives and values, various economic, political, and other resources in a context of competition and conflict, in order to realize goals independently or mutually held by both leaders and followers" (p. 425). Transforming leadership happened when leaders were able to leverage their personalities and vision to inspire followers toward a common goal [16].

Transformational leadership theory underpins most of modern leadership research because of the theory's strong research base supporting its positive influence on followers. Transformational leadership has been correlated with followers' awareness, confidence, motivation, performance, and satisfaction as well as with leaders' emotional intelligence [17,18]. It is therefore unsurprising that transformational leadership increases employee empowerment [19] given employee empowerment's correlation with leaders' emotional intelligence [20].

Transformational leadership's reliance on emotional motivation and social and communication skills - all skills that individuals with ASD struggle to master - suggests that many of the leadership theories and popular lines of research in the early 21st century probably are at best inappropriate and at worst harmful for

employees with ASD [21]. Parr, Hunter, and Ligon's study on transformational leadership and employees with ASD found that transformational leadership increased these employees' anxiety and was related to these employees' lower organizational commitment.

Organizational Leadership Behaviors Linked to Positive Outcomes
Multiple scholars have found that leadership behavior played an important role in facilitating success for adults with ASD in the workplace in part because leaders are positioned to model messages about the importance of inclusion and create individualized workplace experiences for followers with ASD [22-25]. Parr and Hunter found that "demonstrating support and consideration, upholding values and a balanced perspective, and providing some degree of structure" (p. 551) were important behaviors for leaders working with individuals with ASD. According to one study, leadership behavior accounted for 34% of the variance in outcomes for employees with ASD [26]. The limited research available on leadership behavior and employment outcomes for individuals with ASD suggests there are four key interdependent leadership behaviors and characteristics important for those leading this population: providing clear and direct communication, knowing about ASD, providing individualized consideration, and creating a work environment accepting of neurodiversity.

Clear, Direct, Communication
Multiple studies have found that communication was a key element of effective leadership [27-29] and research on individuals with ASD in the workplace suggest that leader communication is particularly important for individuals with this population [24,30]. Most of the research on improving employer/employee communication when the employee has ASD is focused on interventions that improve the communication skills of the employee; however, some researchers have begun focusing on the communication exchange itself - rather than singularly on the individual with the disability-to improve employer/employee [31]. This line of research focuses on not only on improving the communication skills of the individual with disabilities and the leaders and coworkers working with that employee but also on identifying and addressing contextual factors influencing the communication exchange [14].

Employer Knowledge of ASD
The degree to which leaders understand ASD impacts how well employees with ASD perform in the workplace. A leader's knowledge and understanding of ASD enhanced communication between the leader and the Autistic employee while facilitating positive relationship growth and minimizing conflict [26,30,32,33]. Organizational understanding of ASD also facilitated leaders' and coworkers' ability to socially accept and create accommodations for individuals with ASD [24,34].

Individualized Consideration
The degree to which organizational leaders are able to understand, appreciate, and accommodate employees with ASD's unique abilities and needs is the core of individualized consideration, and individualized consideration is the root behavior necessary

for successful leadership of individuals with ASD [30,34,35]. Individualized consideration impacts every aspect of the relationship between leaders and employees with ASD, and the leader's willingness and ability to adjust work environments, task assignments, and communication practices are key factor in employees with ASD's success.

Work Environment

The work environment includes a variety of cultural, task specific, and general accommodations for employees as well as the general atmosphere of a workplace. An organization's diversity climate, level of psychological security, and level of inclusion - all elements influenced by leadership behavior-probably are pillars of successful work environments for individuals with ASD [29]. Disability confidence, which Lindsay et al., identified as being evidenced by a supportive and inclusive culture that leads and models social change, is critical for employers to socially include individuals with disabilities. Organizations often rely on Autism experts to help create and facilitate positive workplace environments and interventions for individuals with ASD [23,30, 36]. Workplace training on ASD for neurotypical managers and coworkers is one indicator of a work environment conducive for individuals on the Autism spectrum.

Conclusion

As the coming wave of individuals with ASD enter adulthood it will become increasingly important for leaders in communities, companies, and governments to understand and appreciate the differences and similarities in leading individuals with ASD versus their neurotypical peers. However, modern leadership research and practice probably cannot provide sufficient guidance to leaders aiming to integrate individuals with ASD into the workplace.

Transformational leadership theory underpins most of modern leadership research because of the strong research base supporting transformational leadership's positive influence on neurotypical followers.

However, the theory's reliance on emotional motivation and social and communication skills-all skills that individuals with ASD struggle to master - suggests that many of the leadership theories and popular lines of research in the early 21st century probably are at best inappropriate and at worst harmful for employees with ASD. While there is limited research on what type of leadership would be more appropriate for leading individuals with ASD, research available suggests there are four key interdependent leadership behaviors and characteristics: providing clear and direct communication, knowing about ASD, providing individualized consideration, and creating a work environment accepting of neurodiversity.

Avenues of Future Research

There are multiple avenues of further research which will allow scholars to more fully understand the relationship between organizational leadership and employment outcomes for individuals with ASD. Scott et al. (2015) and Goldfarb, Gal, and Gadon's [37] findings that employers and individuals with ASD hold disparate perspectives on the role of work, appropriate accommodation, and employer/employee responsibilities-while only two studies-suggest that more research is necessary to uncover what employers believe are appropriate boundaries for workplace accommodations for individuals with ASD. Additionally emotional intelligence has been found to mediate communication, collaboration, and caring in leaders [27,38], suggesting that studies investigating the role that emotional intelligence plays in creating successful employment outcomes for individuals with ASD could shed light on how organizational leaders could develop positive work environments and more effectively provide individualized consideration for employees on the Autism spectrum. Lastly, additional large-scale, empirical research focused on identifying specific organizational leadership behaviors, leadership training needs, and organizational culture elements that mediate positive employment outcomes for individuals with ASD are also needed.

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