**ECOSYSTEM APPROACH TO EMPLOYMENT AND AUTISM**

**WHAT WE KNOW**
In comparison to the general population and other disability groups, adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder (autism) demonstrate the lowest rate of employment. This is unfortunate given that employment has many benefits to one’s health and well-being such as improved self-confidence, life purpose, improved finances, increased independence and social connectedness.

We’re learning that getting and keeping a job for someone with autism involves many components within one’s social world. It therefore seems important to consider not only the individual with autism but the surrounding “ecosystem”.

**WHAT IS AN ECOSYSTEM**
An ecosystem is a network of interconnected parts. The employment ecosystem (Figure 1) illustrates the critical intersecting elements of:
- the individual with autism
- their family or natural supports
- supportive agencies
- the workplace
- the broader community
- policies / government

**WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH TELL US**
Successful employment is often a result of the interaction of multi-layered, intersecting systems, resources and individuals. The extent of employment opportunity and potential are often inextricably linked to both internal resources and the broader system of family, agencies, community, workplace and policy. Collectively these stakeholders and systems play an integrative role that can either positively or negatively influence access to and retention of employment. Actions taken to enhance and support different areas of the ecosystem can have a positive impact on employment outcomes as exemplified by the EmploymentWorks Canada (EWC) program.

**COMPONENTS OF THE ECOSYSTEM**
Individuals with autism have a range of foundational traits and job focused skills that influence employment readiness.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment Readiness</th>
<th>Occupational Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual level of pre-employment/employment skills and core life skills</td>
<td>Interests, strengths, importance of work in a person’s life</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ASD Presentation</th>
<th>Well-Being</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social communication, repetitive behaviours, interests and sensory sensitivities</td>
<td>Self-management, self-esteem, mental health, quality of life</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

EWC considers and monitors these aspects relative to tailored programming. Individual goal setting with participants is a key component of the program. Staff work collaboratively with participants to identify and generate goals that are important and meaningful to the individual, while continuing to build on strengths and supporting areas in which the individual seeks further development.

Participants’ rating of, and satisfaction with, their performance on individual goals are noted to have significantly improved over the course of the EWC program.


*Click on the image to access the paper at www.springerlink.com*
KEY ELEMENTS OF THE EMPLOYMENT ECOSYSTEM 
& A BRIEF APPLICATION OF CONCEPTS WITHIN EWC

Family members and friends can play a central role in the employment experience for individuals with autism. Advocacy, providing transportation and navigating services likely represent only a few ways that families or significant others support a youth or adult with autism. Parents of individuals in the EWC program provide these types of support, but also report that their son/daughter’s program involvement and greater independence offer hope to parents that the individual can become more self-sufficient in the future.

Employment support services may be pivotal to job access and sustainability for individuals with autism, yet the availability of appropriate and accessible services is often limited. Ideally, these services offer assessment of job fit, training, placement, job coaching, customized employment and employer capacity building. For many participants, EWC is an early step on their journey toward employment. EWC staff often work collaboratively with employment agencies to enhance ecosystem awareness and seek broader understanding for tailored capacity building. As an example, community agencies and/or EWC host or co-host events for stakeholders to build knowledge and linkage for greater system capacity.

Community-level needs for individuals with autism include quality housing, transportation, health and mental health services, income sufficiency, food security and leisure opportunities. The availability of community services to address these needs is critical; if absent, such gaps negatively influence employment. Given the key role of the community, EWC focuses on increased connections with the community and building community engagement. This happens through program delivery within the community, and linking participants to supports in their community, as needed. For example, a substantial number of participants who experience high levels of anxiety and/or depression have led to the development of stronger connections with mental health professionals and services in the community.

Employers, co-workers and the work environment are factors that are critical in the employment experience. Awareness and openness of employers and co-workers to individual diversity, as well as an array of organizational supports cumulatively may increase job access and retention. EWC participants have benefited from employers and coworkers who are proactive and supportive, and who are clear in conveying job requirements and offering support for the transition to employment settings. A number of participants in EWC have ultimately been hired by employers participating in the program; indeed a win-win for both the participants and employers!

Obstacles / Barriers
- Insufficient / misguided support
- Limited advocacy skills
- Financial challenges

Supports / Facilitators
- Navigation
- Transportation
- Coordination
- Encouragement
- Envisioning possibility

Assist with:
- Housing security
- Health / mental health
- Income security
- Transportation
- Educational support
- Food security
- Leisure opportunities

Lack of or insufficient resources
Limited awareness / knowledge / understanding of autism

Obstacles / Barriers
- No services / insufficient access
- Long waitlists
- Restrictive eligibility criteria
- Insufficient funding

Supports / Facilitators
- Values individuals with autism
- Supportive HR policy
- Capacity in the workplace
- Accommodations
- Associated supports within the workplace
- Job coaching / mentorship

Indifference or negative attitudes about autism
Myths and stereotypes
Lack of supportive HR policy
Traditional hiring practices
Lack of accommodations
Lack of supports

Policy / Government / Societal Values:
Individuals living in the community are surrounded by a broader systemic infrastructure including social, economic and health policies that variably support engagement in employment and community life. One’s context matters, as illustrated by emerging data that suggests that individuals and families with lower income and education levels are at greater risk for poorer employment outcomes. Policy that reduces income disparities may lessen disadvantages faced by many individuals with autism. This invites continued learning about ways that employment programs such as EWC can interface with broader areas of social policy and context, with the aim of greater access to employment and quality of life for all individuals with autism.