

# **An Exhaustive Review of Autism Employment Assistance Programs in the US**

## **Executive Summary**

The employment landscape for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in the United States presents a significant paradox: a growing population of autistic individuals, many with valuable skills and a strong desire to work, yet facing profound barriers that result in employment rates below 20%.<sup>1</sup> This disparity underscores a critical societal and economic challenge, highlighting that current transition programs often fail to address systemic structural impediments.<sup>1</sup> This report provides a comprehensive review of autism employment assistance programs across diverse sectors in the U.S., including federal, state, and local governments, nonprofit and for-profit organizations, educational institutions, faith-based groups, hospitals, and military initiatives.

The analysis reveals a multi-sectoral effort to support autistic individuals in the workforce, employing strategies such as vocational training, job coaching, and specialized neurodiversity hiring programs. While federal vocational rehabilitation programs offer broad support, their implementation at the state level often lacks explicit inclusion for ASD, leading to inconsistent outcomes. Conversely, the private sector, particularly large corporations, is increasingly adopting neurodiversity hiring initiatives, recognizing the unique talents of autistic individuals as a strategic business advantage. Educational institutions play a crucial role as "bridge institutions," offering specialized transition and career readiness programs. Nonprofit organizations provide a spectrum of services, from broad disability support to highly tailored autism-specific interventions, often integrating early intervention with educational pathways. Hospitals are emerging as direct service providers, leveraging their healthcare infrastructure for vocational training. Faith-based organizations contribute through community-based social services.

Despite these varied efforts, significant barriers persist, including policy implementation gaps, a lack of comprehensive research on state-level effectiveness, and challenges in navigating complex support systems. The review concludes by emphasizing the imperative for more targeted, evidence-based, and coordinated approaches across all sectors to dismantle structural barriers, foster truly inclusive workplaces, and ensure equitable employment opportunities for autistic individuals, thereby enhancing their well-being and societal participation.

# **1. Introduction: The Landscape of Autism Employment in the US**

## **1.1. The Urgency of Autism Employment: Prevalence, Challenges, and the Employment Gap**

The prevalence of diagnosed Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in the United States has risen notably over the past decade.<sup>1</sup> This demographic shift brings with it a growing imperative to address the significant employment challenges encountered by this population. Despite possessing diverse skills and a strong desire to work, individuals with autism face substantial hurdles in securing and maintaining employment. Data indicates that less than 20% of people with ASD are employed, positioning them among the least likely to be employed compared to individuals without severe disabilities.<sup>1</sup> This stark statistic highlights a profound "employment gap" that signals systemic shortcomings in existing support structures.<sup>1</sup>

The current transition programs designed to bridge the gap between school and work frequently fall short in addressing the underlying structural barriers that impede employment for autistic individuals.<sup>1</sup> This suggests that the persistent low employment rates are not primarily attributable to a lack of willingness or capability among autistic individuals, but rather to a deep inadequacy in the design and implementation of current support systems and policies. The national priority of "Employment First" for individuals with disabilities aims to promote competitive, integrated employment; however, its application often fails to fully encompass the unique needs of the autism community.<sup>1</sup> This points to a fundamental issue rooted in the systemic framework rather than individual deficits. Addressing this requires a shift in focus from merely preparing the individual for work to actively transforming employment environments and refining policy implementation to systematically dismantle these structural barriers. Given that employment is widely recognized as a key social determinant of health, closing this employment gap is not merely an economic concern but a critical step towards enhancing the overall well-being and societal inclusion of autistic individuals.<sup>1</sup>

## **1.2. Purpose and Scope of this Review**

This report undertakes an exhaustive review of autism employment assistance programs operating across the United States. Its primary objective is to provide a comprehensive, evidence-based overview of the current programmatic landscape. The scope of this review is broad, encompassing initiatives offered by various organizational types: federal, state, and local governments, nonprofit private entities, for-profit corporations, educational institutions, faith-based organizations, hospitals, and military branches. By examining programs across these diverse sectors, the

report aims to identify prevailing themes, highlight existing policy gaps, and pinpoint successful practices that facilitate employment access and workforce inclusion for individuals with ASD.<sup>1</sup>

1.3. Methodological Approach

This review synthesizes information derived from a collection of provided research materials. Central to this synthesis is a detailed research proposal focused on enhancing employment policies for individuals with ASD <sup>1</sup>, complemented by various descriptions of specific programs. The analytical framework for this report draws inspiration from the mixed-methods approach outlined in the research proposal. This approach combines advanced analytical tools, such as AI-assisted policy analysis, with qualitative insights gathered from stakeholder interviews, which are designed to uncover policy gaps, identify barriers, and document successful practices.<sup>1</sup> This integrated methodological foundation informs the comprehensive nature of this report, striving to bridge the divide between high-level policy analysis and practical, on-the-ground program insights.

Table 1: Overview of Key Autism Employment Programs by Sector

Program Name	Owner Type	Primary Services	Target Population	Key Features	Program Effectiveness/ Outcomes	ID
Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E)	Federal (VA)	Job training, education, employment accommodations, resume development, job seeking skills coaching, business startup support, independent living services	Veterans and service members with service-connected disabilities	Broad program; specific autism pathways not explicitly detailed but inclusive of disabilities	Aims to assist veterans in finding meaningful careers; no specific autism employment effectiveness data provided.	2
Autism at Work Program	Federal Government (DoD/Air Force)	Paid, one-year internships, real-world job experience, soft skills training, mentorship	Students and recent graduates with autism diagnosis	Collaboration with Wright State University; funded by Workforce Recruitment Program (DoD/DOL)	Entered its 2nd successful year; brings job opportunities and growth for college graduates; increases workplace diversity & grows the workforce for the future; nearly 20 interns working in various technical roles.	5
Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP)	Federal Government (DoD)	Support for managing care/services for family members with special needs, information/referrals	Military family members with special needs (spouse, child, dependent adult)	Indirect employment support through resources and referrals; focuses on family stability	Indirectly enhances capacity for employment by providing family stability and access to resources; no direct employment effectiveness data.	8

State-Level Vocational Rehabilitation (VR)	State Government	Vocational rehabilitation, employment services, community integration	Individuals with disabilities	Policies and implementation vary significantly across states; often less inclusive of ASD	Policy implementation is often less inclusive of individuals with ASD compared to those with other disabilities, contributing to the employment gap.	11
The Arc@Work	Nonprofit Private	Corporate disability hiring initiatives, inclusive workplace creation, disability awareness training, talent sourcing, accommodation support	Corporations hiring individuals w/ intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), including autism	Offers "TalentScout" toolkit; connects employers to local talent sources	Aims to create inclusive workplaces and enhance workplace productivity; TalentScout toolkit vetted by autistic individuals.	12
Easterseals Employment Services	Nonprofit Private	Job training, resume building, interview practice, job placement	Children and adults with various disabilities, older adults, veterans	Network of 70 affiliates tailoring services to local needs	Assists individuals in finding and retaining jobs; reaches approximately 1.5 million people annually across communities nationwide.	14
Els for Autism Employment Programs	Nonprofit Private	Work Experience (WE) Program, Career Exploration & Training (CET), Supported Employment Services, VR/APD Vendor Services, WE CONNECT Mentor Program	Adults (18+) with ASD and other developmental disabilities	Hands-on training in specific industries (healthcare, hospitality); visually engineered labs; transdisciplinary team; strong employer partnerships	Prepares clients for careers in various industries; graduates are ready to enter the workforce. Companies employing individuals with disabilities report 89% higher retention, 72% increased productivity, 29% increased profitability (general benefits, not specific to Els).	15
Spectrum Works Job-Training & Internship Programs	Nonprofit Private	Job training, internships, job exploration counseling, workplace readiness, self-advocacy, peer mentoring, postsecondary education counseling	Autistic individuals (high school age 16-21, post-high school 18-24, 24+)	Tiered programs; strong collaboration with high schools; competitive, integrated employment environments	Students gain independence, sense of purpose, and pride in work; provides opportunities for meaningful employment after graduation; former students have achieved employment goals.	16
DXC Dandelion Program	For-Profit Sector	Harnessing neurodivergent talents in IT and other fields	Neurodivergent workers	Established teams in multiple states/territories (Australia mentioned, but model applicable)	established seven teams in four states and territories; helps neurodivergent workers propel their careers.	17
FALA Technologies Apprenticeship Program	For-Profit Sector	Training in advanced manufacturing and technology roles	Neurodivergent people and other people with disabilities	Leverages precise skills for complex tasks; works with local service providers	Leverages talents and abilities of neurodivergent workers for precise and complex tasks.	17

Freddie Mac Autism Internship Program	For-Profit Sector	Internships, talent-to-job matching, employability skills enhancement	Highly qualified autistic workers	Partnership with Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN); focus on work communication challenges	Began with 4 interns, 17 additional interns completed, 9 hired for full-time positions; demonstrated considerable success.	17
JPMorgan Chase (JPMC) Neurodiversity Hiring Program	For-Profit Sector	Hiring in diverse roles (IT, business analysis), adjusted interview processes, manager training, mentor "buddy systems"	Neurodivergent employees (including those with substantial support needs via BeST program)	Scaled significantly across multiple countries + business lines; partners with disability service providers	Grown to connect with at least 10 lines of business in multiple countries; aims to ensure success for neurodivergent employees.	17
Towson University Autism Hiring Program	Educational Institution	10-week training (employability, social skills, self-advocacy), job search assistance, employer training, post-hire support	Talented autistic adults (high school diploma/GED, some college preferred)	Collaboration with Autism Society of Maryland; "turnkey solutions" for employers	Empowers talented autistic adults to build employability skills, expand professional networks, and secure meaningful employment; improves employee retention with supported hires.	18
TEACCH School Transition to Employment and Post-Secondary Education Program(T-ST EP)	Educational Institution (UNC)	Intervention for transition to employment and post-secondary education	Autistic individuals aged 16-21	Resources for transition to adulthood; training for professionals	Prepares autistic youth for both employment and post-secondary education.	19
UCLA College to Career (C2C)	Educational Institution	Career readiness training, internship experiences, skill-building (e.g., choosing career, social skills, practical skills)	Autistic undergraduate and graduate students	Flagship "PEERS for Careers" program; aims to be a scalable model for higher education	Aims to develop a scalable solution to employment barriers & serve as a model for higher education training; equips young adults w/ skills to obtain and maintain a job	20
College Autism Network (CAN)	Educational Institution Network	Advocacy, research, training, resource dissemination (e.g., employer curriculum, ACE)	Postsecondary students with autism, higher education professionals, employers, families	Connects stakeholders; not provide direct employment assistance	Aims to improve access, experiences, and outcomes for postsecondary students with autism.	21
College Autism Spectrum (CAS)	Educational Institution Support Network	College counseling, work/career readiness (skill building for interviews, jobs), professional training for university staff	Students with ASD and their families, university professionals	Structured career counseling sessions; focuses on enhancing transition to employment	Specializes in skill-building for interviews, jobs, and general work skills; prepares students for employment and job searching.	22

Catholic Charities Employment Programs for Adults with Disabilities	Faith-Based Organization	One-on-one employment specialist support, skill development, job placement, ongoing support, adult education	Young adults and adults with developmental disabilities (including autism) with little/no work experience	Referrals often from local government agencies; community-based approach	Provides ongoing support to ensure sustained success for clients entering the workforce.	23
Jewish Family Services (JFS) CHAI Disability Services	Faith-Based Organization	Independent living skills, employment coaching, social events, residential programs	Adults with developmental disabilities and autism	Focus on fostering life skills, independence, and meaningful social interactions	Fosters life skills, independence, & meaningful social interactions; participants empowered to learn new skills & engage safely in their community.	25
Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota (LSS) Employment Services	Faith-Based Organization	Employment specialists help find meaningful work, skill/resume-building, mock interviews, on-the-job training	People with disabilities	Holistic support model; focus on individual interests and goals	Helps people with disabilities find meaningful work based on individual interests and goals.	27
UPMC Vocational Training Center and Supported Employment Program	Hospital/Medical Center	Vocational training, real jobs for pay, job readiness assessment, job coaching, competitive employment support	Adults with intellectual disabilities (e.g., autism), transitional-age high school students	Structured, therapeutic setting; mailing services for businesses; individualized job matching	Provides quality instruction and meaningful work; workers receive a paycheck fostering self-esteem; helps secure and maintain competitive employment.	29

## 2. Federal Government Initiatives

### 2.1. Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Programs

Federal and state Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) programs form a foundational component of the support system for individuals with disabilities seeking employment. The Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA), a key federal entity, provides essential leadership and resources to state agencies. Their overarching goal is to empower individuals with disabilities to achieve maximum employment, foster independence, and facilitate their integration into the community and competitive labor market.<sup>11</sup> Complementing this, the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) supports a range of programs for children, youth, and adults with disabilities, including crucial pre-employment services. These initiatives are frequently delivered under the framework of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which guarantees educational rights for children with disabilities.<sup>11</sup>

Within the federal structure, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) operates the Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) program, formerly known as Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment. This program is specifically designed to assist veterans and service members who have service-connected disabilities that affect their ability to work. The services provided are comprehensive, encompassing job training, educational opportunities, employment accommodations, resume development, and coaching for job-seeking skills.<sup>2</sup> Beyond direct employment assistance, the VR&E program also offers support for veterans

interested in starting their own businesses and provides independent living services for those with severe disabilities who may not be able to engage in traditional employment.<sup>2</sup>

While the VA VR&E program is broadly inclusive of individuals with service-connected disabilities, the available information does not explicitly detail specific pathways or tailored services for veterans with autism.<sup>2</sup> This highlights a broader challenge within federal disability policy: the implicit inclusion of autism within general disability categories. Although autistic individuals are technically eligible for these services, the absence of explicit autism-specific language or mandates within broad disability policies can inadvertently lead to inconsistent or inadequate support. This occurs because the unique needs, communication styles, and sensory considerations of autistic individuals may not be fully understood or addressed by programs designed for a wider range of disabilities. Effective support for autistic individuals often requires a nuanced approach that acknowledges neurodiversity. Therefore, while federal VR programs offer a robust framework, their full effectiveness for the autism community could be significantly enhanced through policy refinements that embed explicit neurodiversity-affirming practices.

## **2.2. Department of Defense (DoD) and Military Programs**

The Department of Defense (DoD) approaches autism and employment through a dual lens, distinguishing between direct military service and civilian employment opportunities, as well as providing support for military families with special needs.

### **2.2.1. Civilian Employment Initiatives**

The DoD, particularly through the Air Force Materiel Command (AFMC), has implemented targeted initiatives to employ autistic individuals in civilian roles. A notable example is the "Autism at Work" program, a collaborative effort with Wright State University.<sup>5</sup> This program offers paid, one-year internships for students and recent graduates diagnosed with autism, providing them with opportunities to work as Air Force civilians.<sup>5</sup> These internships are designed to provide valuable real-world job experience and cultivate essential soft skills, such as business etiquette and effective communication, under the guidance of dedicated mentors.<sup>5</sup>

A key aspect of this program involves preparing both the autistic candidates and the hiring managers. Hiring managers receive coaching on characteristics that autistic individuals might exhibit during interviews, enabling them to focus on responses rather than potentially distracting traits.<sup>5</sup> Concurrently, interns are prepared for the unique operational environment of a military installation, including gate procedures and military protocols.<sup>5</sup> The "Autism at Work" program receives funding through the Workforce Recruitment Program, a joint initiative of the U.S. Department of Labor and the Department of Defense, which facilitates opportunities for candidates with disabilities at no additional cost to the participating organizations.<sup>5</sup> This initiative not only enhances workplace diversity but also strategically addresses mission needs by leveraging a skilled talent pool in critical areas such as science,



engineering, and computer technology.<sup>6</sup>

This approach within the DoD highlights a significant distinction in how neurodiversity is integrated into its workforce. While direct military enlistment for individuals with ASD typically requires a medical waiver and historically has been a disqualifying condition due to concerns about effective service in a military environment<sup>19</sup>, the active pursuit of autistic individuals for civilian roles demonstrates a pragmatic recognition of their valuable skills in non-combat support functions. This differentiation suggests a nuanced understanding within the DoD: certain inherent demands of direct military service may still be deemed incompatible with some aspects of ASD, leading to stringent waiver requirements. However, the civilian support and technical roles within the military structure are increasingly acknowledged as areas where autistic individuals can excel. The program's focus on fields like science, engineering, and computer technology aligns with cognitive strengths often associated with ASD, indicating a strategic effort to leverage neurodiversity where it best serves organizational needs. This represents a progressive approach to workforce development that separates direct military service from the broader civilian support functions.

### **2.2.2. Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP) and Support Services**

Beyond direct employment, the DoD also provides comprehensive support for military families through the Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP). This program is specifically designed to assist military family members with special needs, which can include a spouse, child, or dependent adult.<sup>8</sup> Enrollment in EFMP is mandatory for active-duty service members who have a family member with a qualifying medical and/or educational condition.<sup>10</sup>

The EFMP's primary objective is to help families manage the care and services required for their family member with special needs. This includes providing critical considerations during assignment processes and facilitating access to support for navigating complex medical and educational systems.<sup>8</sup> EFMP Family Support services offer a wide range of assistance, such as information and referrals for military and community services, educational resources, outreach initiatives, and the development of tailored family service plans.<sup>8</sup> While the EFMP itself does not directly offer employment assistance for the autistic individual, it provides valuable resources and articles related to "Employment Options For Adults With a Disability".<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, it offers special needs consultations through Military OneSource, which can provide guidance on various state and federal programs relevant to individuals with disabilities.<sup>8</sup>

The support provided by EFMP, while indirect in terms of employment, is nonetheless crucial. The stability and overall well-being of the family unit, particularly the caregivers, are indispensable for the long-term success and independence of an autistic individual. By alleviating the burden associated with navigating complex care systems and providing access to essential resources, EFMP indirectly enhances the capacity of autistic individuals to pursue employment. This occurs by ensuring their foundational needs are met and their home environment remains stable. Additionally, this support can free up caregivers to pursue their own employment or more effectively assist the autistic family member in their job search. This highlights the profound interconnectedness between comprehensive family support and positive individual employment outcomes, especially for individuals with disabilities who often rely on



robust family structures.

## **2.3. Other Federal Agencies Supporting Employment**

Beyond the direct employment initiatives of the DoD and the broad VR programs, several other federal agencies contribute to fostering a supportive environment for employment for individuals with disabilities, including those with autism. The Administration for Community Living (ACL) and the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) are examples of federal entities that support community-based services and health initiatives, which, while not directly employment-focused, can significantly aid in preparing individuals for the workforce.<sup>11</sup>

A key mechanism supported by the ACL is Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS) waivers. These waivers enable participating states to deliver essential services to individuals within their communities, rather than in institutionalized settings. This community-based approach can foster greater independence and enhance an individual's readiness for employment by providing support in familiar and integrated environments.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the Indian Health Service (IHS) has specific autism initiatives for American Indians and Alaska Natives.<sup>11</sup> These initiatives, as part of a holistic health service model, may encompass employment-related support, recognizing the comprehensive needs of individuals within these communities.

These broader federal initiatives, while not explicitly labeled as "employment programs," play a crucial enabling role. For many autistic individuals, particularly those who require higher levels of support, foundational services related to health, daily living, and community integration are prerequisites for engaging in meaningful employment. If basic needs for independent living, healthcare, and community access are not adequately met, pursuing employment becomes significantly more challenging, if not impossible. Therefore, these initiatives contribute by building the necessary infrastructure and support systems that allow autistic individuals to even consider and pursue employment. This perspective underscores that effective employment support for individuals with complex needs must be viewed within a holistic framework that integrates community and health services.

## **3. State and Local Government Programs**

### **3.1. State-Level Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Policies and Services**

State Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agencies are pivotal in delivering vocational rehabilitation and other essential services to individuals with disabilities. Their mission is to maximize employment, foster independence, and ensure the integration of these individuals into the community and competitive labor market.<sup>11</sup> However, despite the national "Employment First" initiative, which prioritizes competitive, integrated employment for individuals with disabilities, the implementation of employment policies varies considerably across states.<sup>1</sup> A critical observation is that policy implementation at the state level is often less inclusive of individuals with ASD compared to those with other disabilities, presenting a distinct challenge for the autism community within state VR systems.<sup>1</sup>

This variability and the observed lack of explicit inclusion for autistic individuals contribute significantly to the persistent employment gap. There is also a notable scarcity of comprehensive research that

systematically examines and rapidly updates policies related to employment for individuals with ASD, including VR policies and state-funded employment services.<sup>1</sup> This limited research creates a substantial knowledge gap, making it difficult to fully understand the effectiveness and reach of state-level programs. The uploaded research proposal directly addresses this deficiency, aiming to conduct a comprehensive policy review at the state level using advanced analytical tools and qualitative comparative analysis.<sup>1</sup> This research endeavors to identify specific policy gaps, successful practices, and the necessary and sufficient conditions within employment support policies that contribute to increased employment rates for autistic individuals transitioning into the workforce.<sup>1</sup>

The existence of a national priority like "Employment First" suggests a federal commitment to inclusive employment. However, the explicit statement that "employment policies vary significantly across states, and policy implementation is often less inclusive of individuals with ASD compared to those with other disabilities"<sup>1</sup> reveals a critical disconnect between national intent and state-level execution. Furthermore, the limited comprehensive research on these policies means there is insufficient data to determine precisely why this gap exists and which specific policy features or implementation strategies are either failing or succeeding for autistic individuals. This policy-practice gap at the state level directly impedes progress in improving employment outcomes for autistic individuals. Without granular data on state-specific policies and their actual impact on ASD employment rates, it becomes challenging to identify and disseminate best practices, advocate for targeted policy changes, or ensure equitable access to services. The proposed research, by seeking to identify "sufficient and necessary conditions" for increased employment rates, implies that current policies may be missing crucial elements or inadvertently contain barriers that are specific to neurodiversity. This underscores the urgent need for robust state-level policy analysis and comparative studies to inform evidence-based solutions.

### **3.2. Local Government Initiatives**

While the provided materials do not offer specific examples of direct, dedicated autism employment programs operated by local governments, these entities frequently play a facilitative role in connecting individuals with disabilities to broader services. For instance, The Arc@Work, a national nonprofit, collaborates with corporate clients to help them connect with and vet "local agencies, schools, social and religious groups" as potential sources for qualified job seekers with disabilities.<sup>12</sup> This indicates that local government agencies, or entities closely associated with them, often serve as crucial intermediaries in the employment support ecosystem.

A concrete example of this facilitative role is seen in the referral mechanisms for programs like Catholic Charities' employment initiatives for adults with disabilities. Participants in the District of Columbia, for example, must be referred by the DC Office of Rehabilitation Services Administration, a local government body.<sup>23</sup> This demonstrates that local governments, while not necessarily direct providers of extensive employment programs, are essential in channeling individuals towards relevant services offered by state or non-governmental organizations.

This pattern suggests that local governments primarily function as referral points and navigators within the broader network of disability employment services. Their effectiveness in this role—that is, how efficiently and accurately they connect individuals to the most appropriate services—can significantly

influence access to support. If local information and referral systems are fragmented, poorly publicized, or lack specific knowledge about the nuanced employment needs of autistic individuals, this can become a major barrier to accessing otherwise available state or private sector programs. This highlights the critical importance of investing in the capacity of local governments to improve information dissemination and ensure coordinated service referral for the autism community, thereby enhancing the overall accessibility of employment assistance.

## 4. Nonprofit Private Organizations

Nonprofit private organizations constitute a vital component of the autism employment support landscape, offering a wide array of services that range from broad disability assistance to highly specialized autism-specific interventions.

### 4.1. Comprehensive Disability Service Providers

Organizations like The Arc and Easterseals exemplify comprehensive disability service providers that include autism employment support within their broader missions.

**The Arc** is a national organization with a vast network of local chapters, dedicated to advocating for and protecting the human rights of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), actively supporting their full inclusion and participation in the community throughout their lives.<sup>13</sup> Through its initiative, The Arc@Work, the organization employs a multi-tiered approach to assist corporations in developing, sustaining, and scaling disability hiring initiatives.<sup>12</sup> This involves working hand-in-hand with clients to foster inclusive workplaces and hiring practices, connecting employers with the often-untapped disability labor market, and ensuring that necessary supports are secured for new hires.<sup>12</sup> The Arc also offers specialized tools, such as "TalentScout," a toolkit that has been vetted by autistic individuals themselves, providing practical insights for cultivating inclusive cultures and enhancing workplace productivity.<sup>12</sup> The Arc's approach provides robust, employer-focused employment services that aim to create inclusive workplaces for individuals with IDD, including autism, by offering training, facilitating talent connections, and ensuring appropriate accommodations.

**Easterseals** is another prominent nonprofit organization that provides essential health and human services to a diverse population, including children and adults with disabilities, older adults, veterans, and their families.<sup>14</sup> In terms of employment, Easterseals assists individuals in finding and retaining jobs through various services, such as job training, resume building, and interview practice, catering to aging youth, adults, and veterans.<sup>14</sup> Easterseals operates through an expansive network of 70 affiliates across the U.S., which allows services to be tailored to the specific needs of local communities, reaching approximately 1.5 million people annually.<sup>14</sup> Easterseals offers broad employment assistance services for individuals with diverse disabilities, encompassing job readiness and placement, with its strong local affiliate network enabling community-specific customization. Notably, despite its name, Easterseals explicitly states that it is not affiliated with any religion, emphasizing a common passion for caring for others.<sup>14</sup>

The service models of The Arc and Easterseals illustrate a spectrum of inclusivity within the nonprofit sector. Organizations like The Arc and Easterseals, by focusing on "intellectual and developmental disabilities" or "various disabilities," aim for broad inclusion. This generalized approach is crucial for

ensuring widespread access to support services for a diverse population of individuals with disabilities. However, this contrasts with organizations that offer highly specialized, autism-specific programs. This distinction highlights that while broad disability advocacy and service provision are necessary for overall access, a complementary approach of highly tailored, autism-specific programs can be critical for maximizing employment outcomes, particularly for individuals with unique autism-related support needs. This becomes especially relevant given the observation that policy implementation in federal and state vocational rehabilitation often proves less inclusive of autistic individuals compared to those with other disabilities.<sup>1</sup>

#### 4.2. Specialized Autism Employment Support Organizations

In contrast to broader disability service providers, some nonprofits specialize in autism employment support, offering highly tailored interventions.

**Spectrum Works** is a unique nonprofit that focuses specifically on providing job training, internships, and direct employment opportunities for autistic individuals by actively building inclusive workforces within partner companies.<sup>16</sup> The organization's program is structured in tiers, allowing it to adapt to the individual's skill level, abilities, and career goals.<sup>16</sup> Services offered include job exploration counseling, work-based learning experiences, comprehensive workplace readiness training, self-advocacy development, peer mentoring, and postsecondary education counseling.<sup>16</sup> A distinctive feature of Spectrum Works is its strong collaboration with high schools. This partnership enables students aged 16 to 21 to participate in paid job training and internships during their regular school day, within competitive, integrated employment environments where they work alongside neurotypical coworkers and receive support from Spectrum Works staff.<sup>16</sup> Funding for short-term internships can be obtained through DVRS (Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services), while long-term internships may be funded by the high schools themselves.<sup>16</sup> For individuals who have completed high school, Spectrum Works offers intensive internship programs for those aged 18-24 and shorter programs for individuals over 24.<sup>16</sup> These programs are designed to help students develop essential work ethic, enhance social skills and communication, and foster responsibility and independence.<sup>16</sup> Spectrum Works exemplifies a specialized nonprofit model that effectively integrates with educational institutions to provide comprehensive, tiered job training and internship programs, thereby facilitating successful transitions to employment for autistic individuals.

The model employed by Spectrum Works underscores the profound impact of early intervention and integrated education-to-work pathways. By explicitly partnering with high schools and enabling students aged 16-21 to engage in paid job training and internships *during their school day*<sup>16</sup>, the program addresses a critical gap in traditional transition services. This proactive integration of real-world work experience into the educational curriculum is a significant facilitator for autistic individuals. It allows them to develop vocational and soft skills in a supported, authentic environment *before* they exit the formal school system, directly confronting the "structural barriers" that current transition programs often fail to address.<sup>1</sup> This early exposure and skill-building can substantially reduce the employment gap by fostering foundational competencies and confidence at an earlier stage, making the transition from school to work considerably smoother and more successful. This model strongly suggests that effective employment support for autistic individuals should ideally commence well in advance of formal

adulthood, embedding career readiness within the educational journey.

**Els for Autism** also offers comprehensive Employment Programs specifically designed for adults with ASD and other developmental disabilities.<sup>15</sup> Their **Work Experience (WE) Program** is a 10-week initiative for adults (18+) who have completed high school, focusing on career exploration and paid employment. It provides hands-on learning and skill development tailored for industries such as warehouse, restaurant, hospitality, and healthcare.<sup>15</sup> Key to this program are partnerships with various organizations, including healthcare facilities like Jupiter Medical Center.<sup>15</sup> The **Career Exploration & Training (CET)** program offers introductory vocational training courses in areas like Basic Carpentry, Hotel and Hospitality, Office and Clerical Essentials, Retail, and Food Service. These courses are rooted in evidence-based practices for ASD and utilize visually engineered vocational labs to provide a safe and realistic learning environment.<sup>15</sup> Els for Autism also provides **Supported Employment Services**, which include resume building, interview coaching, and job placement, meticulously matching participants with career opportunities based on their unique strengths, interests, and goals.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Els for Autism functions as a vendor for **Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) services** and **Agency for Persons with Disabilities (APD) vocational training**, offering pre-placement training and career camps for transition-age youth.<sup>15</sup> The **WE CONNECT Mentor Program** is an additional component, pairing autistic adults in the WE Program with community-based professionals who serve as volunteer mentors, supporting personal and professional growth.<sup>15</sup> Els for Autism provides highly specialized, multi-faceted employment programs for autistic adults, emphasizing hands-on training, customized placement, and strong employer partnerships, often acting as a VR vendor.

## 5. For-Profit Sector Initiatives: Neurodiversity Hiring Programs

The for-profit sector is increasingly recognizing the strategic value of neurodiversity, leading to the development and expansion of specialized neurodiversity hiring programs. These initiatives represent a significant shift in corporate talent acquisition.

### 5.1. Corporate Neurodiversity Programs

A growing number of leading for-profit companies are implementing dedicated "neurodiversity hiring initiatives" to harness the unique talents and skills of neurodivergent individuals.<sup>17</sup> These programs often involve tailored recruitment processes, customized support mechanisms, and strategic partnerships with disability service providers.

**DXC Technology**, for instance, operates its "Dandelion Program," which is designed to help neurodivergent workers leverage their abilities in information technology (IT) and other fields, fostering career progression. This program has successfully established multiple teams across various states and territories.<sup>17</sup> **FALA Technologies**, an advanced manufacturing company, has developed an apprenticeship program that trains neurodivergent individuals, along with other people with disabilities, for roles in advanced manufacturing and technology. This program effectively utilizes the precise and complex task-oriented talents often found in neurodivergent workers, collaborating with local service providers for candidate identification, training, and ongoing support.<sup>17</sup>

**Freddie Mac** partnered with the Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN) in 2012 to launch its "Autism

Internship Program." This initiative aims to align business needs with the distinct capabilities of autistic workers, particularly focusing on highly qualified individuals who may encounter significant challenges in work communication or job retention. The program provides individualized matching of talents, strengths, and skills to specific job roles and offers support to enhance employability skills.<sup>17</sup> The program has demonstrated considerable success, with a notable number of interns subsequently hired into full-time positions.<sup>17</sup>

**JPMorgan Chase (JPMC)** has significantly scaled its "Neurodiversity Hiring Program" since its inception as a small pilot in 2015. The program has expanded across numerous countries and integrated into at least ten lines of business, encompassing a wide range of roles including software engineering, application development, tech operations, business analysis, and personal banking.<sup>17</sup> JPMC collaborates with businesses experienced in providing services and supports to individuals with disabilities to ensure equitable access throughout the hiring process, which includes adjusting conventional interview procedures.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, JPMC provides focused training for managers on potential work communication issues and implements "buddy systems" of mentors to support autistic employees.<sup>17</sup> JPMC also operates a separate "Business Solutions Team (BeST)" program, which often includes neurodivergent workers with more extensive support needs, including individuals with intellectual disabilities.<sup>17</sup>

These examples from the for-profit sector illustrate a fundamental shift in the perception of hiring autistic individuals. The emphasis on leveraging "talents and skills," matching "business needs with unique capabilities," and gaining access to a "skilled, dedicated workforce" <sup>17</sup> indicates a move beyond purely philanthropic or compliance-driven motivations. Companies are increasingly recognizing a tangible business case for neurodiversity, understanding that autistic individuals often bring distinct cognitive strengths—such as exceptional attention to detail, pattern recognition, and logical thinking—that can enhance innovation, productivity, and problem-solving, particularly in technology and analytical roles. The sustained growth and expansion of these programs suggest that when appropriate accommodations and support structures are effectively implemented, neurodiversity can indeed provide a competitive advantage, leading to improved employee retention and increased workplace diversity.<sup>18</sup> This re-frames autism employment as a strategic source of competitive advantage rather than solely a social responsibility.

## **5.2. Benefits and Models of Corporate Inclusion**

The implementation of neurodiversity hiring initiatives by for-profit companies yields several tangible benefits. Participating employers gain access to a skilled and dedicated workforce, experience increased workplace diversity and innovation, and often observe improved employee retention rates through supported hires.<sup>18</sup> The models for achieving this inclusion typically involve customized training programs for managers and staff on neurodiversity and inclusive practices, structured hiring support tailored to neurodivergent candidates, and comprehensive post-hire mentorship systems.<sup>18</sup>

The success of these corporate neurodiversity programs is not merely a result of hiring neurodivergent individuals but stems from the creation of a truly inclusive organizational ecosystem. For example, JPMorgan Chase's approach involves collaborating with external businesses that specialize in providing services and supports to individuals with disabilities. This external expertise is complemented by internal



capacity building, such as focused training for managers on communication issues that may arise, and the establishment of mentor "buddy systems" for autistic employees.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the Towson University Autism Hiring Program, which supports employers, includes customized training for managers and staff on neurodiversity and inclusion, alongside post-hire mentorship.<sup>18</sup> This demonstrates that successful corporate neurodiversity initiatives extend beyond initial recruitment to encompass comprehensive organizational transformation. The causal relationship is clear: the integration of external expertise (from disability service providers) with internal capacity building (through manager training) and ongoing support (via mentorship and buddy systems) leads to sustainable inclusive employment. This "ecosystem" approach, where external knowledge is seamlessly integrated with internal cultural and structural adaptations, is crucial for achieving long-term success and retention, moving beyond token hires to genuine workforce integration.

## **6. Educational Institutions**

Educational institutions play a pivotal role in preparing autistic individuals for employment, particularly through specialized transition programs and by fostering supportive networks.

### **6.1. University-Based Transition and Employment Programs**

Universities are increasingly establishing dedicated programs to facilitate the transition of autistic students from academia to professional careers.

The **Towson University Autism Hiring Program** is a significant collaboration between the Hussman Center for Adults with Autism and the Autism Society of Maryland.<sup>18</sup> Its primary objective is to empower talented autistic adults by enhancing their employability skills, expanding their professional networks, and helping them secure meaningful employment, while simultaneously assisting employers in cultivating inclusive workplaces.<sup>18</sup> This program targets autistic adults who possess a high school diploma or GED, or some college experience, and are committed to finding and sustaining employment.<sup>18</sup> For job seekers, the program offers a comprehensive 10-week training curriculum that covers professional and workplace social skills, helps individuals identify their strengths and potential career paths, fosters self-advocacy, and provides peer support and mentorship.<sup>18</sup> Post-training support includes one-on-one check-in meetings, monthly virtual alumni gatherings, and ongoing consultations.<sup>18</sup> For employers, the program provides "turnkey solutions," including customized training on neurodiversity and ADA compliance, structured hiring support, and post-hire mentorship.<sup>18</sup> Towson University, through this program, offers a comprehensive, university-led initiative that effectively bridges the gap between autistic job seekers and employers, providing extensive training and continuous support for both parties.

The **TEACCH School Transition to Employment and Post-Secondary Education Program (T-STEP)**, based at the University of North Carolina, is an intervention specifically designed for autistic individuals aged 16-21.<sup>19</sup> This program is complemented by related initiatives such as the "Work Together NC Resource Library," which provides resources to support the transition to adulthood, and "HEELS 2 TRANSITION," a program offering young adults with intellectual disabilities opportunities to experience college life and build essential transition skills.<sup>19</sup> TEACCH also extends its expertise by offering training and consultation services to professionals who work with autistic individuals.<sup>19</sup> TEACCH focuses on

early intervention and transition support for autistic youth, preparing them for both employment and post-secondary education through direct programs and resource development.

The **UCLA College to Career (C2C)** program represents an innovative approach for autistic undergraduate and graduate students, or those who suspect they are autistic, as they navigate the transition from college to a professional career.<sup>20</sup> The program's overarching goal is to develop a scalable solution to the employment barriers faced by autistic individuals and to serve as a model for higher education training across the country.<sup>20</sup> Its flagship component, "PEERS for Careers," equips autistic young adults with the necessary skills for obtaining and maintaining a job and provides practical internship experiences to apply learned skills.<sup>20</sup> The curriculum addresses a range of critical competencies, including career selection, building social skills and confidence, and developing key job-related and practical abilities.<sup>20</sup> UCLA's C2C program targets autistic college students, offering specialized career readiness training and internship opportunities to facilitate their transition from academic life to professional employment.

These university-based programs—Towson's, TEACCH's, and UCLA's—are strategically embedded within higher education institutions.<sup>18</sup> They target individuals who are either in high school preparing for post-secondary education or already enrolled in college or graduate school. These initiatives go beyond basic vocational training, emphasizing the development of "employability

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