

# Community-based work experience

The Bridge London





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The difficulties that autistic individuals have in finding employment has long been acknowledged (Rutter, Greenfeld, & Lockyer, 1967). What is of increasing concern is that these difficulties have not, in the intervening half century, been significantly reduced. Employment rates for individuals with autism, regardless of intellectual ability, reportedly range between 4.1% and 11.8% (Taylor & Seltzer, 2011). Autistic individuals are likely to experience more difficulty in experiencing employment than individuals with Language Impairment (both Specific and Pragmatic), intellectual disability or learning disabilities (Shattuck, Orsmond, Wagner, Cooper, 2011; Whitehouse, Watt, Line & Bishop, 2009). The likelihood of experiencing employment is further decreased when an autistic individual has an additional intellectual disability (Schaller & Yang, 2005). For individuals with profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD) the situation is even more disturbing. A survey of 270 special schools in England found that not a single individual with PMLD, had upon leaving school, experienced any form of employment (Florian et al., 2000). More recent research for the Department of Health (Mansell, 2010) echo these figures.

Regardless of the significant contribution that *opportunity costs*, as a result of unemployment or underemployment, make to the overall cost of supporting individuals with autism with or without intellectual disability in the UK (Buescher et al. 2014; Knapp, Romeo & Beecham, 2009), there are significant benefits for the individual and their family to having experienced employment. Employment is one of the most desirable social achievements for *every* individual, including those with additional and/or complex needs (Bennett and Dukes 2013; Hendricks, 2010; Roux et al. 2013; Wilczynski, Trammell, & Clarke 2013). Experiencing employment for individuals with developmental disabilities has been shown to increase self-esteem, promote personal dignity, and improve cognitive and adaptive skills as well as improving psychological well-being and quality of life (Fleming, Fairweather, & Leahy, 2013; Gerhardt and Lainer 2011; Hillier, Fish, Siegel & Beversdorf, 2011; Hurlbutt and Chalmers 2004; Mawhood & Howlin 1999; Stephens, Collins & Dodder, 2005). However, supporting individuals with developmental disabilities to experience employment and the associated benefits remains a significant, unserved need (Chen, Leader, Sung & Leahy, 2015).

Whilst the majority of pupils with complex needs do not currently have the opportunity to experience employment when they leave education (Mansell, 2010; Whitehouse et al., 2009), there are equally limited opportunities to experience community based employment whilst still in education, despite this experience having a positive relationship with finding work after school (Geisen & Cavanaugh, 2012; Test et al., 2009). Positive experience of employment whilst still at school also raises expectations among parents, employers and young people themselves around the ways in which individuals with developmental disabilities can and should participate in the workforce (Chambers, Hughes, & Carter, 2004; Kraemer & Blacher, 2001). Raising parental expectations is particularly important as these have a significant impact on long term outcomes for young people with developmental disabilities, such as autism (Kirby, 2016). There is, therefore, a growing call for more to be done so that young people with developmental disabilities can experience community-based employment whilst still at school (Carter, Austin, & Trainor, 2011; Carter, Trainor, Ditchman, Swedeen, & Owens, 2009; Rusch, Hughes, Agran, Martin, & Johnson, 2009; Rusch & Wolfe, 2008).

The experience of community based employment may not lead to full-time employment, though it does increase the likelihood, it will however, provide an opportunity to develop valuable life skills as well as increase self-esteem. It will also help to show that individuals with developmental disabilities, such as autism, have untapped potential that deficit-driven conceptualisations of difference conceal. This potential is being increasingly recognised, particularly in the US (Wehman et al., 2012; Wehman, et al., 2014). Funding a community-based employment opportunity for individuals with complex needs in the UK will not only have an incredibly positive impact on those individuals taking part, it will have a wider impact in perpetuating the message of difference, not deficit and help promote a more inclusive society that will be to everyone's benefit.

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