Why should businesses extend themselves to hire individuals with special needs? Because there is an untapped population of individuals with disabilities who can fill positions. It’s the right thing to do and it creates goodwill in the community.

Many parents of children with autism and other developmental disabilities are concerned about what will happen when their sons and daughters enter adulthood. Will they be able to live on their own? Find meaningful work? Build a happy and productive adult life?

Jo-Ann and Eric Branzetti, who live on Cape Cod in Massachusetts, have been asking themselves these questions since 1993, when their son Matthew was diagnosed with autism, three months before his third birthday.
"A lot of your natural expectations for your child go out the window when you get that diagnosis," says Jo-Ann. "Every expert we talked to, had a different opinion and that was disheartening. One told us that Matthew would never be able to live on his own. Of course I was upset that life was going to be very hard for him, and scared about what would happen to him when we’re gone."

At the time of Matthew’s diagnosis, Jo-Ann and Eric didn’t know much about autism, the services available for children on the spectrum, or what the future might hold for their son. Since then, they have learned a lot through personal experience and because Jo-Ann worked as an intake coordinator for an organization that provided services for children with autism and other special needs.

Like the children served by Jo-Ann’s company, Matthew received early intervention and home-based services. When he was old enough, he went to public school for a few years, but made little progress. Matthew was eight when he started attending a May Institute school on Cape Cod. At the school, he actively participated in an individualized, structured program focused on helping him improve his communication and social skills.

THE TEENAGE YEARS

In 2008, Matthew moved to a May Institute school in Randolph, Mass. As the once easy-going little boy entered his teenage years, he started exhibiting some challenging behaviors. The Branzettis worked to put interventions in place at home that mirrored the interventions his teachers were implementing at school. And, with the help of a small amount of medication, Matthew’s behavior improved.

The move was a good one for Matthew. He was ready for the school’s intensive vocational track for older students. Programs like this one combine individualized academic instruction with specialized skills-building. This ensures that adolescents with developmental disabilities will be able to experience as much independence and fulfillment in their adult lives as possible.

Families and educators usually begin working with children at age 14 to prepare them for their eventual transition to adult life.

BUILDING VOCATIONAL SKILLS

“We work with teachers and parents to develop specific vocational goals for each student,” explains Scott Chasse, M.Ed., the school’s director of Vocational Services. “We find out from their parents what kinds of chores they do at home and what strengths they see in their children. We take their age, challenges, and skills into consideration before developing their vocational training program.”

When students turn 15, school staff members assess their progress to determine if they may be able to do volunteer or paid work on campus. With the help of a job coach, many students are employed by the school to do jobs such as recycling, delivering mail, or working in the cafeteria.

Matthew attends the school’s Todd Fournier Center for Employment Training and Community Inclusion. The Center’s mission is to prepare young people with special needs to transition from a school environment into the outside world – something they all must do by age 22, when they “graduate” from the federally mandated educational services system.
TEACHING ADULTS WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

By Teka J. Harris, M.A., BCBA

Just because an individual turns 22 and “ages out” of the federally mandated educational services system, does not mean that his or her opportunities for learning new skills have come to an end. Most adults with developmental disabilities – whether they are 22 or 62 – enjoy learning. Developing new skills or improving existing skills helps them feel important, intelligent, and more independent. In addition, the social interaction they have with an instructor or a caretaker can provide valuable positive reinforcement, and the rewards they receive for responding correctly can be stimulating and motivating.

Most adults with developmental disabilities – whether they are 22 or 62 – enjoy learning. Developing new skills or improving existing skills helps them feel important, intelligent, and more independent. In addition, the social interaction they have with an instructor or a caretaker can provide valuable positive reinforcement, and the rewards they receive for responding correctly can be stimulating and motivating.

Adults with developmental disabilities can learn a variety of life-enhancing skills. They can learn to complete household tasks, make financial transactions, tend to their personal hygiene, and facilitate appropriate interactions with others. Loading a dishwasher, cashing a check, shaving, or making a telephone call to a friend are just a few examples of skills an adult learner may be able to acquire.

There are a number of factors to consider when working with adults with developmental disabilities, including their age, cognitive capacity, physical capabilities, preferences, and the kinds of skills that are most appropriate for their individual circumstances. Taking these factors into account, the teacher or caretaker can design a skill training program that will not only benefit the individual, but that he or she is ready, willing, and able to begin.

Teaching new skills to men and women with developmental disabilities takes time, patience, and persistence. It begins with the development of a structured teaching strategy. Similar to a school curriculum, a teaching strategy describes the overall goal of the instruction and also identifies smaller, more easily attainable objectives the person can reach on the way to mastering the overall goal. It also provides an outline to follow that will enable teachers or caretakers to properly implement the teaching procedure.

Teaching strategies describe the behaviors expected of the adult learner, the score or level of performance he or she is expected to achieve, the instructions and assistance (prompting) staff will provide to encourage correct responding, and the materials needed to implement the teaching procedure. Positive reinforcement should always be incorporated into teaching strategies.

Once the teaching strategy is developed and implemented, service providers should review it on a regular basis to ensure that the individual is receiving the most effective support. They should evaluate progress regularly and modify the plan whenever necessary in order to optimize learning.

Keep in mind that as circumstances change, an adult learner may be able to complete a certain task, but not exactly the way it is outlined in his or her strategy. In that case, the strategy may need to be modified. Sometimes, it matters more that the task was completed than how it was completed.

Teaching strategies should always focus on an individual’s existing interests and abilities, and should be designed around his or her personal choices. It is important to remember that these personal preferences may change over time. Teaching an adult with developmental disabilities can be extremely rewarding. Enhancing an adult’s skill level provides him or her with dignity and the personal fulfillment that will result in a happier and more independent life.

About the Author:

Teka J. Harris, M.A., BCBA, is the Clinical Director for the Western Massachusetts division of the May Center for Adult Services.
Developing and practicing new skills in the Center’s life skills suites helps students like Matthew reinforce their work ethic and gain additional work experience. It is important for young people to learn and practice job and life skills in safe, controlled environments that look and function like actual work and community settings.

MOVING FROM THE CLASSROOM TO THE COMMUNITY

When an aspiring student worker is ready to work in the community, he or she is placed in the most appropriate job available through the school’s employee/employer match program. Employers looking to fill entry-level jobs in the retail, restaurant, or hospitality industries appreciate being able to hire individuals who have had an opportunity to practice required skills.

Matthew has had a variety of jobs at the school, including his present job of putting together orientation packets for new employees. At home, he gained work experience by baking and delivering cupcakes with his mother for their home-based cupcake business.

Always a boy who loved to be active, Matthew blossomed and became more confident as he took on more responsibility. “Matt is a very fast learner,” says Ana Maria Chiappee, BCaBA, his vocational coordinator at the school. “He really liked academics and feeling like an excellent student, but he also liked to be up and about. He loved doing the retail stocking, pricing, and organization that we practice in our program. He really rose to the occasion and we were able to match him with a paying job in the community.”

When Matthew was 18, he started working at BJ’s Wholesale Club – with the help of a job coach – cleaning display cases.

“THERE ARE SO MANY PEOPLE OUT THERE WHO CAN DO THE JOB WITH JUST A LITTLE PATIENCE. IF YOU GIVE THESE PEOPLE THE OPPORTUNITY, YOU CAN CHANGE THEIR WHOLE LIVES. THERE IS NOTHING STRANGE ABOUT THEM. GIVE THEM THE RIGHT JOB, FIND THE RIGHT FIT, AND THEN THEY ARE INCREDIBLY PRODUCTIVE AND SO HAPPY.”

- ANGELA, JOSHUA’S MOTHER

Today, Matthew works about seven hours a week in the community, not only at BJ’s, but also at a convenience store/gasoline station owned by VERC Enterprises. At this new job he keeps things clean, inside and out. In addition, he continues to work three to five hours a week for the Center.

For young people with special needs, community integration is vitally important. Inclusion in the community is one of the best ways for them to learn new skills, become independent, form meaningful relationships, and lead happy, fulfilling lives.

“But it is important to remember that community integration is not just about paid employment,” says Scott. “It can also be accomplished by helping these young men and women find volunteer work and/or participate in organized community activities.”

SATISFACTION IN A JOB WELL DONE

Joshua, a graduate of the Todd Fournier Center for Employment Training and Community Inclusion, worked two days a week at Arbella Insurance Group in Randolph, Mass., doing data entry and filing this past year. Rachel Azizi, his supervisor, was extremely pleased with her company’s partnership with the Fournier Center and had nothing but praise for the quality of Joshua’s work.

When I was considering Josh for his current position, I was told that he just wanted to be given an opportunity to do a good job and to be accepted for who he is. That really hit home with me because isn’t that what we all want?

The training he received was similar to any other new hire. The only difference was that Josh’s job coach shadowed him for the first couple of weeks. She would stay nearby in case she was needed, but Josh became progressively more independent, and was soon able to complete the tasks on his own.

Josh’s job includes logging recorded statements, filing records, and various other tasks to assist our adjusters. Josh is dedicated to doing his job well and his accuracy in data entry and filing is beyond reproach. It’s a win-win situation: He is gaining work experience, and our fulltime employees can be more productive because he has eased their workload.

The opportunity to work with Josh was exactly what our department needed. Josh’s honest nature and remarkable work ethic are inspiring, and remind all of us that there is much satisfaction in a job well done. Our department looks forward to Tuesdays and Wednesdays when Josh walks through the door. His smile and “happy-to-be-here” attitude have done wonders for our staff.

— Rachel Azizi
Arbella Insurance

MEANINGFUL WORK

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2011), only 17.8 percent of people with disabilities are employed. And young adults with autism are three to four times less likely to be employed than young adults with other disabilities.

One factor that contributes to a low employment rate among people with disabilities is a lack of access to job training. Studies show that students with special needs who hold community jobs during their school years are more likely to be independent and continue to work in the community after they have transitioned into adult services. Good vocational programs focus on helping students develop essential work and life skills, with the overall goal of enabling them to obtain volunteer and paid positions and achieve as much independence as possible.
COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS ARE KEY

Scott is often out in the community, building relationships and developing an employers’ network of business establishments willing to provide jobs for vocational students. To date, the Center’s employers’ network includes Arbella Insurance Group, Papa Gino’s, and the Massachusetts South Shore YMCA, in addition to BJ’s Wholesale Club and VERC Enterprises.

It is a program that is working well for students like Matthew who are able to obtain paying jobs in the community. [See related story, “Satisfaction in a Job Well Done.”] When these young men and women first start their new jobs, they are accompanied by a job coach who will assist them. Over time, the students become more and more independent.

“MATT IS A VERY FAST LEARNER. HE REALLY LIKED ACADEMICS AND FEELING LIKE AN EXCELLENT STUDENT, BUT HE ALSO LIKED TO BE UP AND ABOUT. HE REALLY ROSE TO THE OCCASION AND WE WERE ABLE TO MATCH HIM WITH A PAYING JOB IN THE COMMUNITY.”

- ANA MARIA CHIAPPEE, VOCATIONAL COORDINATOR

“I want my job coaches to work themselves out of a job,” says Scott. “If the coach is successful, there’s going to come a time when the student doesn’t need him or her.”

Why should businesses extend themselves to hire individuals with special needs? According to Scott, there is an untapped population of individuals with disabilities who can fill positions that some employers have difficulty filling. And there is a federal tax credit for businesses that employ adults with special needs. “Most important,” he adds, “it’s the right thing to do, and it creates goodwill in the community.”

Jo-Ann and Eric, who now own an ice cream store on Cape Cod, agree. They opened their family business with Matthew in mind. “There is a lot of cleaning and restocking that needs to be done. These are jobs Matthew has done at the school. He could transfer these skills to the family business. But long-term, I was thinking this is somewhere that other people with disabilities – not just Matthew – may be able to work.”

When Matthew turns 22 next spring, he will graduate. “I’m very scared about him turning 22,” says Jo-Ann, “but I think his work ethic and work experience will really help him transition. I don’t expect Matt to work 40 hours a week, but if he can have that balance of maybe a day program and a job, I think it’s going to make him happy. And I think it’s going to allow him to contribute to society, which is really what every person wants to do.”