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# Working within the Spectrum: Employees with Asperger Syndrome in Our Library

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# Working within the Spectrum: Employees with Asperger Syndrome in Our Library

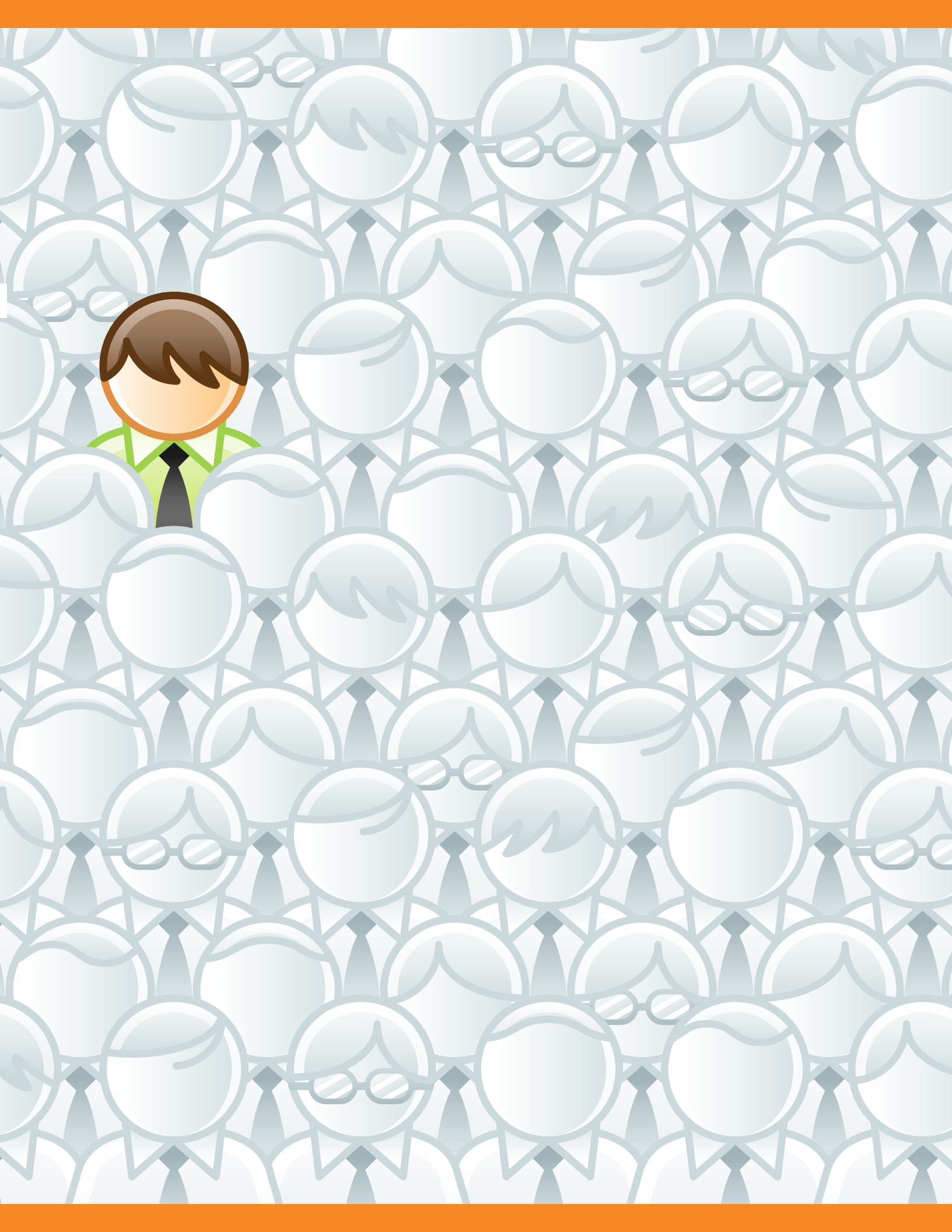
## INTRODUCTION

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines autism as “one of a group of disorders known as autism spectrum disorders (ASDs). ASDs are developmental disabilities that cause substantial impairments in social interaction and communication and the presence of unusual behaviors and interests.”<sup>[1]</sup> Diagnoses have been growing at a rate of 10 to 17 percent per year, and in 2007, the prevalence of ASDs in eight-year-old children was 1 in 150 in the United States.<sup>[2]</sup>

Community groups and educational institutions offer services for children with autism, but what happens to them as they grow older? As is true for their non-autistic peers, adults with autism will need self-sustaining employment throughout their lives.

Having a spectrum disorder means that people with autism have a range of capabilities. While it is true that some persons are best suited to repetitive tasks like rolling silverware and bagging groceries (traditional employment opportunities), people on the high-functioning end of the spectrum, such as those with Asperger syndrome, have capabilities that go beyond routine tasks. Adults with Asperger's are well suited for complex, multistep jobs involving great attention to detail, such as are found in libraries. In this article, we relate our experiences as the supervisors of two individuals with Asperger syndrome who began working in our library at Illinois Wesleyan University (IWU) in summer 2008. We also provide a list of resources for those who may consider employing people on the spectrum.

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## THE IDEA

In early 2008, a member of the Autism Society of McLean County and father of a recent college graduate with Asperger's asked IWU's University Librarian Karen Schmidt about available work in our library. We were planning a new initiative involving storing and providing access to scholarly work in a digital institutional repository, and Schmidt suggested that the graduate could help with the large quantity of scanning and data entry required to launch the repository.

Schmidt asked Linda Kunce, an IWU professor of psychology with expertise in autism to visit our library and answer questions we might have. Kunce had previously worked with the graduate and her family and was able to speak to her specific skills and needs and to the overall characteristics of people with ASDs.

Catherine Spitz, associate vice president for Human Resources, also attended this meeting and provided advice on hiring and funding the position. Ultimately, a mixture of funds from state and local governments along with the university's budget made a three-month trial position possible.

During the course of conversations within the library about hiring for the institutional repository, the circulation department's supervisor, Suzanne Wilson, saw an opportunity for another adult with Asperger's to be involved in summer projects of shelf reading and inventory work. As we, the circulation desk coordinator and the university archivist, would supervise these individuals, we met with and interviewed the perspective employees with their primary caregivers to discuss the range of job skills involved and accommodations needed. By May 2008, our new employees were actively assisting the library in meeting its goals.

The person working with the archivist on the repository asked to be called Rainbow for the purposes of this article. Rainbow received her B.S. degree from a land grant institution in December 2007. The new circulation assistant, whom we will call Bart, completed his final year in high school in December 2008.

## CASE STUDY I

Rainbow's work was based in the university archives and initially involved scanning more than twenty linear feet of undergraduate honors theses dating from the late 1970s to the present. Rainbow's parents suggested starting her on a part-time schedule and gradually adding more hours until she was working thirty-two hours per week.

Rainbow's parents explained she is open with people about her Asperger's and willing to instruct others about her needs and feelings at a given moment, but beyond individual interactions she prefers to work alone. Additionally, repetitive computer and scanning work that tends to bore other undergraduate students who work elsewhere in the archives is enjoyable for Rainbow. Overall, we found a good match for Rainbow's skills and our needs.

Rainbow needs a clear understanding of the goals of a project and a quiet space to work in. She initially worked with a script outlining the steps needed to do the job but learns quickly with verbal instructions, too, if the steps aren't too varied and asks questions as needed. We were able to keep one-on-one training time to a minimum during the theses project. By the end of her

first week on the job it was apparent that Rainbow had a knack for listening to the parameters of a project and engaging in problem solving to find the best way of accomplishing a goal. This aptitude for taking the initiative became evident when, after being given a set of steps to accomplish a task, she tried a different sequence of steps that she thought would work and that turned out to be a more efficient way to accomplish the same thing.

We knew that loud noises, including loud voices and laughter, were sensitivities we would have to accommodate. Rainbow uses headphones and a personal music player to block out background noises, and we set up a workspace in a room that was used by others but was not in a high-traffic area. We also placed a sign on the door alerting people to her presence and to her need for silence.

We had agreed that if others disrupted her comfort zone she was welcome to leave the area, and there were days when people intruded on her space or were too loud in adjacent rooms. Rainbow became upset for a while but removed herself from the irritant, regained her composure, and returned to her work. Occasionally, she left work for the day in order to recover from a disruption.

Rainbow is fast but careful and finished the theses project before the end of her trial period. She was given other archival material to scan for the repository and took on the additional task of uploading what she scanned into the repository's interface; where abstracts were missing, Rainbow volunteered to summarize the articles as she uploaded them. We had an opportunity to extend her original work time by three months and she continued with a series of smaller scanning projects.

As the age of the material increased, the software's ability to "read" the text in order to make it searchable became less accurate. Rainbow became uncomfortable making the more editorial-type decisions needed at this stage. With this difficulty plus an increasing variety in the type of material selected for scanning, her supervisor needed to be on hand frequently. At this point, a job coach with experience in text-editing software could have helped provide the necessary advice, but the available funds for Rainbow's position were ending and further experimentation with work flows was not possible.

## CASE STUDY II

Bart also has been diagnosed with Asperger's but, unlike Rainbow, he is outgoing, likes to be around people, and likes

a lot of different tasks. He has worked in libraries before and enjoys shelving and customer service. Able to work with a number of distractions around him, he does best when he has a variety of things to keep him busy throughout the day. The needs of the circulation department seemed to be a great match for Bart's experience and abilities.

Bart's mother provided the circulation coordinator with a binder describing some of the characteristics of autism that impact Bart, as well as some of his interests and suggestions for how to interact with him. Bart does not pick up on body language cues or voice tones, and he does best when communication is direct. He also has some autism-typical behaviors, like arm flapping and grunting, that emerge when he's nervous or uncomfortable. Simple redirection always works to resolve the issues and calm Bart down.

Bart is a productive worker and prefers to tackle at least a couple of different tasks each shift. He enjoys knowing what the day will hold for him from the minute he arrives and thrives when given a clear-cut schedule; however, he does need prompting throughout the day to move on to the next thing on the list. While he enjoys variety, he has a tendency to become distracted between tasks. Creating a time line for how he will spend his day has worked well for us. His shelving and shifting are accurate and he completes tasks in the same amount of time as other student workers.

When he first began in the library he had a job coach, but after a successful summer we determined that he could manage well without one. Bart enjoys working at the circulation desk helping patrons, but that turned out to be an unexpected challenge. Because of the amount of detailed and nuanced information circulation students are expected to know, this wasn't the best fit. His customer service skills are exceptional, but Bart does not work often enough to accumulate the knowledge required to do that job as well as we would need. This is the same reason we don't hire part-time students, and it is possible Bart could be trained further if he worked longer hours.

When attempting something new or very complex, Bart is self-reliant enough that he would benefit from having job support aids such as checklists and instructions on hand. This is both a good and a bad thing. It clarifies procedures before a task is started, but it also means that a twenty-minute job requires more preparation by his supervisor than it would for many employees. It is often not worth the set-up time to have Bart do something complex that is short-term. Providing him with support tools for long-term projects or keeping him on the routine jobs he does well with works better.

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One of the greatest things about bringing Bart aboard has been seeing how the twenty-two student employees in the department interact with him. Since he is working without a job coach and his supervisor is not always available, the student workers in the department have stepped in and often take responsibility for getting Bart started on his projects and keeping him on track. While at first many were tentative about talking with him or letting him know what assignments there were, they have all become comfortable with him, discussing his interests, getting him refocused when he is distracted, and offering help when they see him in need.

## CONCLUSION

Libraries have been identified as a good place for people with autism to work,<sup>[3]</sup> and yet library literature does not offer examples from which to learn. We offer our experiences as an entry into this conversation and as a voice of encouragement for employing people on the autistic spectrum in libraries.

While both our employees are identified as adults with Asperger's, they have different abilities, personalities, and

ways of interacting with the world. Key components for success are finding the right kind of supervisor, the right autistic personality and skill set for the job, and a willingness to communicate with the support person or primary caregiver in the employee's life. The supervisor should possess patience and a sense of humor, and appreciate what people with autism can bring to the table — both with their skills and the life experiences they can share with other employees. Some community support groups or government agencies will provide job coaches to help an employee navigate variations in daily assignments<sup>[4]</sup>; local social services and advocacy groups can help identify such persons.

We've come to think of this experience as a way of broadening patron and staff understanding of spectrum disorders and as outreach to some community members who may not otherwise find positions that leverage their skill sets. Our experiences involve working with Asperger syndrome employees in archives and circulation settings, but we also think other places in the library, such as in technical services processing periodicals and marking books or electronic resource preparation, are potentials for employing people with ASDs. Undoubtedly, there are as many possibilities as there are personalities.

Now that we are aware of the strengths the people in this population have to offer, we won't overlook their talents when suitable work is available. Above all, we found that during this experience we did what we always do as workers and as supervisors, but rarely articulate. We all try to choose employees for jobs that match their skill levels and interests, and we all hope for managers who will appreciate our skills and accommodate our learning styles in ways that bring out the best in us. Why should we think differently of prospective employees' potential because some have a diagnosis for their personality traits and others don't? ■



**Branching Out.** Elgin's new Gail Borden Public Library District Rakow Branch Library combines cutting edge architectural design with sustainability and efficiency. Floating librarians, express check, digital reference and automated sorting allow this branch to emphasize customer interaction over material handling. Designed with the sustainable elements of cool daylighting, ground source heat exchange and on-site stormwater management, the project has been registered with the U.S. Green Building Council, and anticipates LEED® Silver certification.

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- [1] Centers for Disease Control. *Autism Spectrum Disorders Overview* [online]. 9 February 2007 [cited 15 December 2008]. Available at <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/overview.htm>.
- [2] Hecita, Fredalynn Mortera. *Autism Statistics* [online]. 22 April 2004 [cited 30 September 2008]. Available at <http://www.autisticsociety.org/News/article/sid=609.html>; and Centers for Disease Control, *Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring (ADDM) Network* [online]. 9 February 2007 [cited 15 December 2008]. Available at <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/addm.htm>.
- [3] Types of jobs available in libraries, places that need people with library-related skills, education requirements, and range of salaries are outlined on pp.127–29 of Temple Grandin and Kate Duffy's *Developing Talents* (2004).
- [4] For a thorough discussion of the variety and history of employment supports, see Paul Wehman, et al., *Real Work for Real Pay* (2007).



## RESOURCES

Autism Society of America Career Center. *Career Center* [online]. Bethesda, Md.: Autism Society of America. Available at <http://tinyurl.com/mzx9to> (cited Dec. 22, 2008).

Employers wishing to recruit from a pool of applicants with autism may post descriptions on this site. From the society's home page at <http://www.autism-society.org/>, one can find out more about ASDs and chapters affiliated with the group.

Dick, Marcia A., and Dorothy E. Jones. "Hiring Students with Disabilities in the Academic Library." *Illinois Libraries* 81, no. 2 (1999): 83–87. The authors detail their experience of hiring and working with a blind student but also speak broadly to the commonsense idea that college students will graduate, enter the workplace, and become supervisors themselves one day. Providing varied experiences for the students as co-workers and patrons of persons with different levels of ability in an academic library will give them insights that will benefit all later.

Grandin, Temple, and Kate Duffy. *Developing Talents: Careers for Individuals with Asperger Syndrome and High-functioning Autism*. Shawnee Mission, Kans.: Autism Asperger Publishing, 2004. "This book is designed to take readers — those on the autism spectrum and their family members, teachers, counselors, and other adults who make a difference in young lives — through the career planning process. . . discovering and growing talents and interests that might lead to satisfying work as well as a career planning and job search process. These are ideas that have helped me succeed" (pp. xi-xii). With these introductory words, author and scientist Temple Grandin introduces one of her many published works on the topic of autism. Dr. Grandin is autistic and speaks eloquently on her experiences and beliefs relating to autistic individuals in our society. A complete list of her works and details about her life are available at <http://www.templegrandin.com>.

Hagner, David, and Bernard F. Cooney. "'I Do That for Everybody': Supervising Employees with Autism." *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities* 20, no. 2 (2005): 91–97. This is one of two resources recommended by the psychology professor initiating our employment experiment. The work details the skills needed and qualifications brought by fourteen autistic employees in a wide range of jobs. Supervisors, employees, co-workers, and job coaches provided feedback on their experiences; these observations and the recommendations of the authors proved invaluable as we familiarized ourselves with the needs and possibilities entailed in our upcoming interactions with our employees.

Johnstone, Jodi. "Employment of Disabled Persons in the Academic Library Environment." *Australian Library Journal* [online] 54, no. 2 (2005): 156–63, <http://www.alia.org.au/publishing/alj/54.2/full.text/johnstone.html> (cited Sept. 2008). In this article, Johnstone speaks only of employing disabled people in general in academic libraries, but the Australian disabilities' rights act she cites does cover intellectual disabilities. Her paper includes case studies and numerous citations on disability and employment in the United States, including the benefits of exposing staff and student workers to broader segments of their communities. The latter resonates with the reactions we observed with our student workers.

Kitchen, Suzanne Gosden. *Employees with Asperger Syndrome* [online]. Morgantown, W.V.: Job Accommodation Network, 2007. Available at <http://www.jan.wvu.edu/media/Asperger.pdf> (cited Dec. 27, 2008). This short booklet was the second of two resources recommended by the psychology professor initiating our employment experiment. Kitchen refers to recent revisions in the Americans with Disabilities Act and provides an easily understood synopsis of Asperger's syndrome with accommodations that may be needed based on individual characteristics. She also offers a list of government and private organizations that may be consulted for further information.

Kregel, John. "Why It Pays to Hire Workers with Developmental Disabilities." *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities* 14, no. 3 (1999): 130–2. This article provides four real-world experiences of employers' interactions and outcomes with developmentally disabled employees. Kregel gives an overview of earlier studies of employer experiences and reports that employers in individual areas may rate performance by people with developmental disabilities lower than their non-diagnosed peers but at the same time reports overall employer satisfaction with developmentally disadvantaged employees. In summary: "Hiring workers with disabilities is not a charitable act, it's just good business sense" (p. 132).

Lattimore, L. Perry, Marsha B. Parsons, and Dennis H. Reid. "Enhancing Job-Site Training of Supported Workers with Autism: A Reemphasis on Simulation." *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis* 39, no. 1 (2006): 91–102. Employers interested in different training approaches may find the results of this research helpful. Autistic employees receiving off-site training as well as on-the-job training are shown to perform at a higher level than those who receive on-the-job training only.

Office of Disability Employment Policy. *Employers* [online]. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Labor. Available at <http://www.dol.gov/odep/categories/employer> (cited Sept. 30, 2008). Legal aspects to consider when employing people with disabilities, recruitment strategies, accommodations that may be necessary during employment, and workplace emergency preparedness are addressed in this Web site.

Shapiro, Joseph P. No Pity: *People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 1994. Issues surrounding numerous disabilities are included in Shapiro's work. In the section on ASDs, Shapiro pointedly observes businesses aren't hiring from the autistic population simply for the greater societal good; they are getting employees who work diligently throughout all the hours they are on the job (pp.144–51).

U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. *Questions and Answers about Persons with Intellectual Disabilities in the Workplace and the Americans with Disabilities Act* [online]. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2004. Available at [http://www.eeoc.gov/facts/intellectual\\_disabilities.html](http://www.eeoc.gov/facts/intellectual_disabilities.html) (cited Dec. 22, 2008). This resource can help employers think through issues they should consider such as "when a condition qualifies as a disability under the ADA; under what circumstances an employer may ask an applicant or employee or a third party (such as a family member of an applicant or employee) questions about an intellectual disability; what types of reasonable accommodations may be needed by applicants and employees with intellectual disabilities; how to address safety concerns and conduct issues in the workplace; and how an employer can prevent harassment of employees with intellectual disabilities."

Wehman, Paul, Katherine J. Inge, W. Grant Revell, Jr., and Valerie A. Brooke. *Real Work for Real Pay: Inclusive Employment for People with Disabilities*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing, 2007. The history of employment practices is provided in essays detailing strategies and offering questions for determining the kinds of employment-related scenarios people with disabilities may encounter. Autism is not treated separately but several sections on intellectual disabilities and supported work environments are relevant to this community and to potential employers of its members.