

Melita

From: Melita DeBellis [melita@gcepd.org]
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To: melita@gcepd.org
Subject: From the Governor's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities

Governor's Committee on Employment
of People with Disabilities



Welcoming Motivated Workers!

ABILITIES

Promoting the employment of Vermont citizens of all abilities

March 2008 - Vol 2, Issue 1

Dear Friends ~ A Message about Autism Spectrum Disorders



April is [Autism Awareness Month](#) in Vermont, so it is a fitting time to talk about employment for individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). What are their unique employment challenges? And what would be helpful for an employer to know who wants to create a successful employment environment for a person with ASD? Responding to these questions is one of our goals with this issue of "Abilities".

When an individual has an obvious, physical disability, it is sometimes easier to appreciate the nature of, or challenges associated with, their situation. With a sometimes hidden disability such as an autism spectrum disorder, it's a whole different ball game. Employers and co-workers may not have a good understanding of what kind of assistance or accommodation - if any - the individual needs. They may not appreciate how the particular disability informs how an individual will carry out their job responsibilities. And for the job seeker, the big challenge is whether or not to disclose the fact that they have a disability that may create challenges in the performance of their work.

In seeking an employment story regarding an individual with an autism spectrum disorder to highlight for this issue of Abilities, we had two distinct responses. First, there were individuals who hesitated to disclose their condition and share their story. Some were concerned that it would make it that much more difficult for them to find work. Others felt they would prefer to be known for who they were, not for their disability. On the flip side were the compelling stories we heard about skilled and educated individuals who have been unable to find and retain employment due to the lack of adequate supports, accommodations, and other factors. Clearly, there is much work to be done, and the time is now as there are a large number of students with ASD currently in our school system

who will soon reach employment age.

So our opportunity - indeed, the opportunity for the business and service sectors as well as the disability community - is to continue to strive to find ways to create an environment for employment success in a way that also allows the individual with the disability to feel safe, respected, and valued. The issue is bigger than can be addressed with one newsletter, but our hope is that this issue of Abilities will provide important information that will make a difference.

Best regards,

Fred Jones, Chair,
Governor's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities

and

Susan Chicoine, on behalf of the Vermont Business Leadership Network

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Andrew Jones - An Employment Success Story from an Employer's Perspective

Andrew Jones has Asperger's syndrome and is the senior web developer at Small Planet, Inc. an advertising and design agency in Rutland, Vermont where he has worked for the last eight years. Andy is recently married and the couple is expecting their first child sometime in July. David Townsend is the President and owner of Small Planet and has been working with people of disability in the workplace for the past nine years.

"Recognizing the Ability in a Disability" *by David Townsend, President, Small Planet, Inc.*



So, here's the question: can we as employers - leaders in our companies and communities - move beyond our fears and ignorance and recognize the talents and abilities in others for what they are? Without reservations? Without prejudice? It's a tough question that challenges how we see people and about whom we can hire if we're willing to suspend what we know in favor of what we might learn.

The first time I met Andrew Jones I was not impressed. We needed help in the

production end of things and he had been recommended to me as someone with talent, and more importantly at the time, the skills I was looking for. Andy showed up for his interview not appearing at all prepared for work in a professional environment. To top it off, his resume - which included four jobs in the prior three years - wasn't exactly a testimony to his dependability.

The interview didn't go well and I passed on hiring him, never expecting anything more to come of it. But a few weeks later, encouraged by the person who had recommended him, I called Andy and asked him back for a second interview. To my amazement, he showed up with a fresh haircut and neatly dressed, signaling to me that, at the least, he was serious about the position. Based on his second interview, I decided to take chance and took him on.

The first few weeks of Andrew's work went well enough - he was given assignments, completed them (most in astonishing little time) and quietly went about his business. He showed up on time, did his work (and did it well) and, in short, seemed to be the kind of employee that employers dream about. Other than his extraordinarily quiet demeanor - Andy rarely said anything unless asked and could never be counted on to carry a conversation - things seem to be going along swimmingly. That's when I began to take notice of some unusual behavior.

On my rounds around the office to check in with people and see how things were going, I would often notice Andy 'surfing' the web or working on something other than his immediate assignment. When queried if he had finished the work that had been given to him, the invariable answer was always "yes". Why then, I asked, hadn't you told someone you were ready to move on to the next thing? He would always say that he would make sure to let someone know the next time and then return to his assignment. While I had chosen to address what appeared to be a lack of communication, it was really the surfing - which I assumed was personal stuff being done on company time - that was nagging at me. So, I finally confronted him with it, only to find out that during his time "in between assignments" Andy was looking for software or programs that would help the company do a better job in a number of areas. Wow! Did I feel like a fool? Here I was thinking the guy is goofing around on the company nickel and he's really investing it well. Ouch!

The years passed and Andy's role in our company grew. Soon he was out of the production end of things entirely and heading up our web programming area. We were a growing company and he was growing with us. His ability to focus for long periods of time on complex problems that would make anyone else's eyes glaze over was, and remains, truly amazing. Over time, people in the office who interacted with him learned to be direct and precise in their communications and to be clear about setting deadlines. Attempts to get Andy to exercise what we felt was simple initiative continued to be frustrating, but his remarkable knowledge about all things web and interactive helped to overcome the communication issues. We simply learned to adapt. Then one day, things started to come undone.

While the details of the event are something that don't bear on the outcome of this story, the results of the incident called his years of loyal service into

question and eventually led to his disclosure of having Asperger's Syndrome. Now his behavior over those years began to make some sense. The short, direct communication style, the ability to focus on complex and detailed problems, the task centeredness, and his intense loyalty to the company . . . all fit the classic description for high-functioning autism. I'm happy to say that we were both able to get over our bump in the road, although it took a lot of work on both ends to restore the trust that had been unfairly called into question. So, after nine years, what I have learned?

- That I am (and we all are) to some degree, victims of what we think we know, captured by our own prejudices.
- That what one may consider a disability can be, in truth, an ability. Most other people could not (and most likely would not want to) do what Andy does, with the attention he can give, over the time spans he can concentrate. Simply put, he possesses a unique and powerful ability. His Asperger's and its attendant conditions of focus, orientation to detail, and task centeredness are actually the reasons he is so good at what he does.
- That you *can't* always judge someone by their appearance (no matter what all of the hiring books tell us).
- That anyone has something to teach someone else. In this case, Andy's need to have his communications precise and to the point has improved my ability to give good direction to everyone.

Part of me will always remain embarrassed by the limitations of my judgment and behavior when I think about Andrew Jones and part of me will be glad for the opportunity he has given me to expand how I see and interact with *all* people. After speaking with other employers from businesses small and large, I also realize that how I felt and how I reacted were not very different than how they would have responded. Knowing that, I believe that the only way we, as a community of employers, are going to change the current dynamic of disability hiring, is to speak up and share our experiences and learning, and in doing so, break down the barriers of our current thinking and open our businesses and communities to a whole body of highly skilled, highly motivated people who can help them grow.

Through his own hard work and loyalty to our company, Andy has built quite a life for himself and I am proud to be a part of it.

About Autism and Autism Spectrum Disorders

By Clare McFadden, Autism Specialist for the Vermont Division of Disability and Aging Services

Temple Grandin, Ph.D is a designer of livestock handling facilities and Professor of Animal Science. Half of the cattle in the United States are handled in facilities that she has designed. Daniel Tammet operates an online language learning company. He knows 11 languages and has learned a new language in one week. He can calculate complex math problems in his head and has memorized pi to 22,514 digits. These incredibly talented people also have Autism Spectrum Disorders.

Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) are brain-based disorders that impact a person's communication and social skills and his/her behavior. They impact the way the brain processes and responds to information and these differences can lead to challenges in some areas and special talents in others. Two of the most commonly known ASDs are autism and Asperger's Disorder.

Many people have become familiar with autism through the character played by Dustin Hoffman in the movie *Rainman*. While this movie does illustrate one example of a person with autism, it is important to keep in mind that people with ASD display a wide range of abilities and challenges. Symptoms can range from mild to severe. Some people are unable to speak, have cognitive impairments and display unusual behavior. Other people are very articulate, have average or higher intelligence, but still have significant difficulties with social skills. No two people with ASD are alike. Like other people, each person has his/her own set of strengths and challenges.

However, there are some common challenges. The characteristic that is common to all people with ASD is a difficulty in the area of social skills. They often have a difficult time understanding the unwritten social rules, such as when to be honest and when to tell a white lie, how close to stand to someone or how to engage in small talk. They may have trouble picking up on subtle cues such as facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice or when someone is joking or being sarcastic. Some people with ASD are very anxious in social situations.

Some people with ASDs also have very sensitive senses. They may be very sensitive to loud noises, or bright lights, especially fluorescent lighting. Others react strongly to certain smells or textures.

Some people on the autism spectrum have difficulty understanding and communicating with others. Some people may use alternative means of communicating such as using pictures or typing rather than speech. Others who do speak may have difficulties understanding others. Some people with ASD have no difficulties with communication.

The number of people diagnosed with ASD in Vermont and nationally has been growing at a rate of 10-17% a year over the past 15 years. A recent study released by the Federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicates that 1 in 150 children have ASD. There is currently no known cause or cure. However, with appropriate education and support, many individuals with ASD can overcome many of the challenges related to ASD. Despite their challenges, people with ASD have much to offer in the world of work.

Clare McFadden is the Autism Specialist for the Vermont Division of Disability and Aging Services. She can direct people to resources needed to support people with ASD and can be reached at clare.mcfadden@ahs.state.vt.us.

Employing People with Autism Spectrum Disorders

By Clare McFadden, Autism Specialist for the Vermont Division of Disability and Aging Services

Some people with ASD have special talents or intense interests that can be built upon and developed into careers. Temple Grandin attributes her success as a humane livestock facility designer to her ability to recall details. She says that she thinks in pictures and that her memory is like a movie she can replay in her head, allowing her to recall important details. She also believes that her autism has given her sensitivity to how animals see the world. These talents combine to allow her to design livestock facilities that are sensitive to the needs of the animals and are humane. Daniel Tammet was able to capitalize on his incredible facility with languages to become a developer of language learning courses.

Because of the wide range of abilities, challenges and interests of people with ASD, there are no specific types of jobs or careers that are best suited to people with ASD. However, surveys of people with ASD indicate that there are some factors that can contribute to making a good job match. Good job matches build on the person's special interests/talents, require minimal social skills, have clearly defined expectations and routines, and allow sufficient time to adjust to the work environment and learn new skills. Bad matches are often jobs which require fast-paced decision making, multi-tasking and require a high level of social skills. Also, for people with sensory sensitivities, the physical environment such as the noise level, lighting or distractions can impact their success.

Some individuals with ASD need no accommodations or support to be successfully employed. Others will. Vermont's Vocational Rehabilitation counselors can help individuals with ASD to choose and find jobs, as well as provide access to needed accommodations to improve the likelihood of success. For individuals with more significant challenges, Developmental Disability Services Agencies can provide long term support to the person on the job, including initial job training, ongoing on-site job coaching and problem solving with the employer.

Another resource for employers are the Disability Program Navigators within the Department of Labor. In addition to being a resource for job seekers, the Navigators are able to provide employers with information regarding accommodations in the workplace, including the costs of providing affordable accommodations.

Sometimes people with ASD have a very difficult time with job interviews due to their social skill challenges and anxiety. For example, some people with ASD have a hard time making eye contact or are very nervous when they first meet

new people. Others may provide very brief answers to interview questions, while others may provide very long, overly detailed answers. However, if employers can look past these challenges and see the other skills the person has to offer in the workplace, it can often lead to a long term, successful work situation for both the employer and the employee.

Melita DeBellis, Executive Coordinator of the Governor's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities, contributed to this article.

Workplace Accommodations for an Employee with an Autism Spectrum Disorder

By Clare McFadden, Autism Specialist for the Vermont Division of Disability and Aging Services

Accommodations for an employee with ASD may vary greatly depending upon the individual. Many of these accommodations are structured in recognition of the fact that a person with ASD may need extra help initially to understand the job tasks or social protocols, and may also at times have difficulty explaining their needs or challenges to their supervisor. What follows, however, is a representation of the types of accommodations an employer might consider.

- ~ Have a job coach work with the individual to help them learn the position;
- ~ Have a co-worker serve as a social coach to help the person understand the social do's and don'ts of the work setting;
- ~ Structure the work space to minimize distractions;
- ~ Allow a longer initial period to learn tasks or new routines;
- ~ Provide very clear and specific job descriptions, expectations and instructions and/or visual systems to organize the work.
- ~ Have only one person give instructions or assignments to the individual with ASD.
- ~ Recognize the particular sensitivity of persons with ASD to stress and anxiety. Ensure they are given appropriate meal and rest breaks. Talk with them to learn their capabilities. Don't assume they react to situations as you might.
- ~ Ask the individual if everything is okay.
- ~ Recognize that sometimes a person with ASD will not have the communication or negotiation skills that make it easy to approach a manager and discuss necessary changes in working conditions. It may help to remember that the individual wants to do a good job for you, and that with a little extra

communication effort from the employer's side, a solid foundation can be laid that will allow the person to be a wonderful employee.

~ When dealing with a complicated new task or computer application, the person may initially need step-by-step assistance. Written or picture directions may help as well. Once the learning is solidified and understood, you can expect a high performance level.

~ For certain individuals, ongoing proactive oversight can be helpful, especially around the sort of unexpected social or soft skill issues or questions that may arise, such as, "What do I do if I miss the bus?" "What if I can't work late because I'll miss my only bus home?" "What if I oversleep?"

Melita DeBellis, Executive Coordinator of the Governor's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities, contributed to this article.

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[Vocational Rehabilitation](#)

[Vermont Association of Business, Industry and Rehabilitation](#)

[Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired](#)

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[Vermont Developmental Disabilities Council](#)

[Vermont Department of Health on Autism](#)

[Guide to Services in Vermont for People with Autism Spectrum Disorders](#)

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The 5th Governor's Summit on Employment of People with Disabilities

The 5th Governor's Summit on the Employment of People with Disabilities will be held on June 9, 2008 at the Sheraton Conference Center in Burlington. Hosted by Voc Rehab Vermont and VABIR, the Summit will focus on returning veterans with disabilities who may face challenges finding employment in their communities. Special emphasis will be given to those who are returning with PTSD and Traumatic Brain Injuries.

The morning session of the Summit will be by invitation only, and will consist of a working session including leaders from business, government, veteran's groups, returning vets with disabilities and other social service providers. These

facilitated workgroups will address various aspects of the challenges facing returning veterans and will provide recommendations to the Governor.

The luncheon program will follow the morning session and is open to the general public with a particular emphasis on outreach to the Vermont business community.

The luncheon program will be launched by Governor Jim Douglas who will briefly address the audience on this topic and present the Governor's Awards from the Governor's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities.

One of the luncheon keynote speakers will be Lee Woodruff, the wife of ABC Correspondent Bob Woodruff. Bob and Lee are authors of the book *In an Instant: A Family's Journey of Love and Healing*. This New York Times best-seller describes their family's difficult journey during Bob's critical injury in Iraq while anchoring a broadcast for ABC News and his subsequent reintegration into his chosen career.

Call for Nominations - Governor's Awards



The Governor's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities (GCEPD) seeks the assistance of the Vermont community in making nominations for our 2008 Governor's Awards. These awards will be presented to individuals, businesses, media or municipalities that have made significant contributions to the employment of people with disabilities. The nomination deadline for the 2008 awards is April 15, 2008.

The awards will be handed out by Governor Jim Douglas on June 9th, 2008 at The Governor's Summit on Employment of People with Disabilities.

The Governor's Awards are given in three different categories. The Employment/Accommodation Award is for an employer who reflects the spirit of the Americans with Disabilities Act in their employment practices. The Design/Accessibility Award is for an architect, contractor, business, municipality, recreational facility or entity that has developed innovative and creative solutions for accessible structures, buildings or services, or provided accommodations to create equal and aesthetic access. The Media Award honors print and broadcast reporting that recognizes the importance of equality and dignity regarding disability. A fourth award, the Governor's Award for Outstanding Effort, may also be given if the committee believes it is appropriate.

People are encouraged to nominate Vermont businesses, individuals or municipalities that have contributed to the employment of people with disabilities. The most recent award winners included Susan Chicoine and Charles LeTourneau of TDBanknorth and Alice Dermody of Aramark Food Services for employment/accommodation efforts; Mark Stewart of MGS Architects of Newport, Vermont for design and accessibility; and Perry Richards, Elizabeth Tuck and former employee April Tuck of the human resources

department of Middlebury College received the Governor's Award for outstanding effort. Since the GCEPD began presenting awards in 1989, over sixty Vermont businesses and individuals have been honored.

To obtain a [nomination form](#), or for more information about the GCEPD, please go to the GCEPD website at www.hireus.org, or contact Melita DeBellis, Executive Coordinator, Melita@gcepd.org or 802-434-6600.

Melita DeBellis,

Governor's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities
melita@gcepd.org; 802-434-6600; www.hireus.org

and

Christine McCarthy

Vermont Business Leadership Network
vabired@aol.com; 802-878-1107; www.vtbln.org

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