



## Worktopia: Improving future employment prospects for youth with autism

By Rakhee Chowdhury

The road to finding meaningful employment in adulthood is hardly ever a smooth ride. For a person with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), navigating this road often results in unique challenges that can be particularly daunting. According to the Canadian Survey on Disability conducted in 2012, as many as 83 percent of adult respondents with ASD report no employment income. It is no question that the right job can improve one's self worth and be something to look forward to. The question is: what can be done to help make the road to adulthood for young adults with ASD an easier one to navigate?

With the aim of creating vocational initiatives for individuals with ASD and/or intellectual disability, the See Things My Way (STMW) Centre for Innovation is participating in Worktopia, a national project sponsored by The Sinneave Family Foundation and Autism Speaks Canada, and funded in part by the Government of Canada's Opportunities Fund for Persons with Disabilities Program. Worktopia programs emphasize community participation by helping youth with ASD develop the skills necessary to obtain sustainable employment.

The first Worktopia program offered in Quebec by the Centre is Employment-Works Canada (EWC): a 12-week training program that paves the road to future employment for young adults with ASD, aged 15 to 29, and no longer in school. Inaugurated in January 2017, EWC collaborated with a variety of workplace partners to provide eight adults with ASD opportunities to explore their interests in the areas of foodservice, TV production, and community services. Throughout these experiences, partici-



Participants and staff of the first cohort of Employment-Works Canada (Québec) at Action Main d'Oeuvre inc. (Photo credit, Audrey Morrissette)

pants felt more prepared than ever to transition toward future employment, having gained lasting friendships and a new set of skills under their belt. The journey continues as participants explore even more employment possibilities with the ongoing support of career counsellors at Action Main D'Oeuvre inc.

This fall, STMW is thrilled to launch another edition of EWC as well as the first edition of CommunityWorks Canada® (CWC). The latter is a 10-week after-school pre-employability program that aims to improve job readiness among students with ASD, aged 15 to 21, through volunteer opportunities. Soon, more youth with ASD will enroll in these programs to foster the development of important skills and to seek opportunities for future employment.

*STMW is currently seeking youth with ASD, aged 15 to 29, to participate in the 2018 editions of Employment-Works Canada and CommunityWorks Canada®, both offered in English. To participate, contact Rakhee Chowdhury, Worktopia coordinator in Québec at [rakheec@seethingsmyway.org](mailto:rakheec@seethingsmyway.org). To learn more, visit <http://worktopia.ca/>, <http://www.seethingsmyway.org/>, and <http://www.actionmaindoeuvre.ca/>.*



## Get down to work: An exploratory study of employment among post-secondary graduates with disabilities

By Evelyne Marcil, Laura King, Alice Havel, Catherine Fichten, and Mary Jorgensen

After working hard in college and university for many years, most people assume they will obtain employment when their studies are completed. In the case of graduates with disabilities, finding a job is a major concern. As there are multiple barriers to employment for graduates with disabilities, we decided to investigate the job search process of successfully employed post-secondary graduates with disabilities.

We selected 16 English speaking participants from previous studies who told us that they had a job and interviewed them about their job search process. Sixteen short interviews (10 to 15 minutes) were conducted over the phone, email or Skype. Questions concerned the nature of employment, duration of the job search, how participants heard about the employment opportunity, strategies used to obtain employment, and advice they would give to a graduate with disabilities who is looking for a job.

Participants' jobs ranged from store manager to teacher, and from lawyer to translator. Although many participants had jobs related to their field of studies, some worked in a different field (i.e. studying in a pastoral ministry and working as a youth centre counselor). All 16 participants had obtained employment within 12 months of graduating. Nine participants did not even look for a job as they were hired where they had completed their internship or were already working when they finished their studies. In order of importance, participants learned about job opportunities through contacts, employment centers or job websites, volunteering, and other ways (i.e. already employed there). Regarding strategies to obtain employment, participants used, in order of importance:

contacts, skill set, volunteering, already working there, and other strategies, such as personal qualities, experience in the field, and a good resume.

Regarding advice participants would give to recent post-secondary graduates with disabilities looking for a job, their answers were divided in the four P's of employment. These were, in order of importance: Practical (i.e. work on CV, prepare for interview), Personal (i.e. accept yourself, do not give up), People (i.e. network, having someone to vouch for you is good), and Professional experience (i.e. volunteering, internship). It is noteworthy that some participants suggested disclosing a disability, whereas others advised against it.

The advice provided can be beneficial to everyone, not only graduates with disabilities. Advice such as "do not give up" or "prepare for interviews" is useful for anyone in search of a job. Thus, among post-secondary graduates with disabilities, strategies and advice to obtain employment do not differ from those for the general population. In terms of disclosing a disability, as a general recommendation, individuals should disclose only if: 1) their disability might impact their work performance, 2) there are benefits to disclosing (i.e. accommodations, quotas for employment) that outweigh potential pitfalls (i.e. discrimination, not getting the job), and 3) they are comfortable disclosing their disability. Other than that, the world is yours. Get down to work!

*This research was conducted by the Adaptech Research Network at Dawson College.*

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