

Interview with Mike Chapman from TEACCH.

Describe TEACCH, please.

TEACCH Employment Services started 30 years ago, as a result of our program recognizing some changes in the vocational rehabilitation act. Providers at the time weren't being as successful placing people with autism as they were other individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. So we thought: is there a difference, and can people work. Our program started helping people with autism find jobs, and what are some of the best practices; using research techniques to see what works, what doesn't work, what are some of the best ways to train staff, etc. That's a large part of what our program started on. If it involves getting a job, we probably do it. From professional jobs, people with college degrees, masters and even PhD level people with autism to individuals who are much more affected intellectually in terms of IQ levels or adapted behaviors or other issues that make it challenging for them to enter the workforce. Our job is to go in and make assessments of the individual, we work with them and their family, their teachers, educators, other vocational agencies, to figure out what they are good at doing. We find their strengths and learning styles that we can capitalize on to bring out their skills. Then we do a job match where we work very hard at not displacing any person at their job; we place them where we hope is the right job for them. Our success rate speaks for itself: we have a success rate of around 83-84%, in terms of people who get to a job and stay in that job. The national average is 37.5%, so we try to do a little better. We train people on the job, we use all of the visual support that we know people with autism need, and we tailor them to any level of understanding. We may have people that do better with a combination of written word and verbal, and individuals that do better with objects or pictures to understand the sequence of activities they need to do or learn to do for some sort of job in the workforce. Last but not least, we provide really intensive long term support where we never go away unless we feel like it's the right thing to do. There are still people that we are serving 30 years later, still in the job that they started 30 years ago. A lot of agencies may or may not stick with a person for that long, but what we find is that with an individual with autism, when crises occur - could be a new manager, could be a new machine that came in that they have to learn to operate, could be a change in coworkers... or a life situation, like mom or dad is sick - during those crisis moments, the chance of them getting through without us and keeping that job is vastly diminished, and we don't want that - we want them to stay in their job.

We have several programs, we also work with our local school system: Chapel Hill/Carrboro city schools to do some pre-employment transitional services. We work with the department of vocational rehabilitation doing all of those services we just talked about. We are also doing a college graduate program where those individuals who just graduated college go through a different kind of internship model. It's called Link-It (linkit.org). That's in the United States... we also do training all over, we are developing employment models, job coach training, transition trainings for high school teachers, residential programs. We travel all over the United States and the world, and obviously here in North Carolina. We offer those trainings to help people benefit from all of the things that we learned over the last 30 years.

What is a resource that could be offered to adults with autism to help them secure jobs?

The thing that gives them the extra push... I think it's a combination of two things that work together. First off is the initial assessment, where we focus on the skills and abilities that any person has - disability or no disability. It really focuses on what this person likes, what they want to do, and how best to help them learn the job skills and the soft skills (communication, social, working independently, good work habits)... then from that the employment agency supports the person to find the right match that maximizes their strengths and minimizes their challenges. That's the same thing that we do for ourselves whenever we find a job, whereas many times the individuals who have autism may not be as good at doing that, and being able to recognize their strengths and/or their challenges.

Then there is always the part about making sure you have staff that are trained to recognize all that. So having staff that are out there to see and identify these characteristics in the individuals they are working with.

How could companies make themselves more accessible to the workforce of adults with autism?

What we are seeing is a lot of companies are trying to do that now. There is a big push for a lot of Autism-At-Work type programs, or Autism Initiative. They started years ago with companies like Walgreens, now there is Microsoft and SAP's. I think the first thing that companies and organizations have to do, is they have to open their mind to different ways

of looking at employees and working with the employees that they hire. Many times companies tend to hire people that are just like them because it is easier for them to understand and support those individuals. Well, we see with our entire population changing that there are people with all kinds of neurodiversity out there; people with ADHD, severe and persistent mental illness, there is people with autism and all other types of neurodiversity. With these neurodiverse people, companies have to learn how to support different populations. When you have a neurodiverse workforce in your company, your company is better rounded, there is lots more engagement from your neurotypical employees, your workforce comes up with better ideas, higher productivity rates – just all kinds of support from a resource article that just came out from Extenture in 2019 where they did some studies that literally pointed out all of the increases in revenue that come from having a neurodiverse workforce. I really think that companies have to be willing to step outside of their traditional comfort zones and be willing to create new comfort zones for themselves. Once they do that they recognize that the change was scary, but there was a new equilibrium that made their company better. If you hire individuals and make your place open, you will learn, and it will make your company a better place when you do it. I think that is what has to happen: companies have to open up to the idea of hiring people that aren't exactly like them.

We are salesmen, so we have to go out and have a marketable 'product'. In our role, we try and go out and find what the employer is looking for in their position: someone who's dedicated, who has a strong attention to detail, who may be able to do things that typical employees won't be able to do. A lot of times people that we are working with in our TEACCH employment program are people who are really unique, and have a really great skill set, and they can match them to that company. It's all about selling companies on what they are going to get. Bottom line – what they want is a return on investment. So what we talk about is that they get people who can do the job, people who are often times more loyal, and individuals with autism often times are that. They are great employees who are amazingly loyal, and if you get a good employee and they stay with your company for a long time, you're not doing a lot of hiring and firing of other people that didn't work out, and spending a lot of time playing catch up because you're always behind when someone leaves, and you always have to hire someone new. Now you have this great workforce who is loyal to your program, and that itself is a return on investment because every new employee that you hire is a waste of resources that you could be using to further your company. That's what we sell every time we go out.

What would help adults with autism make themselves more marketable to possible employers?

People with autism should learn to capitalize on their strengths. They need to recognize, not only does autism come with challenges... someone once said, "Having autism is like I have a special super power." So you need to recognize that special super power and how you can use that in a company. So if the company is trying to learn about you as an employee, you also need to be willing to take those steps forwards and learn what it takes to advocate for yourself and work with other people who may not understand autism as well as they could. There is learning about social skills; talking about communications, expectations... There is a great story I have about a young man who wasn't making friends at work so people were asking why he was so standoffish, why he would never come in to work to do idle chit-chat. So his boss sat down with him (he was learning all about autism through our support) and said, "Hey, I noticed when you come into work you don't say hello." He replied, "You don't pay me to say hello to people, you pay me to come in and do my job. If I talk to people I'm wasting time and not doing what you ask me to do." And he was absolutely correct. But there is another piece that you need too: being a part of a team, you have to interact with your coworkers. So his manager told him, "That's great, I love your dedication, but one of the things I need you to work on is being a part of a team. I want you to say hello to at least 3 people a day." It's that step: a little bit of give, a little bit of take. The employer gave a little, the person with autism gave a little, and they were able to meet in the middle. I think that is a beautiful part about both people learning and both people getting what they wanted.

Basically, recognizing that the neurotypical world thinks differently than a person with autism would. So thinking 'How can I learn to think not like they do, but recognize when they are thinking differently'... 'How do I explain myself so that I'm clearer, and they understand how I'm thinking'. That sums up everything of the social and communicational pieces.