EMPLOYMENT SUPPORTS FOR TRANSITION-AGED AUTISTIC YOUTH

A presentation by Jennifer McDonough & Alissa Brooke (November 17, 2021)

RACHEL POLANSKY: Good afternoon, and welcome to today's webinar, “Employment Supports For Transition-Aged Autistic Youth.” My name is Rachel Polansky and I am your host for today's event. It's great to have you all today. I have the distinct pleasure of introducing today's speakers, Jennifer McDonough and Alissa Brooke.

Jennifer Todd McDonough has been a faculty member at Virginia Commonwealth University, VCU, and working in the field of employment for people with disabilities for over 20 years. She earned her MS from the Medical College of Virginia at Virginia Commonwealth University in Rehabilitation Counseling. Ms. McDonough is the Associate Director of Training at VCU-RRTC. She is also the Project Director for two national research Studies, one related to customized employment for transition youth with ASD and/or ID, and one related to employer practices of hiring and retaining employees with disabilities.

Additionally, Ms. McDonough has provided technical assistance and disseminates resources nationally due to individuals with disabilities interested in disappointments – in employment, excuse me. Ms. McDonough is a national expert on Social Security Disability benefits and work incentives. She also serves as the Virginia Project SEARCH statewide coordinator and directly oversees four Project SEARCH sites for youth with autism and/or intellectual disabilities. Throughout her career with VCU-RRTC, Ms. McDonough has worked directly with individuals with
disabilities, assisting them in locating employment and determining accommodation needs.

Alissa Brooke has been with VCU-RRTC since 2008. Alyssa earned her ACRE Certification for Community Rehabilitation and began working as an Employment Specialist. She earned her MS in Rehabilitation Counseling from VCU in 2012, and became a CRC, and also complete the training to become a Positive Behavior Support Facilitator. In 2013, she began to serve as the Center's Transition coordinator. Alissa has experience working with individual individuals across disabilities and in the last four years, has provided leadership for our Project SEARCH site at St. Mary's Hospital, working exclusively with youth with autism spectrum disorders. She has focused on supporting choice, customized employment, job retention, and using assistive technology and positive behavioral supports.

So without further ado, I'd like to turn it over to Jennifer and Alissa. Take it away.

JENNIFER: Welcome, everyone, and thank you all so much for joining us today. We have a smattering of people from all over the country. And we're excited to have you all with us. Alissa, any first thoughts before we get started?

OK. So, we wanted to talk with you today about employment supports for individuals with autism, autistic youth, and wanted to first delineate what we mean when we say “employment.” We're actually referring to competitive integrated employment. Our Center has been around for almost 40 years, our Rehabilitation Research and Training Center. And everything that we do here at the Center is related to the employment of people with disabilities. And it is all about competitive integrated employment.
And so when we talk about that, we're talking about assisting individuals with disabilities finding employment in their own home communities, where they are working alongside individuals without disabilities, where they are also earning at least minimum wage or higher, and equal to what others are earning, performing the same types of job duties. And finally, we're talking about meeting an individual's distinct needs. So, we're making sure that the job is related to their interests, skills, abilities, and preferences, and providing the supports that they need in order to be successful.

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So, we've been working, like our host has shared, for quite a number of years, specifically with autistic youth. I think Alissa and I began working together in 2012, and prior to that, we were working on other projects.

But in 2012, we began performing some research around autistic youth and helping them find community employment, that community integrated employment. And we were really looking at what exact supports did they need in order to be successful in their employment.

And so, what we have learned over those years is that individuals with autism can work in competitive integrated employment. We just need to be able to identify the supports that they need in order to be successful. And so really individualizing our approach to them and looking at exactly how we can best support them in their specific situations.

We also know that positive behavior supports are essential and can assist with social skill differences as well as behavior challenges of the youth that we're working with. And so, as we have worked through those 12 years, we have run
across a multitude of challenging support needs and we'll talk about that later. But through positive behavior supports, we have been able to address many of those challenges and assist individuals in becoming hugely successful and independent in their home communities.

And we also know, just like for anyone with or without a disability, that employment is really therapeutic to each of us. It helps in our independence, helps us become a part of our community, helps with their social awareness, our communication, our cognition. When we are out and contributing to our community, we feel engaged. We feel a part of a team and like we're giving back. And so, it really is therapeutic for each of us to be a part of a workplace.

ALISSA: OK, so, thanks, Jenn. Hi, everybody. This is Alissa. So, we're going to kind of bounce back and forth and with each other throughout the duration of this. But as you know, because you've signed up to be a part of this presentation today, much of what we're going to talk about is maintaining employment. But, before we can talk about maintaining employment, and helping individuals with autism to be successful in keeping their job, first, we have to talk about getting that job, and what it takes to help somebody to make a good job match and to find a position which is going to be well suited for them.

So, we start out by building a Job Seeker profile, and as was shared in the bio, Jennifer and I work for VCU's Rehabilitation Research and Training Center, and we both started out as employment specialists, or you may have heard it referred to as “job coaches.” And so we are providing direct support to individuals to help them to obtain a job and then to keep that job.
When we get a new client, a new referral, for example, the first thing that we're going to do is we're going to figure out who that person is and take the time to get to know them. And that will give us as much information as we can so that we can make a job which will suit what that particular individual's skills are. What are their abilities, their interests? What kind of preferences and features of a job and an employment setting are going to be important for them, and are going to help them to be successful?

As we start to build what we call a Job Seeker profile, we start to – we try to get to know this person as an individual, as a person. Not just a Job Seeker, but, you know, through all areas of their life. And so, we, we build the Job Seeker profile with the input from the Job Seeker themselves, but also with input from people who know them really well – so, their family members, or friends, for example, if they have close family friends or paid professionals who have worked with them before. Maybe they're part of social networks that can provide us with good information, or have had previous volunteer experiences or paid experiences, which will give us a lot of good information about their strengths and their interests, and what type of a job they may be interested and doing well at.

If – I always like to just say this, that the people that you see on here, these are suggestions. It's not exclusive. It's not all inclusive. If the Job Seeker does not want their family members to be a part of it, you know, then they're are over 18, they're an adult who has the authority to say that. So we're not telling people who is a part of this process, but we're making those suggestions to them. And, again, it's just to get to know the individual as best as we possibly can.

So, when we start to get to know people, also, we don't necessarily want to meet them at an office, like, “Oh, come to my office,” you know? “OK, someplace I've
never been before. Wow, that's really comfortable.” Maybe we'll make the suggestion to meet them in their home or have the person choose where they would like us to meet them, so it's a comfortable setting for them, so we can go start to begin to build rapport and a relationship in a setting that doesn't seem so, you know, “Sitting in an office, oh gosh. This is totally unfamiliar type of an environment for me.”

But as we're building that Job Seeker profile, we're learning about what their past employment and volunteer experiences are. Now, people may not have had past experiences in employment before, and that's OK. If it's a high school student, you know, or somebody just transition age exiting, maybe they've had their community-based internship type of experiences during school, and that's wonderful. That's really good information about past types of work experiences.

We're learning about what are their hobbies, what do they like to do when they are, you know, for fun. What are their behavior support needs and challenges? And, again, we're not getting this type of information because, we want to say, “Oh, then that's not going to be a good setting for somebody because of their behaviors.” But, because we want to know how can we support them best once they do go to work. And, of course, we want to learn about their communication and teaching styles, too. Because when somebody goes to work, we're going to be teaching them how to do their job, how to fit in in their work environment. And so, we want to meet them and teach them in the way that they receive information the best. So, we like to learn about their preferred communication and their learning styles, as well.

And, you know, we're gonna start out with a meeting where we have to kind of do our intake information and get all of that, you know, past experiences and stuff. But we also want to do observation, and there's so much to be said for the things that
you can learn when you're observing somebody in their home environment, in a community environment, or a business setting. So that's all information that will come into play, as well, as we're getting to learn the Job Seeker, and where employment may be best suited for them.

Well, what I have here is – So, of course, we all know that when you apply for jobs, you have to have a resume, and you have to put things on an application, and that's all well and good, but some of us may not have, really, you know, extensive work experiences, and that's OK, too.

So, if you have a job coach, a lot of the time, I would say that, in general, talk more about this and building the business relationship. A lot of time, I will say that the interview and the opportunity, when you're meeting the employer, that part could be a little bit of the formality, but we want to be able to present who you are and the things that you do well. And so our resumes don't necessarily have to look like, you know, Times New Roman, 12-point font on a piece of paper. But maybe we'll have pictures or use a PowerPoint to show different things that you have done. I met with somebody in the spring who was applying for a program, and he really loves to mow the lawn. And not only does he mow his own lawn at his home, but he mows the neighbor's lawn too. So they included that in there, some pictures of the things that he does and the types of food that he likes to make, and some complicated recipes, and that shows his ability to follow instructions. And so those are really good things that we could potentially put on a visual resume.

I would say that if you are somebody who has work experience, then wonderful, we can use that. But if you're somebody who's in high school or doing volunteering or your hobbies around the community, take pictures of that because that can contribute to building your profile or your visual resume later.
When I moved into my new house, I made my closet really organized, and I’m so proud of it, and that’s a picture of my organized closet. But the reason that I did that is because some people, you know... We’ve met people before, who say, “You have never seen a 20-year-old boy’s room look like what my son’s room looks like. He is the most organized person.” Well, that’s wonderful, but a picture's worth a thousand words. And so, take a picture of his organized closet, and take a picture of his organized room. Those are really good work skills. You may not think about them as work skills now, but they translate into really good work skills to be able to show a employer, as well. Anything to add there, Jenn?

JENNIFER: So, the other thing that we have used is video resumes, which are a way to show an individual’s skills and abilities through an actual video. They’re really easy to do. You can use your iPhone, that's usually what our coaches use, and format them into clips or pictures with voice-over on them. And we have some examples of that. And how to do that on our website, VCURRTC.org, and we can send that out to you as well.

For example, we had one young man who came to us and his mom said, “Well, he's really good at playing the piano,” and you know, we kind of expected that he could play a few songs here and there, something somewhat, you know, entry level. Well, they shared a video with us, and he was a classically trained pianist. And we were able to use that video, and take additional video of him, to then customize the position for him going out to different retirement communities. And he would play for the individuals who live there, and they just loved him and still do. And he, you know, they make requests, and he’s very particular about making sure he knows the music. But he will learn that piece of music and then present it to them at the next time that he's at their home.
ALISSA: I love that example, though, because we maybe made an assumption about what it means to be good at the piano, but then when you actually see it and you hear and experience it for yourself, it's like, “Oh my gosh!” And so employers have that same reaction. You know, “This person is really talented mechanically.” And then you show a picture of them putting together, you know, a mod, or remote control car, and it's like, “Oh my gosh, wow, that person has really good skills.” So it eliminates, you know, people making assumptions and just shows, wow, that's really what somebody that does. Those are their skills. It's right there for you.

JENNIFE: So, I know that we have a wide array of individuals on this call, from schools who are looking for ways to help their students kind of get some job experience or work experiences. We have employment specialists, who we can always identify with. Like Alissa said, we've been there, done that, and I'll be doing that tomorrow, because one of my staff members is out. And we also have parents and other advocates on this training. And so, one of the questions we get frequently is, “Well, how do I build a relationship with a business in my community?”

And I really – this is, partially, my job, is to make relationships in our community with businesses to increase the employment of people with disabilities. And so, I really start out with mapping my community and figuring out, “OK, so what exactly is the individual, that Job Seeker that I'm working with, what is it that they're interested in doing?” And brainstorming by myself or with my team to think about all the different types of jobs that are out there, related to that particular theme.

And so, going into Google Maps and typing that in, and then once I've identified businesses in that community, figuring out more information about the different businesses. Where are they located? How big are they? What are the different types of transportation options that my client would have available to them to access that
business, if it turned out that they were hired on? And I need to know, what do I bring to the table to that business. All of this I need to know before I ever make a phone call, send an e-mail, anything like that.

Well, I know that I have a wide array of individuals with amazing skills and abilities that can help meet the needs of businesses in my community. And so, that's one huge thing that I can bring to my business partnership or collaborations. Also, I know that I can provide them with training around supporting autistic individuals in their business, whether they are employees or whether they are, you know, someone coming into the business to receive a service or purchase a good, so I can also provide that to them.

And so you need to know, what are the benefits of hiring someone, before you ever step into the business. And I always tell people, if you don't believe in your client or customer's ability to perform a job, no one that you go and meet with is going to believe that, because they can read you and reach your confidence level. So we really have to believe that every individual can work with the right supports. And that's something we at the RRTC really strongly believe it.

Alissa, do you want to – thank you. So, where do we really begin with businesses? Well, after we've kind of identified our businesses, now, I've got to really use my network to start figuring out who do I know in those businesses as well as what is it like at that business? What's their culture? I'm working with a business right now, and it's a large business. They are in probably 5 or 7 different states. And every time that I talk with my liaison there, she tells me, “You know, you just don't understand the culture here. The culture here is so different than anywhere else.”
Well, I've been working with them for two years now, and I can tell you, I understand the culture, and it's not really that different from anywhere else. It's just, it's similar to many other businesses that I've worked with, and I have to recognize that when I talk with them, that they are a little bit more polished, a little bit more detail-focused. They want things in writing. They're a little bit more formal. And so, versus when Alissa and I are working in our hospital community, we've built a great relationship with a large hospital here in Richmond area and across the state, we know that their culture is a little bit more laid back, a little bit more compassionate, much more, family feel.

And so I need to know that before I go into that business. Because it's going to impact how I present myself and the customers that I am assisting in finding employment. It's also going to help me match people to those types of jobs in that business because if I know that my customer, or my Job Seeker, is looking for a more family-type environment, I'm certainly not going to take them into that stuffy environment that is real tough, tied up, kinda tight, if you will. That may not be the best culture for them.

So I usually like to start at the top. If I can get a meeting in with someone at the CEO level, COO, owner, administrative level, that's where I really want to start. And so I may have to do a lot of networking to figure out who that is. I might have to go on their website, see who their board members are and who I know within that business to get to that level. Because what we know, and our experience and research shows, is that if you can bring that high-level administration on board to hiring an individual, or many individuals with autism, or any disability for that matter, then it kind of trickles down. You know, If the top of the business believes in hiring individuals with disabilities, then the rest of the staff and management will
buy into that same belief. If they know that their CEO believes in this partnership, they will kind of follow suit.

Also, I like to use business language. Many times, job coaches, vocational rehab counselors, schools, staff, we use terms that we're all familiar with. We might use terms like “IEPs,” “job site training,” “follow along,” “job development.” Businesses don't understand what that means. Even if we try to explain it to them, they just don't really understand those words, so I need to talk like a business. I need to explain the talent that I am supporting and promoting to that business. I need to talk about how it is a win-win and how it's going to impact their bottom line.

I can also provide disability awareness and education training to the business. That's something a lot of businesses really appreciate, and might be a first step for them to become more comfortable in their hiring practices. And I can – if I know enough about the business, maybe I've frequented there as a customer, maybe I know someone there who currently works there and/or previously worked there and had some experience – I could kind of brainstorm with them to give some possible tasks that my Job Seeker might be able to assist them with.

But I always like to schedule a tour, because I'm really a visual learner. And that can help me figure out what is it exactly that I see that maybe the business doesn't even see that they need help with, that my Job Seeker can assist with.

So, these are just some questions that I like to ask while I'm touring. You know, are there things not getting done routinely? Are there staff that are overqualified or working outside of their area of expertise? Are there tasks that could be done more efficiently by someone else? Tasks that you'd like done more often? And really, just look around and ask a lot of questions. I toured a law firm not too long ago. They
had tons of boxes everywhere. Upon further discussion, I learned that they all needed to be gone through, sorted and turned into electronic documents, and was able to propose an employee that could assist them with that.

ALISSA: Sometimes the, you know, I know that one of the things that we've talked about is that there may be barriers for people with autism entering employment. And so, when you ask these types of questions, it may allow the business to identify some holes that they have within their own operation, and to potentially create an opportunity for a new position that hadn't previously been listed as a position. And so, it's worked out really nicely for us to sometimes fill in, those needs, that they maybe knew that they had a need for, but didn't really know how to put into a position for.

JENNIFER: So, we're going to take all that information that we gathered through the Job Seeker profile, about the Job Seeker, and then match it up with what we have then learned from the business. You know, which businesses offer more sedentary versus mobile tasks, and how does that match up well with the Job Seeker that I have? What's the culture like? Is it more team focused or individual focused? How does that match up with my Job Seeker? So, we're gonna use all of that, too. And, the match is key if we do not make a good match on the front end, then we're setting our Job Seeker up for failure really. And so, it's going to turn into that kind of rollercoaster of in and out of jobs if we're not really paying close attention to that match.

Then, we're going to provide support, not only to the individual to assist them with learning their work skills and helping them learn any behavioral skills that they might need, but we're also going to provide support to the business. And, we're going to provide training to them. We're going to provide assistance in
understanding how to best communicate with our Job Seeker, and helping them understand, you need to be honest with us as a job coach so that we can better support the individual and the business to turn something that might become a problem and nipping it right at the bud and in taking care of it quickly so that it doesn't turn into a problem. And we're going to show you some examples of things that we've used in the past.

And it's really important that we can't overlook the fact that, you know, working inside of a business is not like working in a school. We have to remember that a business is just that. They are running a business to make money, and we've got to understand their needs. We have to understand the environment to make sure that match is successful. And we may even need to develop a schedule for the business, because they may have a hodgepodge of tasks that they have come up with, but there's no rhyme nor reason to it, and we'll talk about that a little bit more.

If we're not aware of that work culture, it's setting ourselves and our Job Seeker or new employee up for failure. So, we've got to be cognizant of that, as well as building that true relationship with the business, and having them trust that when there is a problem, or when there is a concern, that we are there to support them, and help them through it. If we don't kind of drop what we're doing and run back to that business to support the new employee and the manager, then we're putting that employee at risk to lose their job.

So this is kind of that list of things that we were talking about earlier. We have seen a ton of different challenges across those, not only 12, but many more years, where autistic youth need support while they're on a job site. And sometimes if we don't pay attention to these things, then we might have some sort of behavior come through that will help us recognize that they need the support.
So everything from following a break or schedule to initiating tasks. Asking for help is always a big one. You know, even just how to pay for lunch, because if they've been in the school system for a long time, someone may have been typing in their code for them in the lunch line. So if they go to work and they've never paid with a debit card or with cash, then they're likely to just take their tray of food through the cafeteria at work and walk on out and then they, you know, have gotten written up for stealing or something like that. So we have to pay attention to all of these different types of skills that we need to help them support.

ALISSA: And I would say for, you know, the school staff members, or school members that are here, as well as families, you know, this is a slide that you may want to take a look at and think about how you can begin practicing these things now. Things like accepting correction, and how to ask for help are huge. And we find that we're oftentimes teaching that skill, especially to those transition age students who are exiting school and entering adult services, you know, what are the appropriate ways to accept correction? How do I ask for help? A lot of us, as parents and teachers, you know the look at, somebody, gets on their face when they need help. And so we start to help out too quickly without giving them the opportunity to make a mistake or maybe to take that opportunity to initiate, you know, requesting help of somebody. So those are big, big things to be working on in the schools. Many of these things, at a younger age, the more practice, the better.

OK, sorry, took a second for my slide to advance there.

So, Jennifer was saying that we have to provide education, and we do a lot of education to the businesses. And so that is absolutely true. And I think that the better relationship that we have with business, the better success that it will end up being for the employee there if little hiccups or challenges do arise.
So, if somebody is able, if somebody, you know, we always, in those beginning meetings and intake and everything, we talk about disclosure, what are you comfortable with, me providing, you know, sharing with the employer about your disability? And, so, depending on what somebody says, and what their terms for disclosure are, we will provide as much or as little information to the employer based on that. But what I will say is that employers appreciate the information that we can provide them. They want to have successful working relationships. They've invested their time in hiring you and they want it to work as well. And so, the more education that we can do, the more upfront we are about the best ways maybe to understand autism in general, but not only that, the best ways to understand this person, I think that that's really an important strategy and tip for success, is for us to be able to educate the business.

So, when we do that, sometimes we'll meet with the business. Maybe if they have, you know, meetings every morning, maybe we'll meet with the business during that time, to provide some education. Or maybe we'll do, like, a small in-service, or something like that, on the best ways to work with somebody with autism, if we're doing just general disability awareness. And, you know, maybe we'll do smaller meetings, if it's for how to work with this particular individual and their co-workers. I always like to also include the employee in that so it's not, “Hey, I'm Alissa, I'm here talking about somebody,” but you know, “Hey, I'm Alissa, and this is, you know, so-and-so, and we're talking to you together about the best way to support this person to be successful at work.”

But when we do that, we often share some, you know, what are the characteristics of autism, and then we also share just some common communication strategies that are successful. So, we'll teach employers to speak with the – to be direct, to use
fewer words and to be concrete in their instruction. The job coach should already have figured out what are the best interaction methods, and so they can teach the employer what are the best ways to communicate with this person. If the Job Seeker themself doesn't really know that, that's a wonderful place for the family, and, you know, others, to come in and provide their input.

We can also use written or picture supports to supplement verbal instruction, and that can go both ways. That can be the employer, or their job coach using written or picture supports. Or that could be, “This is the way that this employee communicates,” and so they can use it for texting, e-mailing is better, things like that.

We always teach employers to allow time for a response so that people can process what they're saying before, you know just word vomiting expectations at them and then walking away.

We also use assistive technology a lot. Assistive technology is awesome. You know, back in 2010, when we were first doing this, we're like, “OK, how can we get our hands on an iPod Touch to help somebody?” But now, who doesn't have a phone? Most people do, right? And it's a wonderful tool to use. Communication, again, with texting, with e-mailing. But also, we've been able to use assistive technology to help people with jobs that require communicating verbally, for somebody who maybe doesn't have clear verbal communication skills or doesn't, you know, is non-verbal.

For example, we worked with somebody who was required to announce himself prior to entering the rooms that he was going into. But this person, wonderful smile, really great interpersonal skills when you're kind of looking at each other, but really difficult to understand. And so we used his iPod – or his iPhone and recorded
on it in a male voice to say, “Hi, my name is Jim, I’m here to stock your room, may I come in?” Awesome use of assistive technology because rather than that requirement for communication being a barrier to say that this employee couldn’t do that job, we just – it was a very simple, very, very simple solution.

We also teach employers to say what the heck you mean. Don’t use idioms. Don’t say things like, “Hold your horses,” or, you know, try to be sarcastic or funny. Just say what you mean to say, and, you know, move on. That way, it’s more simple for people to understand. I’ll never forget, one of our – an employee had a co-worker whose nephew passed away, and they said, “Oh, Kathy lost her nephew,” and he perked up, “Oh, I hope they find him!” And so, that was an opportunity for me to explain, you know, what they meant when they said that. Then, he said, “Oh, I want to make her a card.” So, just teaching employees – employers to say, what the heck they mean, for real.

We also teach employers the best way to give directions. Again, be clear and to the point, you know, let’s break those large tasks into smaller pieces if we need to. Supplement with pictures or written directions, if necessary. A great instructional strategy that we see used a lot that people like, people tend to like, is the “Tell, Show, Do” method: tell me what I need to do, show me how to do it, give me the opportunity to do it. And we’ll see if there’s any tweaking and correction, or asking for help that needs to go on from there.

I really always ask employers, please, when you tell somebody to do something, give them the opportunity to demonstrate to you what their understanding is. We get calls a lot of times from employers who are moving too quickly. “Well, I told him you needed to do this.” Well, you just said it. You know, receptive communication is, it can be a challenge. We already know that. So, make sure that they're
understanding. Take that extra second. It's going to be, maybe, it takes a little bit longer on the front end to take that extra second to make sure that the individual understands, but, in the long run, they want to do the job the right way, too. They want to make sure they understand it. It's worth it.

We're going to share some examples of different social strategies that we implement at work. But I want to say that, you know, we do spend time teaching individuals those hard skills to be successful on their job. How to actually do your job. If you're a stocking job, how to actually stock. But we really spend a lot of time – and I would say, I would definitely argue we spend more time teaching people the workplace culture, how to fit in with their co-workers, how to understand the social expectations, the hidden curriculum that may exist in, in that workplace. And so we spend a lot of time on that social and behavioral piece.

And I will also say that when an employee is working somewhere, if they fit in, if they're polite, if they are professional, if they are respectful, but they're making mistakes with their work, employers tend to be a lot more forgiving than if they are not acting appropriately for work. So, that's really, really important, and a really good use of time to emphasize those social strategies. So, things like self-monitoring and use of modeling. We'll give some examples of that here in just a moment. And, again, you know, you have these slides for your reference, but we, these are the types of social skills and hygiene and routines for downtime, that we were just talking about on the previous slide, that it is never too early to start practicing these important social skills.

Also, we take into account, you know, the sensory needs of the individuals that we're working with. And we will structure the physical environment or even the job task to support that person and meet their needs the best. You know, if this is
somebody who responds really well to physical work and gross motor, then we're going to try to set them up in a job where they're moving – maybe lifting big things – you know, as opposed to those sedentary and those fine motor skill type of tasks. I have a picture on there of a stress ball because there was one person who we worked with and he always had a stress ball in his pocket, and that's what his hand was up to, you know, when his other hand was working, or if there was a challenging situation, he always had a stress ball. Really simple sensory strategy to help him. The other is a Ziploc bag. This other person, he responded really well and was one of his calming strategies, which we learned early on, was to have a Ziploc bag. And so it's a discreet tool which we can implement in the workplace, and, you know, during break times.

We can also implement breaks to allow for those sensory needs. So, I can remember working with a person who – his preference for work tasks was to be sedentary. He was like really bright with numbers. And so he had this really detailed, detail-oriented task with numbers, but he had a need for these, you know, sensory breaks. And so, we scheduled it into his shift, that I can't remember the length of time, but we scheduled into his shift that he had these breaks and he would run up and down seven flights of stairs. And then after that, he would come back and he would return to work, and we worked it out with his employer, and we took a lot of data. When he had those sensory breaks, he was more productive than when he didn't have those sensory breaks. And so we were able to share that data with the employer, and he totally bought into it.

We also teach employers to help prepare for change in routine and just to explain, you know, how change can be stressful, intimidating, it can be a challenge for many people with autism, we know. And so, we just explain to people, you know, if there
is going to be a change in routine, please give an advance warning and an explanation for why this change is occurring, and, if necessary, develop visual cues or use systems to explain, and to help people prepare for a change.

[coughs] Excuse me, sorry about that.

So here’s an example. Jennifer was saying that, you know, one of the things that we do, and I was kind of suggesting this before, is like when we’re on those tours, we might be meeting with employers that are like, “Oh, yeah, we do need somebody to do all of these different things.” And then you leave that meeting, and you have a list that looks like this picture with the purple writing on the left – on the right-hand side, and it’s like, “Ho-ly! OK. Well, that’s not a schedule.” And so, as part of our responsibility, and we do this a lot, we say that we are creating, you know, structure to seemingly unstructured tasks and unstructured schedules.

And so, I met with the employer, and she said, “These are all the things that I would – We definitely have a need. These are all of the things that I would like an employee to do.” And I followed up our meeting with that list, said, “I just wanna make sure this is what you need to be done.” “Yes.” And so, I met with the new employee, and we structured a schedule that worked for him.

And so the deal is that, all of those tasks that were listed there, some needed to be done at certain times, some needed to be done multiple times in a day. And it was a little bit challenging. There was a lot of discrimination, decision-making, and problem-solving. And so we met with the employer, and we said, “Let's come up with a structured schedule. What needs to be done in the morning? What can be done in the afternoon? And what doesn't necessarily have to get done?” So we developed this structured list. These are the tasks in green that you do in the
morning. If you finish those and it's not 11:30, which is your lunchtime, yet, then you move on to these secondary tasks that are below. After lunch, you return to the afternoon tasks in blue and you do those. And then if you finish them, you move on to the secondary tasks. You'll see “blanket warmers” on there in the morning and the afternoon, and “patient belonging bags” is on there in the morning and the afternoon. We did that deliberately because what first was happening was the employee said, “Well I already did blanket warmers today, so I already checked that off my list.” So we had to revamp the schedule to work for them to understand, you have to do it more than once. And that's OK. Very simple solution.

Here's another example, which is a visual. We create a lot of visuals and a lot of different types of schedules. And the one that you see there on the left, this is what that person – this is how to clean the lobby. That was what that person was responsible for, there. They worked with us. They help to take pictures. And, you know, if it was like that “wet floor” sign, to pick the pictures that were on the computer from, you know, Google images of what they wanted their schedule to look like. And that's what their schedule looks like for what to do within the lobby.

The schedule, or the image on the right, we worked with somebody who was responsible for stocking, like, housekeeping type of closets. And this individual is somebody who doesn't count, but they wanted to get set up to meet like certain par levels. And so rather than saying, “OK, well, because this is a job that requires you to meet par levels and that person doesn't count, they can't do it,” we just said, “OK, well let's take a picture of what it looks like when it's completely full. They're responsible for filling the paper towels and toilet paper and they can match it to this.” We took that picture. We put it up in the closet, after asking the employer if it was OK if we put it up in the closet. And voila. It was a very simple solution.
I will also say, that employee no longer does that exact task, but the employer has said, “You don't even know how many people I have trained on different shifts to stock the closets the right way, based on this picture.” And so we find that often the types of supports that we make to help people to be independent on their jobs get used by other employees as well, if they are fixtures up in the business.

JENNIFER: Alissa, I just want to add in, the comment that you made about involving the new employee or your Job Seeker in developing their own supports is really key. We can come up with all kinds of – especially Alissa and I, because we love some colors, we love some organization – we can come up with all kinds of supports that we make that make sense to us. But if it doesn't make sense to that employee, then it's not going to help them. And so I can remember one particular individual. We came up with this great task list, and they didn't like it. They weren't going to use it, absolutely not. But when they were involved and they had some say – she wanted to use pink and purple colors instead of whatever colors – I'm sure if Alissa came up with it, there is orange in there somewhere. But, you know, having the individual help with creating that supports is key.

ALISSA: Yes. And so here is pretty similar types of examples, but this person, you know, rather than having that low-tech schedule of what to do. on the right there we set alarms on their iPod to help them to know what to do. Similarly to having to do the blanket warmers multiple times, this person had to do the faxes and check the faxes and sort them multiple times. And so we just put that on their schedule several times in the day.

We also use video modeling. As you'll see there on the left, this was an example of using video modeling for how to complete their job tasks. But I will say, we also use video modeling for how to accept feedback, how to practice social skills as well.
More examples of the use of iPod, cell phones and alarms as well.

One of the things that is really challenging is waiting, and so we have found over the years that we often have to schedule for what to do on a break. And that may be a break of, you know, “I have a 15-minute break during my work schedule,” or that might be a break of, “My ride gets me to work at 8:45. I don't start until 9:00. These are the things that I can do during that time.” And so we structure that downtime so that it's comforting and there is still a routine to that downtime.

We found with this particular individual that during downtime – he really loved the freedom of having a awesome cafeteria at work, and so he would go up to work and he would help himself to granola bars or whatever else they had up there that everybody else was paying for. And so, rather than, you know, getting in trouble and losing his position because he was stealing from the workplace, we figured, “OK, well, let's schedule that time. This is totally an opportunity for teaching.” We thanked the business for sharing with us what's going on, and we will structure that time for him.

Jennifer mentioned – Go ahead.

JENNIFER: I was just going to say, I think, you know, something really key here is to talk about that all of these things that we're talking about can start at home, they can start in the school, and be ready for the Job Seeker when they get to that point of actually looking for employment.

ALISSA: Mhm. And that, that totally ties into this one, you know, knowing what are healthy lunch choices and teaching people how to build healthy lunch choices as opposed to seven-course meal. So, starting at home with people, you know, making their own lunches and making healthy decisions is really important as well.
We talked about change in routine. Using the “first / next” or the “first / then” strategy is really good for change in routine at work. And this specific example wasn’t actually for change in routine. I’ll explain what it was for. But this strategy, the “first / then” strategy, we have used a ton for change in routine, and it’s a really simple one for employers to use once you train them in how to do it.

This particular person, he was responsible for a number of things, including cleaning isolettes and pumps – isolettes and pumps that NICU babies use. But his preferred task within his job was to go around to the hospital closets and to pick up items from their soiled utility closets and to clean those, because he’s super social, and that gave them the opportunity to have a lot of greetings and social interactions throughout his shift. Well, what started happening was that he started to rush through that task with the isolettes and the pumps and compromise the quality. And then, you know, there was an issue, could actually do this job, the NICU babies need perfectly clean isolettes to be in, and so through conversation with him, we realized he started rushing because he wanted to get to his preferred task. And he thought that, you know, sometimes he went in there and there’d be a ton of pumps, and you didn’t know he was going to get to the floors. And so this was a laminated card. His employer was able to put the date on it, write out what he needed him to do first, and then he was able to visually see, “Oh, but, I still get to do the floors after this.” And that was a really, really simple and effective solution for him to be, um, to be successful.

I want to get to a couple of just some social examples that Jenn, do you want to pick up on?

JENNIFER: Sure. This was something that we used with an individual that we were working with who was, was falling asleep on the job and was struggling with really
staying focused on the job. And so, for her, she didn’t want an alarm on her phone, necessarily – not necessarily an alarm, but these written on to her phone, like, you know, in her notes section. We needed these, and she needed these, right on her desk where she could see. So we created these task cards. They're kinda like visual cue cards, if you will, for what she should do, if she's feeling a little bit sleepy.

Because what you can do if you’re feeling sleepy is take a short walk, and you can get up and get a sip of water, you could stretch versus, you know, napping for a little bit. She should – what else she could do is keeping her hands focused on work skills. And if she was feeling sad, she could ask her job coach or supervisor for help. We wanted to keep her focused on her work tasks so that she wasn't wandering off. One time, when she was feeling a little sleepy, she decided to get up and walk around. And she landed herself in the administration office. And so we wanted to avoid that. So we had to really define what she could do during those breaks, and to keep herself motivated.

ALISSA: And I should say, that medication came into play here, so understanding that and the side effects of medication was really important as well, to understand why she was feeling sleepy at work, and we were able to then educate the employer on that as well. So, they didn't just think that she was lazy and sleeping on the job.

JENNIFER: I think we all find ourselves frustrated at work, whether it's because we're learning something new, someone isn't giving us what we need, but we're unable to communicate what we need. Or, you know, a lot of times, as we kind of go through school, everything is set up for success, which is great, except when you get to a workplace and you haven't had that experience of being frustrated. And learning a lot of new tasks can be frustrating. So we have to oftentimes create these supports
on, “If I get frustrated work, what should I do?” And so these are just some examples of little cards that we made. They can be put on an actual index card that’s laminated and they can stick them in the employee’s pocket. Or they can be right on the front screen of their phone.

But really stopping, taking a deep breath, saying that they heard you, and then asking for some space. And it really depends on each person. Maybe they need to call their job coach. Maybe they have some specific way that they have learned to really calm themselves. So, for one of the individuals, the same person that we were talking about with the isolettes and pumps, his mom kind of taught him to say “Hakuna matata” and go back to work. And so that’s kind of his way of saying, “OK, I need to let this go. I need to move on.” He also squeezes his hacky sack. And so, helping people understand what they can do when they, one, recognizing that they’re frustrated, and then, two, hat coping mechanism they can use to work through that frustration.

ALISSA: And, you know, these vary for each person. And so I think that just getting set up sooner when you're in high school, or, you know, before, you're actually in the work, entering the work field, even, you know, knowing these things, knowing what works at home, and communicating that with the adult support professionals who will help you in the field, is really, really important.

So, we have so many different supports. And we're happy, you know, if you guys want to communicate with us through e-mail, or, you know, take a look at our handouts and ask questions, you are absolutely welcome to do that, and reach out to us. I think now I want to turn it back over to Rachel.
RACHEL: Thank you, Jennifer and Alissa. This concludes the presentation portion and begins the Q and A session of today's webinar. As a reminder, you can submit your questions through the questions pane in your control panel. Because our time is limited, we may not be able to get through all of your questions. But if there are any questions that we don't get to today, we will try to get back to you by e-mail. So I think we have time for just a couple of them. So our first one is from Bobbi, and she asks, is there a particular profile assessment that you use?

JENNIFER: We really don’t use any type of online or paper and pencil assessments. When we’re working with individuals, we tend to work more with community-based assessments, where we’re actually taking individuals out into their community to learn about them, so working with a business to set up a time for an individual, to come out and try some work tasks, and learning about the individual that way as well as taking –like Alissa was saying, going into their home and learning about their home life and what they enjoy doing while they're at their home, or taking them into places that they often frequent in their community and learning about them in those real life experiences.

RACHEL: Great, thank you. And our next question is from Arianna and she asks: how do you advise parents of a child age 21 who has aged out of school without enough vocational prep? Where would you suggest they go for employment support?

JENNIFER: Alissa, did you –

ALISSA: Yeah, if somebody is not already connected with the, with Voc Rehab in your state, that would be a really good starting point. And you can talk to them
about, you know, what that individual’s goals are. They have a lot of community connections and they would be able to help guide that process.

RACHEL: Great. Thank you. And, all right. I think we have time for one more question. So our final question is, what is your advice to employees about disclosing autism?

JENNIFER: Gosh, that’s a...

RACHEL: If you could – You know, a broad question, but...

JENNIFER: I think it really is so individualized that if you feel that in order to be supported in your employment, that you need to share that information with your employer, you know, talking about how to best communicate with you, how to support you, whether it’s through work tasks or communication skills... You know, it’s really up to the individual. We also have some worksheets and some guides on our website around disclosure that kinda walk you through the decision process around sharing with an employer about your disability, so we can, we can guide you to that if you want to reach out, and hopefully, they’re gonna send y’all our e-mail addresses, if you don’t already have those. I don’t remember if they were on our first slide. But feel free to reach out to Alissa and/or I. We’re happy to talk with you further about any of these items, and any questions we didn’t get to.

RACHEL: Yeah, thank you both so much. We do have quite a few more questions, but unfortunately we don’t have enough time. But, thank you, everyone, for joining us today. Thank you, Jennifer and Alissa very much. If you found today’s event helpful, we encourage you to explore or as I archive of past webinar events. There, you can find recordings of webinars on topics, including transition, employment, and more. The webinar archive is available on OAR’s website.
Once you close out of today's event, you will receive an exit survey. We would appreciate if you would complete that and provide your feedback. Everyone will receive a follow-up e-mail with a link to today's video recording and materials within the week.

On behalf of the Organization for Autism Research, thank you for joining us and have a great rest of your day.

JENNIFER: Thank you.