



## Unit 4: STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH TO EMPLOYMENT OF PEOPLE WITH AUTISM

*„Autism has long been defined in terms of its drawbacks. Now it is time to look at the benefits“*

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Low expectations of employees with autism and poor work outcomes can at least to some extent be explained by an excessive focus on social deficits and other difficulties of people with autism, rather than on their strengths and possible expertise (Holwerda et al., 2012). It happens that employment regulations favor social skills and teamwork, even if they are not necessary to perform a certain job, thus creating insurmountable barriers in the process of hiring people with autism (Richards, 2012). In contrast, focusing on a person-job-environment fit can provide successful outcomes for people with autism in a variety of work environments (Scott et al., 2019).

Some behavioral characteristics of people with autism that are usually described as deficiencies and deficits could also be viewed as advantages in a specific work environment. Summarizing the conclusions of numerous researchers who have addressed the benefits of employing people with autism (e.g. Bissonnette & Coaching, 2008; Howlin, 2004; Wong et al., 2018), we could single out the following:

1. A well-trained person with autism who is familiar with the requirements and rules of the workplace can be a very efficient and reliable worker. Many jobs involve repetition and routines, with each step in the realization of the job being predictable. Such jobs suit a large number of people with autism.
2. Lack of central coherence can also be an advantage, especially if the work requires attention to detail, and maintaining concentration on specific



aspects of the work environment. In other words, the inability to see the forest from the trees, represents a kind of advantage in jobs where the observation of individual trees is required. Workers with autism who focus on details easily notice the isolated elements of an object, image, video, and sometimes an abstract concept, which they can "miss" to colleagues who do not have autism.

3. Some people with high-functioning autism may have an extremely developed long-term memory, ie the ability to remember huge amounts of information. The tendency to think outside the cliché sometimes leads them to innovative solutions to certain problems.
4. Narrow, limited interests can sometimes be used for career development. Workers who have this type of interest can spend a lot of time doing work, without much need to change jobs or take breaks in casual chat. Howlin (2004) describes an autistic worker who packed shirts and glued stickers for a full twelve hours. Since he preferred to work, he rejected the offer to engage other workers in the same activity. After the job was done, he announced that one was missing in the received packages of eight thousand shirts!
5. One of the consequences of an underdeveloped theory of mind is complete honesty, which colleagues can interpret as indecent behavior. However, people with autism often tell the truth even if it is not in their favor. Managers and business owners can have confidence in their statements, because they do not calculate with the possible consequences. It also happens that in crisis situations, people with autism represent the voice of reason, because they rely on rational, analytical thinking, and not on current emotions. In addition, difficulties in emotional reconciliation can be a protective factor if the job is associated with unpleasant emotional experiences (eg work in palliative care institutions).

Although the daily work should rely on the strengths of employees with autism, the importance of permanent support should not be underestimated, which should be tailored to the individual needs of each individual worker with autism.