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Employment as a Public Health Issue: Evidence-Based Transition and Workplace Supports for Autistic Individuals

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Abstract

Background

Autistic young people and adults experience persistently low rates of paid employment despite international policy commitments to inclusive education, disability rights, and improved post-school transition outcomes. This disparity exists even when controlling for intellectual ability, highlighting a systemic failure to translate educational potential into economic participation.

Method

This narrative review synthesises research published between 2010 and 2025 examining evidence-based interventions designed to improve employment outcomes for autistic individuals within special educational needs (SEN) contexts.

A structured search of peer-reviewed and grey literature was conducted. Following screening for relevance and quality, 56 key studies were selected for synthesis.

These spanned supported employment models, transition and internship programmes, workplace-focused social skills training, employer-facing interventions, and technology-assisted approaches.

Findings

Across intervention domains, findings consistently demonstrate that place-and-train models, contextualised skill development, strengths-based job matching, employer engagement, and long-term follow-along supports are associated with improved job acquisition, retention, and workplace participation.

Conversely, traditional 'readiness' models that front-load classroom-based training prior to placement show limited efficacy. The review identifies a 'quality of evidence' gap, with a reliance on small-scale pilots outside of a few major randomised controlled trials (RCTs).

Conclusions

The evidence supports a shift from remediation of the individual to the adaptation of the workplace and educational ecosystem. Implications for inclusive transition planning, educational systems, policy development, and future research within SEN frameworks are discussed, with a particular focus on the mental health impact of unsupported employment.

Keywords: Autism, Employment, Special Educational Needs, Transition to Adulthood, Inclusive Education, Supported Employment, Neurodiversity, Selfdetermination

Introduction

Employment plays a central role in adult life, serving as a primary determinant of economic independence, identity development, social participation, health outcomes, and long-term quality of life. For autistic young people and adults, meaningful employment offers not only financial security but also essential opportunities for structure, routine, self-expression, and community engagement.

Work has been associated with improved self-esteem, reduced social isolation, and greater autonomy among people with disabilities. However, despite these widely recognised benefits and decades of legislative progress—including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD) and various national equality acts—autistic individuals experience some of the lowest employment rates across all disability groups internationally.

The statistics are stark and persistent. In the United Kingdom, the Office for National Statistics [1]. reported that only 21.7% of autistic adults were in any form of employment, compared to 53% of all disabled people and 81% of non-disabled people. Similar disparities are observed in the United States, where the National Autism Indicators Report [2]. consistently highlights that young autistic adults have the lowest employment rates among disability groups, including those with intellectual disabilities or speech-language impairments. Even among autistic people with average or above-average intellectual ability, postsecondary qualifications, or specialised technical skills, outcomes remain poor.

Underemployment, involuntary part-time work, job mismatch (where individuals work in roles significantly below their skill level), and rapid job cycling are common features of the autistic employment landscape. These patterns contribute to long-term economic insecurity and limit opportunities for independent living, often forcing autistic adults to remain dependent on family support or social welfare systems well into mid-adulthood.

The consequences of this exclusion are profound. Beyond the economic costs—estimated to be in the billions annually due to lost productivity and lifetime care requirements—the human cost is staggering. Chronic unemployment and underemployment are significant predictors of poor mental health, contributing to high rates of anxiety, depression, and suicidality among autistic adults [3].

Furthermore, the lack of employment reinforces social segregation, preventing autistic people from accessing the 'natural supports' and social networks that workplaces typically provide.

The Special Educational Needs (SEN) Context

Within Special Educational Needs (SEN) systems, employment outcomes are inextricably linked to the quality of educational provision and post-school transition planning. The preparation for adulthood does not begin at the point of school exit it is a longitudinal process that should be woven through the fabric of the curriculum. However, the interface between SEN provision and the labour market is often fraught with friction. Many autistic learners leave compulsory education without sufficient exposure to authentic work environments, having had limited opportunities for vocational exploration, and possessing inadequate preparation for the social, adaptive, and self-regulatory demands of modern workplaces.

Historically, SEN frameworks have focused heavily on academic attainment or basic life skills (such as domestic chores), often overlooking the nuanced competencies required for employment, such as executive functioning, selfadvocacy, and navigating the 'hidden curriculum' of workplace social dynamics.

Furthermore, transition planning is frequently fragmented, inconsistently implemented, and poorly coordinated across education, vocational rehabilitation (VR), health, and social care systems. This phenomenon, widely known as the 'service cliff', leaves young adults and their families to navigate a complex, bureaucratic landscape without the structural supports they relied upon during their education. Educators, including SEN Coordinators (SENCOs) and transition specialists, often report lacking the specific training, time, or resources to engage effectively with local employers, resulting in transition goals that are aspirational rather than operational.

Shifting Perspectives: From Deficit to Ecology

Importantly, a growing body of research challenges deficit-based explanations for autistic unemployment. Traditionally, poor outcomes were attributed to the individual's 'impairments'—social communication deficits, sensory sensitivities, or restrictive and repetitive behaviours. This medicalised view places the burden of change entirely on the autistic person to 'fit in'. However, contemporary scholarship increasingly understands these outcomes as the result of a systemic misalignment between autistic strengths and environmental demands [4].

Inaccessible recruitment processes (e.g., traditional panel interviews that rely on rapid verbal processing and eye contact), unstructured work environments, sensory-hostile open-plan offices, ambiguous communication styles, and stigma all contribute to employment exclusion. In response, researchers and practitioners have called for employment interventions that are ecological, strengths-based, and inclusive. Such approaches emphasise real-world learning, workplace adaptation, employer partnership, and long-term support rather than prolonged readiness training or attempts to normalise autistic behaviour. This narrative review synthesises the international evidence base on employment

interventions for autistic young people and adults from 2010 to 2025. By integrating findings across intervention domains and theoretical perspectives, the review aims to provide a robust evidence base to inform inclusive transition planning, educational practice, and policy development within the SEN sector.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

This review is anchored in four complementary theoretical perspectives that underpin contemporary research on autism, employment, and special educational needs: Ecological Systems Theory, the Social Model of Disability, the Neurodiversity Paradigm, and Self-Determination Theory. Together, they provide a lens through which to view employment not as an individual achievement, but as a systemic, negotiated outcome. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory conceptualizes human development—and by extension, employment outcomes—as emerging from dynamic interactions across multiple systems [5]. This framework is essential for SEN practitioners as it moves the focus beyond the student's individual characteristics.

Mesosystem

The interactions between these microsystems. For example, the communication between a SENCO and a job coach, or between parents and an employer. Strong mesosystemic links are crucial for successful transition; when schools and families are misaligned regarding employment expectations, outcomes suffer. Exosystem Contexts the individual may not directly participate in but which affect them, such as school board policies on vocational training, local transport infrastructure, or regional labour market conditions.

Macrosystem

The broader cultural and ideological context, including societal attitudes towards disability, neurodiversity, and the value of work. From this perspective, employment success reflects the degree of alignment or 'fit' between the individual and these nested systems. For SEN practice, this implies that interventions must target not just the learner, but the ecosystem surrounding them.

The Social Model of Disability The Neurodiversity Paradigm

The neurodiversity paradigm complements these frameworks by recognising autism as a natural form of human diversity, characterised by distinct cognitive styles, strengths, and challenges, rather than a disorder to be fixed [6]. This perspective emphasizes that autistic brains function differently, not defectively. It highlights strengths often (though not universally) associated with autism—such as pattern recognition, intense focus, attention to detail, reliability, and honesty as valuable assets in the labour market. Neurodiversity-affirming approaches within SEN contexts reject deficit-oriented goals of normalisation or 'masking' (the suppression of autistic traits to appear neurotypical), which is known to cause exhaustion and burnout. Instead, they emphasise respect, autonomy, and environmental adaptation. In the context of employment, a neurodiversity framework advocates for 'niche construction'—creating roles that capitalise on an individual's specific cognitive profile while providing necessary accommodations for their challenges.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) posits that human motivation and well-being are driven by the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy (feeling in control of one's actions), competence (feeling capable of achieving goals), and relatedness (feeling connected to others). Within SEN transition research, SDT has become a critical framework. Traditional employment models often undermine autonomy by placing autistic individuals in roles chosen by professionals or parents, or in segregated settings. Evidence suggests that interventions promoting self-determination—where the autistic person is the primary agent in choosing their career path and advocating for their needs—lead to better employment retention and higher job satisfaction [7]. Supporting autistic students to understand their own profile (metacognition) and articulate their needs is a core component of sustainable employment.

Method

A narrative synthesis methodology was selected for this review due to the heterogeneity of autism employment research. Studies in this field vary widely in design (from randomised controlled trials to qualitative case studies), intervention structure, population characteristics, and outcome measures. A rigid metaanalysis would likely exclude valuable qualitative insights regarding the 'lived experience' of employment, the 'black box' of intervention implementation, and the specific challenges faced in educational settings. Narrative synthesis integrates quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods evidence while preserving contextual insights essential to practitioners.

Search Strategy and Selection Criteria

A structured literature search was conducted across major academic databases, including PubMed, PsycINFO, ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), Scopus, and Web of Science. These were supplemented by targeted searches of grey literature, government reports (e.g., UK Department for Education, US Department of Labor), and programme evaluations to capture policy-relevant data.

Search Terms: Key terms included combinations of Autism, ASD, Asperger's, Autistic, Neurodivergent and Employment, Vocational, work, Internship, Transition, Job Coaching, Supported Employment, Project Search, IPS and Intervention, Programme, Support, Strategy, Outcome

Findings

Thematic Synthesis

The narrative synthesis identified six interrelated thematic domains that consistently shaped employment outcomes. While interventions varied in intensity and setting, clear patterns emerged regarding how employment success is achieved and sustained.

Authentic Work-Based Learning and Supported Employment

The most robust finding across the 15-year period of literature reviewed is the superiority of 'Place-and-Train' models over 'Train-and-Place' models. Traditional vocational education has often operated on a readiness logic: students must demonstrate social and technical competence in the classroom before being trusted in a workplace. The evidence overwhelmingly suggests this approach is flawed for autistic learners due to difficulties with generalisation; skills learned in a quiet classroom rarely transfer automatically to a bustling workplace. 'Place-and-Train' reverses this, placing the individual in a job first and providing training in situ.

Project Search Plus ASD Supports

The strongest evidence base in this domain belongs to Project SEARCH, particularly when enhanced with autism-specific supports. This business-led transition programme targets students in their final year of high school/college. The model involves total workplace immersion: students attend the workplace every day for an entire academic year (roughly 9 months), participating in three 10-week internships (rotations) while receiving on-site classroom instruction in employability skills. Randomised controlled trials [8] have demonstrated that participants in Project SEARCH plus ASD Supports were significantly more likely (often with 70–80% success rates) to obtain competitive, integrated employment than control groups receiving standard special education transition services (often with <20% success rates). The 'plus ASD Supports' element is crucial for SEN contexts. It distinguishes the model from generic disability support by adding Intensive Social Instruction, Visual Supports, Self-Management Strategies, Collaborative Teaming.

Individual Placement and Support (IPS)

Originally developed for people with severe mental illness, the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) model has been successfully adapted for autistic adults. IPS adheres to eight principles, including zero exclusion (anyone who wants to work is eligible), integration of vocational and clinical services, and rapid job search. Studies [9] indicate that IPS is effective because it bypasses prolonged preemployment training, which can often induce anxiety and lower self-confidence.

By placing the individual into a job that matches their interests quickly and then providing support, IPS maintains motivation and leverages the learning opportunities inherent in the job itself [10].

Discussion

The findings of this narrative synthesis underscore a central conclusion: employment outcomes for autistic young people and adults are shaped less by individual capability or 'functioning level' than by the degree of alignment across educational, vocational, and workplace systems.

Moving Beyond 'Readiness'

The review critically challenges the 'readiness' paradigm that dominates much of Special Education. The assumption that a student must demonstrate a full suite of social and behavioural competencies before accessing the workplace is not supported by evidence. In fact, it acts as a barrier. The 'Place-and-Train' data suggests that the workplace itself is the primary classroom for vocational learning.

For SEN practice, this demands a radical rethinking of the curriculum to prioritise community-based instruction over classroom-based simulation. The question should not be "Is this student ready for work?" but "What support does this student need to work now?"

The Centrality of Adaptive Behaviour and Executive Function

While technical skills get the interview, adaptive skills keep the job. The synthesis highlights that emotional regulation and executive functioning are the true currencies of the workplace. This has profound implications for SEN curricula.

'Employability' must be redefined to include self-regulation, resilience, and the ability to self-advocate for accommodations. These are not 'soft' skills; they are survival skills.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The evidence gathered points toward specific, actionable implications for stakeholders within the SEN and employment ecosystems.

Implications for Educational Practice (SEN)

Curriculum Reform

Schools must integrate career development throughout the SEN pathway, not just in the final years. This includes 'pre-

employability' skills like self-regulation, self-determination, and understanding one's own diagnosis.

External Partnerships

SEN departments cannot operate as islands. Schools must actively cultivate relationships with local businesses to create internship host sites. This requires allocating time for SENCOs or transition coordinators to leave the school building and engage with the community.

Family Education

Schools should run workshops for parents on the benefits of employment, addressing fears about benefits and safety, and equipping families to be partners in the job search.

Student Agency

Transition planning meetings must centre the student's voice. Students should be supported to lead their own IEP/Transition meetings, fostering the self-determination skills required in adulthood [11].

Limitations and Future Research

Despite the progress made between 2010 and 2025, the evidence base has limitations that future research must address.

Demographics

The majority of participants in these studies are male and white. There is a severe lack of data on autistic women (who may present differently and face different workplace barriers) and autistic people from ethnic minority backgrounds. Intersectionality remains a major gap.

Longitudinal Data

Few studies track outcomes beyond 12 or 24 months. We do not know enough about the career progression of autistic adults over a decade [12]. Does early entry into low-skilled work lead to career advancement, or does it result in being 'stuck' in entry-level roles?

Autistic Voice

While increasing, participatory research is still developing. Future research must be co-produced with autistic people to ensure that the outcomes measured (e.g., is 'hours worked' the right metric?) reflect what the community values (e.g., job satisfaction, mental health, financial independence) [13].

Cost-Benefit Analysis

More economic evaluations are needed to demonstrate the Return on Investment (ROI) of intensive models like Project SEARCH to convince policymakers to fund them.

Conclusion

The persistent employment gap for autistic individuals is not an inevitability of the condition, but a failure of the systems surrounding it. This review demonstrates that we have the tools to close this gap. Evidence-based interventions like supported employment, immersive internships, and workplace-focused coaching work. They work because they respect the ecology of the workplace and the distinct profile of the autistic learner. For the Special Educational Needs sector, the message is clear: preparation for employment cannot be an afterthought. It must be central to the educational mission. By shifting from a deficit model of 'fixing' the student to an ecological model of adapting the environment and supporting the transition, we can unlock the potential of a generation of autistic young people.

The goal is not just to help them find a job, but to help them find a vocation and a valued place in society.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

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Informed Consent Statement

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Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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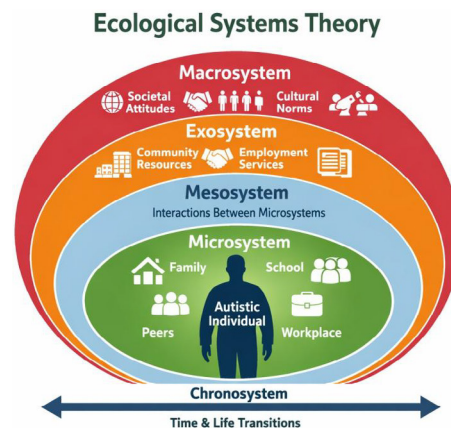


Figure 1: Ecological Systems Theory Applied to Autism and Employment within Sen Contexts.

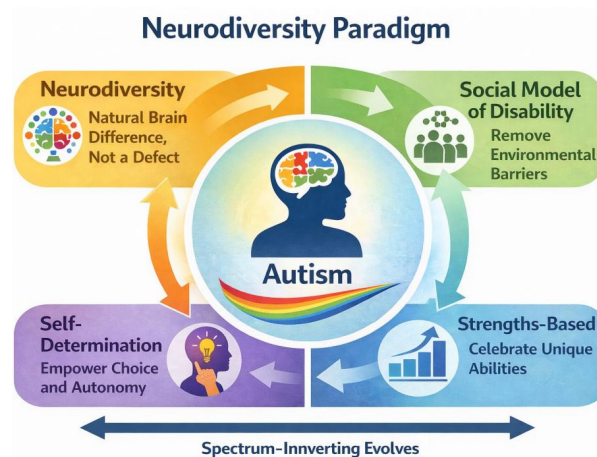


Figure 2: Autism within the Social Model of Disability, Illustrating Environmental Barriers and Strengths-Based Inclusion.