*Generation A: Untapping the Talent of Neurodivergent Individuals*

The term Generation A is introduced to refer to the one-half-million individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) who will reach adulthood in the next decade (Hurley-Hanson, Giannantonio, & Griffiths, 2020; CDC, 2016). These numbers are staggering and suggest the need to examine the long-term employment, career, and life outcomes for this generational cohort. While most individuals entering the workplace in the next decade will be members of Generation Z, Generation A represents people with ASD who will reach adulthood and be poised to enter the workplace in the next decade.

It is vital that we find employment for these individuals and understand the factors that will lead to positive work and career experiences for Generation A. It has been found that individuals with ASD have much higher unemployment rates than the general population (Nord et al., 2016; Scott et al., 2015). The most recent unemployment statistics for adults with ASD reveal that 85% are unemployed and that 69% want to work (National Autistic Society, 2016). Research has shown that many individuals with ASD have never been members of the labor force (Cidav, Marcus, & Mandell, 2012). Research suggests that thirty-five percent of young adults with ASD have never held a job, been members of the labor force, nor attended educational programs after high school (Shattuck, Narendorf, Cooper, Sterzing, Wagner, & Taylor, 2012; Cidav, Marcus & Mandell, 2012).

Even when individuals with ASD do work, employment outcomes for adults with ASD are lower than those for the general population (Jennes-Coussens, Magill-Evans, & Koning, 2006; Taylor, Henninger, & Mailick, 2015). Adults with ASD tend to be underpaid compared to their peers without ASD (Howlin et al., 2004; Roux et al., 2013). Research suggests that individuals with ASD who secure employment also face significant challenges in maintaining employment (Baldwin et al., 2014; Lorenz & Heinitz, 2014;). They also are more likely than their peers without ASD to change jobs frequently and, as a result, to experience higher levels of ongoing stress and financial concerns (Baldwin et al., 2014).

There are individual, organizational, and societal costs when individuals with ASD are unemployed. These include the financial, social, and psychological costs of unemployment for individuals with ASD, their families, and caregivers. There are lost productivity costs for organizations facing labor and skills shortages that might be avoided by employing individuals with ASD. The total cost of autism support services in the United States currently exceeds $236 billion annually (Buescher et al., 2014). This number is expected to rise to one trillion dollars by 2025 (Baldwin, Costly & Warren, 2014; Leigh & Du, 2015). Research suggests that the costs of supporting an individual with ASD may exceed $2 million throughout the individual’s lifetime (Buescher et al., 2014).

As Generation A begins to move into the workforce, there is the potential for numerous benefits to individuals, organizations, and society. Employment has the potential to result in more positive life outcomes both for Generation A and their families and caregivers. Sustained employment and the ability to live independently have the potential to reduce the financial toll on society of caring for Generation A. In addition to filling the demand for skilled workers, there are financial and reputation benefits that may accrue for organizations that hire individuals with ASD. These include tax incentives provided by the federal government and other economic advantages, as well as positive perceptions of the organization by applicants and others within the community.

Organizations in numerous sectors of the economy continue to face a skills shortage (BLS, 2018). Companies have begun to recognize that hiring individuals with ASD to meet these skill shortages may be one solution to the skills gaps problem. A few studies have compared the job performance ratings of employees with and without ASD. Managers tended to rate the employee’s job performance with ASD as average or above average (Hagner & Cooney, 2005; Hillier et al., 2007). Jacob, et al. (2015) found that when neurodiverse employees are in an organization that supports and encourages them, they are very successful in their jobs. They also found that these workers were more committed and conscientious about their jobs, were very loyal, and were productive. EY reported that those with ASD were able to identify process improvements that cut training time in half. They also found that quality of work, efficiency, and productivity were equal to their other employees (Twaronite, 2019). Representatives of JP Morgan & Chase Company report that their employees with ASD produce forty-eight to one hundred forty percent more work than their neurotypical colleagues (Eng, 2018).

Several companies now include ASD and neurodiversity as part of their diversity and inclusion programs to creating meaningful employment for individuals with ASD. The Autism @ Work Roundtable is a group of six companies (DXC.technology, EY, Ford, JP Morgan Chase & Company, Microsoft, SAP) with autism hiring policies (<https://disabilityin.org/what-we-do/autism-employer-roundtable/FAQs/>). Organizations may choose to include individuals with ASD in their workforce for several reasons. These include altruism and a desire to help, legal compliance with employment laws, local and community pressure from parents and ASD support agencies, a desire to increase their reputation, and because inclusion makes good business sense. Hiring individuals with autism may enhance a company’s reputation and social capital. Most employers report positive experiences when hiring individuals with a disability (Cooper, 1991) and would hire more individuals with disabilities in the future (Morgan & Alexander, 2005). A study of employers with disabled employees found that they felt they could increase their public image and reputation by hiring people with disabilities (Olson, Cioffi, Yovanoff, & Mank, 2001). A majority of those who had received service from an employee with a disability felt the service was satisfactory or very satisfactory (Siperstein, Romano, Mohler & Parker, 2006).

Companies need to be aware of consumers’ positive attitudes towards organizations that hire people with disabilities (Morgan & Alexander, 2005; Siperstein, et al., 2006). Organizations can enhance their reputations by hiring individuals with ASD and developing diversity and inclusion initiatives. Ninety-two percent of people surveyed rated companies who hire people with disabilities higher than those who do not (Siperstein, et al. 2006). Eighty-seven percent of people felt that the companies were helping the employees lead more productive lives (Siperstein, et al., 2006).

In addition, research suggests that organizations that hire individuals with disabilities also receive financial benefits. A study by Accenture in 2018 found that companies committed to disability inclusion outperformed their peers and were twice as likely to have higher shareholder returns. The Accenture study identified forty-five companies that are leading disability employment and inclusion efforts. These “Champions” represent thirty-two percent of the 140 United States companies in their study. They found that Champions were two times more likely to outperform peers in shareholder returns. Accenture developed the Disability Equality Index (DEI) as a benchmark tool that gives businesses an objective score on their disability inclusion policies and practices. Companies with improved DEI scores were four times more likely to have total shareholder returns that outperform their peers.

An increase in the employment of people with ASD can lead to considerable economic benefits (Buescher, Cidav, Knapp, & Mandell., 2014; Kemper, Knapp, Romeo, & Beecham, 2009). A study in Australia found that reducing the unemployment of people with ASD by one-third would lead to a $43 billion in the Australian Gross Domestic Product (Lee, Black, Tan, Falkmer & Girdler, 2019). A more productive workforce can mean higher wages and business earnings and a more competitive national economy, and reduced welfare dependency (CED.org, 1993).

The Dandelion Employment Program in Australia calculates that every 100 individuals with ASD who were previously unemployed and who participate in the program for three years save the Australian government over six million dollars in the form of tax gains, savings in welfare benefits, and savings in unemployment services costs. It should also be remembered that workers are consumers. Individuals with autism who are working and have disposable income are able to contribute to the economy. Accenture (2018) estimates that the Gross Domestic Product could increase by 25 billion dollars if an additional one percent of individuals with disabilities were able to join the United States workforce. According to the United States Office of Disability Employment Policy, persons with disabilities are the third-largest market segment in the United States. Discretionary income for working-age people with disabilities is estimated at 21 billion dollars annually (Accenture, 2018).

As Generation A enters the workforce, research will be needed to identify best practices to place individuals who want to work and who possess in-demand skill sets into jobs where there are critical skills shortages. Research is needed on leadership needs for Generation A, and inclusion policies will need to be developed to ensure that Generation A’s untapped talent is accessed and fostered.

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