

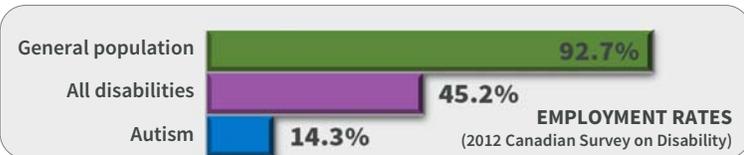
# WORKTOPIA EXCHANGE

Exchanging **knowledge**  
 Exchanging **learnings**  
 Exchanging **ideas**

## ECOSYSTEM APPROACH TO EMPLOYMENT AND AUTISM

### WHAT WE KNOW

In comparison to the general population and other disability groups, **adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder (autism) demonstrate the lowest rate of employment.** This is unfortunate given that employment has many benefits to one's health and well-being such as improved self-confidence, life purpose, improved finances, increased independence and social connectedness.



We're learning that getting and keeping a job for someone with autism involves many components within one's social world. It therefore seems important to consider not only the individual with autism but the surrounding "ecosystem".

### COMPONENTS OF THE ECOSYSTEM

Individuals with autism have a range of **foundational traits** and **job focused skills** that influence employment readiness.

INDIVIDUAL WITH AUTISM	
<b>Employment Readiness</b> Individual level of pre-employment/employment skills and core life skills	<b>Occupational Focus</b> Interests, strengths, importance of work in a person's life
<b>ASD Presentation</b> Social communication, repetitive behaviours, interests and sensory sensitivities	<b>Well-Being</b> Self-management, self-esteem, mental health, quality of life

### WHAT IS AN ECOSYSTEM

An ecosystem is a network of interconnected parts. The **employment ecosystem (Figure 1)** illustrates the critical intersecting elements of:

- the individual with autism
- their family or natural supports
- supportive agencies
- the workplace
- the broader community
- policies / government

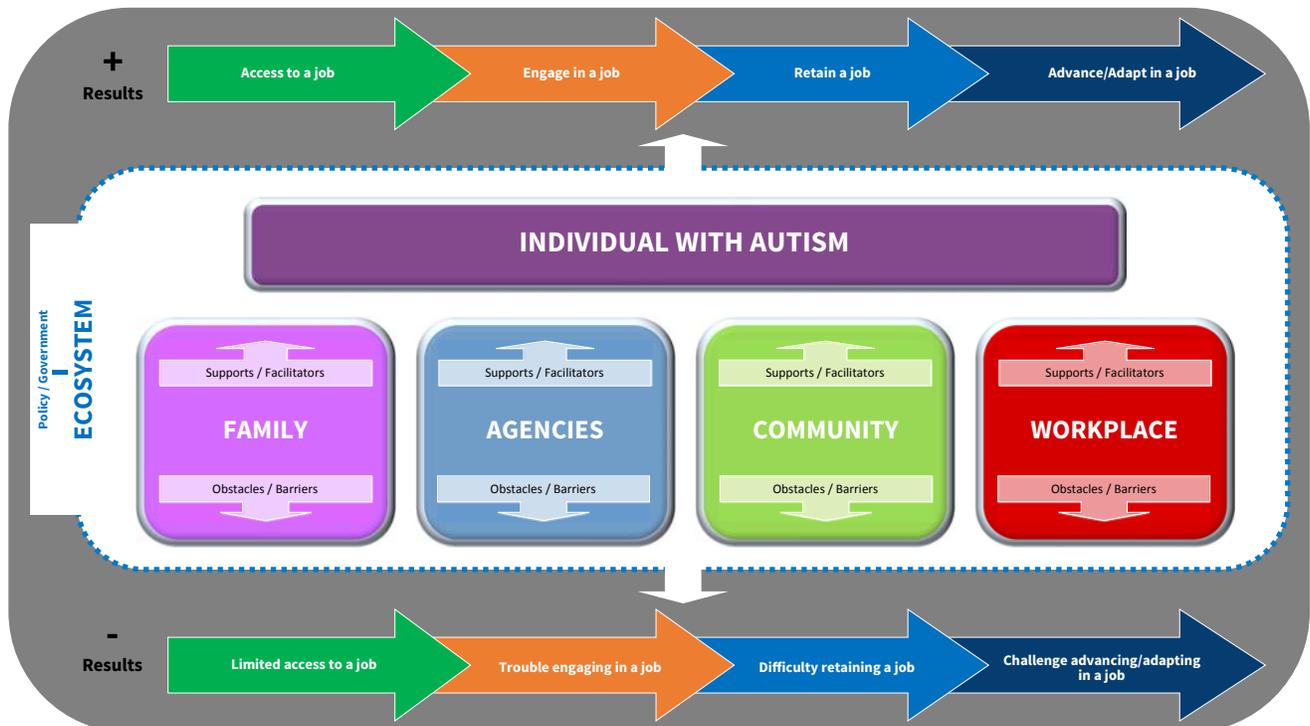


Figure 1. Employment Ecosystem

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## KEY ELEMENTS OF THE EMPLOYMENT ECOSYSTEM & A BRIEF APPLICATION OF CONCEPTS WITHIN EW

### Assist with:

- Navigation
- Transportation
- Coordination
- Encouragement
- Envisioning possibility



- Insufficient / misguided support
- Limited advocacy skills
- Financial challenges

**Family members and friends** can play a central role in the employment experience for individuals with autism. Advocacy, providing transportation and navigating services likely represent only a few ways that families or significant others support a youth or adult with autism.

**Employment support services** may be pivotal to job access and sustainability for individuals with autism, yet the availability of appropriate and accessible services is often limited. Ideally, these services offer assessment of job fit, training, placement, job coaching, customized employment and employer capacity building.

### Assist with:

- Navigation
- Liaison
- Coordination
- Connection
- Mentorship



- No services / insufficient access
- Long waitlists
- Restrictive eligibility criteria
- Insufficient funding

**Community-level** needs for individuals with autism include quality housing, transportation, health and mental health services, income sufficiency, food security and leisure opportunities. The availability of community services to address these needs is critical; if absent, such gaps negatively influence employment.

**Employers, co-workers and the work environment** are factors that are critical in the employment experience. Awareness and openness of employers and co-workers to individual diversity, as well as an array of organizational supports cumulatively may increase job access and retention.

### Assist with:

- Housing security
- Health / mental health
- Income security
- Transportation
- Educational support
- Food security
- Leisure opportunities



- Lack of or insufficient resources
- Limited awareness / knowledge / understanding of autism

### Assist with:

- Values individuals with autism
- Supportive HR policy
- Capacity in the workplace
- Accommodations
- Associated supports within the workplace
- Job coaching / mentorship



- Indifference or negative attitudes about autism
- Myths and stereotypes
- Lack of supportive HR policy
- Traditional hiring practices
- Lack of accommodations
- Lack of supports

## WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH TELL US

Successful employment is often a result of the interaction of multi-layered, intersecting systems, resources and individuals. The extent of employment opportunity and potential are often inextricably linked to both internal resources and the broader system of family, agencies, community, workplace and policy. Collectively these stakeholders and systems play an integrative role that can either positively or negatively influence access to and retention of employment. **Actions taken to enhance and support different areas of the ecosystem can have a positive impact on employment outcomes as exemplified by the EmploymentWorks<sup>1</sup> program.**

To read more about the ecosystem in an employment support context, see the following published paper:

**An Ecosystem Approach to Employment and Autism Spectrum Disorder**, Nicholas, D.B., Mitchell, W., Dudley, C. et al. *J Autism Dev Disord* (2018) 48: 264. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-017-3351-6>

Click on the image to the left to access the paper at:

[www.springerlink.com](http://www.springerlink.com)

## POLICY / GOVERNMENT

### Policy / Government / Societal Values:

Individuals living in the community are surrounded by a broader systemic infrastructure including social, economic and health policies that variably support engagement in employment and community life. One's context matters, as illustrated by emerging data that suggests that

individuals and families with lower income and education levels are at greater risk for poorer employment outcomes. Policy that reduces income disparities may lessen disadvantages faced by many individuals with autism. This invites continued learning about ways that employment programs such as EW can interface with broader areas of social policy and context, with the aim of greater access to employment and quality of life for all individuals with autism.