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BECOMING INDEPENDENT: EMPLOYER PRACTICES THAT ENHANCE SUCCESS FOR EMPLOYEES WITH AN AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

by

Stuart P. Stofferahn

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Education

Major: Educational Leadership

Under the Supervision of Dr. Kay A. Kaiser

Omaha, Nebraska

May 2017

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BECOMING INDEPENDENT: EMPLOYER PRACTICES THAT ENHANCE SUCCESS FOR EMPLOYEES WITH AN AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

Stuart P. Stofferahn, Ed. D

University of Nebraska, 2017

Advisor: Kay A. Keiser, Ed. D

This qualitative study explored employer practices that enhanced success for employees with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Four employers in the southwestern United States who partnered with Southwest Autism Research and Resource Center participated in the study. Data was collected through individual, in-depth interviews with the participants to address four themes that emerged from this study: 1) accommodations that were necessary to enhance the chances of success for an employee with an ASD; 2) positive effects on workplace morale/camaraderie; 3) connections to increased or improved customer relations/satisfaction; 4) How hiring an employee with an ASD has a positive effect on employer's professional career or personal life.

Findings from this study indicate that all of the participants incorporated reasonable accommodations that assisted with the long-term success of the employee. Furthermore, all of the participants experienced some form of positive customer impact, positive employee impact or an increased desire to do more as an employer. The insight this research provides may allow other employers to create supportive work environments for diverse groups of employees while also encouraging employers to establish and nurture relationships with disability agencies and advocacy groups.

Dedication

The table
Was oversized
For just
One person

One chair
Waiting
Sturdy, but
Alone

Six
Hours
Of
Interrogation

The eyes
Of
The
Questioners

Saw one
Man
One
Table

Standing
Unseen
At my side
Behind me

My mom
My dad
My brothers, sister
My teachers, friends

My confidantes
My mentors
My failures
My successes

Never once
Did I
Feel
Alone

In the
Crowded
Empty
Space

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I would like to thank Southwest Autism Research and Resource Center (SARRC) and their employer partners for supporting this research. The staff and employers were the models of grace and accommodation.

Thank you to my committee. You were thorough, and you taught me lessons that I should have learned years ago. Better late than never.

To my advisor, Dr. Kay Keiser. Quantitative all the way, right? Thank you for teaching me how to be comfortable learning and leading in the fuzzy gray area.

To my never-failing, ever-attentive mentor, Dr. Dale Rawson. I have bugged you for years. This dissertation changes nothing.

To my friends and family. The poem is for you. I am never alone in the crowded empty space.

Table of Contents

Abstract ii

Dedication iii

Acknowledgment iv

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study 1

Statement of the Problem 8

Research Questions 9

Rationale for Study 9

Delimitations of the Study 9

Definition of Terms 10

Outline of Dissertation 10

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature 11

Chapter 3: Research Methods 17

Research Design 17

Rationale of Qualitative Methods 18

Case Selection 18

Participants 20

Interviews 20

Data Analysis 21

Validation Strategies 22

Ethical Considerations 22

The Role and Background of the Researcher 23

Chapter 4: Research Findings 25

Background 26

Study Findings 26

Theme: Accommodations 26

Theme 2: Positive Employee Influence 30

Theme 3: Positive Customer Impact 32

Theme 4: Employer Desire to do More 35

Chapter 5: Discussion 38

Overview of the Study 38

Discussion of Findings 39

Accommodations 40

Positive Employee Influence 42

Positive Customer Impact 44

Employer Desire to do More 46

Implications for Policy and Practice 48

Conclusion 51

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In secondary school guidance counselors offices across the United States, stacks of informational pamphlets about post-graduation opportunities often litter tables and desks as they call to potential students with high gloss and photographs of happy faces. Academic rigor is just one common selling point amid many; recruiters will talk of the benefits of living on campus, developing friendships, becoming involved in extra-curricular activities that develop other interests and hobbies, and ultimately finding employment with the help of placement specialists. The message is choice, pathway to employment, and independence. The decision to pursue post-secondary educational goals can involve a process that begins with questions that are introspective and inquisitive, and ultimately lead to a program that is the best fit for that individual with the goal of finding employment and living independently. But for a large group of students, the options of experiencing the same post-secondary opportunities are limited if they exist at all, and finding employment and living independently become daunting challenges which are often met with disappointment and reliance on government assistance, overwhelmed transition services, and family members to meet basic needs for as long as they are alive.

In the United States, the most recently reported number of people who self-described as having a disability numbered almost 53.5 million individuals – or just above 22% of the United States population. This specific demographic varied widely from state-to-state with a higher number listed in the southern states (31%) and lower numbers in the northern states (16.5%) (Courtney-Long et al., 2015). In 2013, 33.9% of US civilians

with disabilities ages 18-64 living in the community were employed, compared to 74.2% for people without disabilities. There is state variation in the rates of employment for persons with disabilities, from a high of 52.8% to a low of 25.3% (Disability Statistics Annual Report, 2014). Employment rates vary by type of disability. Employment rates are highest for people with hearing disabilities (50.2%) and vision disabilities (39.6%) and lowest for people with self-care (15.2%) and independent living (15.3%) limitations, and the wages of people with disabilities age 16 and over was about two thirds of the median earnings of people without disabilities. Also noteworthy, U.S. civilians with a disability have a much higher likelihood of falling into poverty with a rate more than double that of the national rate, and obesity and other health-related risks are also reported at much higher rates (Stoddard, 2014).

A report in 2011 showed that the federal government spent more money each year on cash payments for disabled former workers – right around 14 million people - than it spent on food stamps and welfare combined, totaling over $260 billion annually (Joffe-Walt, 2013). The report also outlined a direct correlation between the unemployment rate and the rate of applications for disability support. Statistics have also shown that once people began receiving disability payments, fewer than 1% ever returned to work – primarily because even though the annual payout for disability was around $13,000 (and a minimum wage job would pay closer to $15,000), a minimum wage job most likely would not include healthcare, whereas qualification for disability ensured eligibility for Medicare (Joffe-Walt, 2013).

Since the disaggregation of disabilities involves a wide range of descriptors, this study focuses upon those who self-report as having an autism spectrum disorder (ASD)

and the challenges involved with participating in available postsecondary education options, finding appropriate work, and obtaining the necessary skills to live independently. ASD is a neurodevelopmental disorder associated with impaired social ability, especially communication, and restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities. Autism spectrum disorder can be associated with significant functional impairments and long-term health, social, and financial costs for individuals with ASDs, their families, and society as a whole (APA, 2013). Autism affects 1 out of 68 individuals in the United States with more than 3.5 million people reported as being on the autism spectrum (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016). The prevalence of ASD has seen significant increases over the last decade, which is due in part to reporting practices and research (Hansen, 2015).

Since 2012, an average of 50,000 adolescents with an ASD have turned 18 each year, and it is estimated that this population will continue to grow at the same rate through 2023 bringing another half-million people on the spectrum into adulthood this decade (Goehner, 2011). Meeting the needs of this burgeoning population presents a looming crisis for service organizations that are presently ill-equipped to do so (Gerhardt & Lanier, 2011).

Parents and family members have long reported the difficulties they face as they consider what will become of their child once a free and appropriate public education ends, and they are no longer eligible for educational support as their child either graduates from high school or ages out of the system (Silberman, 2015; Donvan & Zucker 2016; Sarris, 2015). Shattuck et al. (2011) reported on the prevalence and correlates of service use among post-secondary youth with ASD and compared them to

service use of youth while in high school and found a steep decline in service receipt. As support for families of children with an ASD ends, the suffering intensifies and, what was once a pathway that – for the most part – included support at every turn, becomes a road filled with service-denial (Schopler & Mesibov, 1992). The National Institute of Mental Health (2006) identified youth with an autism spectrum disorder as being particularly vulnerable when school-based services terminate, because challenges and reliance on others for aid, and high rates of comorbid health and mental health problems (Seltzer, Shattuck, Abbeduto, & Greenberg, 2004; Schall, Cortijo-Doval, Targett, & Wehman, 2006; Gerhardt, 2006). The reality is that over half of these young adults live at home for as long as their parents and siblings are able to care for them (Seltzer et al., 2004). Expectedly, the relationships with siblings undergo major transformations during adulthood, as the strain of raising their own families takes a toll on the amount of contact – loosening the sibling bond and placing more responsibility upon aging parents (Knott, Lewis, & Williams, 1995). The first few years immediately after high school are a critical time for youth; a positive transition can build a foundation for an adult life armed with adaptive skills. These years after high school provide an opportunity to not only stabilize a critical developmental period but also stave off potential harmful developmental and social challenges (Gore, Aseltine, & Schilling, 2007).

Postsecondary educational participation rates for ASD youth are lower than other groups, with 40% or fewer attending or receiving a college degree (Cederlund, Hagberg, Bellstedt, Gillberg I.C. & Gillberg C., 2008; Eaves & Ho, 2008; Howlin, Alcock, & Burkin, 2005; Kobayashi, Murata, & Yoshinaga, 1992; Szatmari, Bartolucci, Bremner, Bond & Rich, 1989; Howlin, Mawhood, & Rutter, 2000). The risk of lower involvement

is greater the first two years after high school while youth with ASD struggle with identifying and interpreting social norms as they seek community involvement in some capacity (Shattuck et al., 2012). Some studies have found that 12% to 24% of youth are not engaged in any productive activities in young adulthood (Cederlund et al., 2008; Taylor & Seltzer, 2011), and a large population of young adults with ASD live with their parents and are completely dependent on them for their well-being (Shattuck et al., 2012). Twenty-eight percent had attended a two-year college, 12.1% had attended a four-year college, and 9.3% had attended a vocational or technical education program, while just over one third had not participated in any postsecondary employment or school (Shattuck et al., 2012). Lack of participation in the post high school is related to poor behavioral outcomes, especially in low income youth as they were more likely to be disengaged, despite their impairment severity (Taylor & Seltzer, 2010). This disengagement can also lead to a sedentary lifestyle that contributes to poorer health compared to their peer group, citing obesity and tobacco use as substantially increased health risks adding potential for increased cost to taxpayers (Stoddard, 2014). Research suggests lower income ASD youth have more limited adult life chances than their affluent peers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). The same 2011 census report stated that in 2009, 20% of US children lived below the federal poverty line, and given current estimates of ASD prevalence and the poverty rate, approximately 163,000 children with an ASD were living below poverty in 2009 (Shattuck et al., 2012).

Rates of employment for adults with an ASD are also low, with 25% to 50% of adults with an ASD participating in any type of paid employment (Hendricks, 2010). Those who are employed often are employed below their level of education and have

difficulty maintaining stable employment (Hendricks, 2010; Hurlbutt, 2004). For youth with an ASD, 55.1% had held paid employment during the first six years after high school. More than 50% of youth who had left high school in the past two years had no participation in employment or education (Shattuck et al., 2012), earned less per hour than people in comparison groups, and held jobs that clustered in fewer occupational types (Roux et al., 2013). Youth with an ASD had the lowest rates of participation in employment and the highest rates of no participation compared with youth in other disability categories. (Shattuck et al., 2012). For youth with higher conversational and functional abilities and who live in households with higher income, the odds of finding employment were higher (Roux et al., 2013).

Lack of employment and withdrawal from society come at a steep price. The average cost to raise a child who has not been identified with an intellectual disability is approximately $250,000. For a child on the autism spectrum, the cost is estimated to be between $1.4-2.4 million depending if the child with an ASD also has an intellectual disability – 6-8 times higher than a child who does not have an ASD or intellectual disability. For children, the largest share of the cost was associated with special education services and parental productivity loss (Buescher, Cidav, Knapp, & Mandell, 2014).

During adulthood, the productivity loss came from a lack of employment accompanied by residential care or supportive living accommodation (Buescher et al., 2014). In 2013, the national cost associated with services for adults who identified as having an ASD was between $176 – $196 billion depending on whether the prevalence of an intellectual disability was 40% or 60%. The largest contributor to the total cost was

accommodation services, which included the cost of staff employment in or attached to the accommodation setting followed by direct medical costs and individual productivity loss (Buescher et al., 2014).

To live independently, research has shown that people with an ASD need help with communication, community living, and social skills in addition to work-ready skills (Hall-Lande, Hewitt, & Mosely, 2011). Difficulties in daily living including personal hygiene and self-care (taking medicine, bandaging a cut), housekeeping, food preparation, handling money, and getting around the community might also reduce an individual's chance of achieving independence in adulthood (Duncan & Bishop, 2013). Something as basic as crossing a busy street, for example, involves functional skills that can be more difficult to master than inferential calculus, because it involves visual memory, decision-making, and motor skills – skills that one must have a basic competency *first* to have the ability to utilize academic skills at work (Sarris, 2015). As mentioned, providing the specialized services to a growing population of people with an ASD is becoming increasingly difficult as service providers are inundated with soaring numbers of qualified applicants. Additionally, locating a college for students with an ASD can be perplexing, as parents and students alike discover that once a student graduates from a public high school, the rules change at colleges and universities. If a college or university accepts federal dollars, they must provide reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities, provided these accommodations do not fundamentally change the requirements of their programs. Reasonable accommodations at the collegiate level, differ greatly from a free and appropriate education that guarantees services for a student with a disability (Hamblet, 2014).

Statement of the Problem

The United States faces a looming crisis of supporting a large population of people with an ASD who face the difficult challenge of finding and maintaining long-term employment as a means of living an independent life. This study will focus on employers who partner with a comprehensive, in-resident skills-training organization and the practices they utilize to create a positive work outcome.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study utilizes the analysis of positive deviance. The idea behind a positive deviance approach is to identify unexpected good outcomes, interview people to attempt to discover the behaviors behind the good outcomes, analyze the interviews to discover whether or not others can adopt the behaviors, design change activities to assist with implementation, and monitor and evaluate the results (Marsh, Schoeder, Dearden, Sternin & Sternin, 2004). Spreitzer & Sonehshein (2004) add that positive organizational studies offer important research contributions to understanding the excellence that organizations enable, but scholars frequently overlook. Positive deviant behavior has profound effects on the individuals and organizations who benefit from, and practice, such behaviors (Quinn, 1996; Quinn & Quinn, 2002). This research utilizes an analysis of positive deviance related to employers who have implemented practices with employees who have an ASD that have led to positive outcomes within their organization and into the surrounding community. With the approach laid out by Marsh et al (2004), employers were identified who have experienced unexpected outcomes, the employers were interviewed with the goal of identifying the behaviors

behind the unexpected results, and the interviews were analyzed to identify themes that may assist others in replicating these behaviors.

Research Question

The primary research question this study seeks to answer is: In what ways can employers' experiences provide insight into improving opportunities for ASD employees?

Rationale for the Study

This qualitative study is important and needed for several reasons. First, while the lack of comprehensive support for people with an ASD or other learning difference after high school has been identified and quantified by existing research, there is very little literature that identifies positive deviance specifically related to actions taken by employers to recruit and retain this demographic. Second, very little literature exists that describes any positive impact hiring people with an ASD or other learning difference may have on employee morale. Third, there is a lack of documented understanding of any positive correlations that may exist between employers and the customer base or community due to the hiring of people with an ASD or other learning difference.

Delimitations of the Study

One Site

Positive, successful employers only

Cannot generalize

Definition of Terms

ASD. Autism Spectrum Disorder

Life Skills. Behavioral, social and job-ready skills that allow for an individual to sustain a life independent of full-time care or supervision.

Employment. Any type of paid employment whether part or full-time.

Outline of Dissertation

This dissertation will be divided into five chapters and an appendix section. The first chapter will provide an introduction to the current impact of unemployed disabled people in the United States and specific employment challenges related to people with an ASD, the rationale for the study; the rationale for using qualitative methods; statement of the problem; and the research questions. Chapter two will present a comprehensive review of the literature. The third chapter will describe the research methods; selection of participants; data collection and analysis methods; validation strategies used to increase the validity and reliability of the study; potential bias issues; and the role and background of the researcher. Chapter four will present and highlight the conclusions of the case analysis. Each participant experience will be described in great detail along with the themes that emerge from the study. Themes will be presented accompanied with artifacts. The last chapter will discuss the results of the study, the implications for theory development, practice, public policy, future research, the strengths and limitations of the study, a conclusion, a section of lessons learned, as well as the references used in all the chapters of this dissertation. There will also be an appendix section that will include the IRB permission, informed consent forms; introduction and interview outline; interview protocol; the field notes form; and the themes identified from the printed transcripts of the interviewees.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This literature review explores the factors that may impact the positive deviance practices of employers and include examples of two organizations that are currently employing these practices. Some practices discussed are policies of inclusiveness and etiquette, hiring practices that look beyond standard interaction and workplace support groups that enhance ease of onboarding. Additionally, the review will discuss how amendments to the ADA attempt to foster a goal of inclusion specifically as it relates to federal contracts.

People with disabilities represent a wide market. As with any customer segment, the best way to reach this market is to ensure it is represented in the workforce by hiring employees with disabilities and embedding inclusion in policies and practices (Martinez & Twaronite, 2016). Often times, success in recruiting, training, and retaining people with disabilities lies in the basics of etiquette and common sense. Simply showing inclusivity – belonging to a group – can make the difference (Martinez & Twaronite, 2016). Employers can realize positive outcomes for people with disabilities often with a willingness to being open (Dunst, 2015).

On January 1, 2009, the the ADA Amendments Act of 2008 (ADAAA) went into effect. The five most significant changes were:

- a broadened definition of disability;
- a clarification of the definition of substantial limitations;
- an expanded list of major life activities;

- greater guidance for employers around what mitigating factors may not be considered in determining disability;
- and clarification about the entitlement to accommodation. (ADA Handbook, 2016).

The U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Federal Compliance Programs (OFCCP) announced changes to the regulations of Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which prohibits employment discrimination against individuals based on disability by federal contractors and subcontractors (U.S. Dept. of Labor, 2013). Later, in March 2014, The U.S. Department of Labor instituted new requirements in its section 503 stating that 7% of the federal contractor and sub-contractor workforce be qualified individuals with disabilities (Martinez & Twaronite, 2016) with the additional expectation of equal training and promotion opportunities (U.S. Dept. of Labor, 2013).

A safe environment for self-identification and the inclusion of people with differing abilities has been given a boost by Section 503. The 7% goal has led many employers to seek inclusion across the entire organization with the end-game focused on how diversity helps to strengthen culture and drive innovation (Martinez & Twaronite, 2016). Dunst (2015) emphasized the focus on top-down leadership calling it one of the crucial components to creating a supportive workplace that is committed to achieving diversity.

Advocacy organizations exist to assist employers recruit, train and retain employees with disabilities. Ausenbaugh (2016) and Vogel (2009) suggest that successful recruiting and training programs are associated with solid relationships with these organizations, and they can also be beneficial in assisting employers with

mentorship programs that foster continued relationships between senior leaders and employees with disabilities. Vogel (2009) suggested best recruiting practices that included exploring beyond the campus career center and reach out to those who work with students with disabilities and to find candidates who meet an employer's skills and education criteria. As with Ausenbaugh (2015), Vogel (2009) identified advocacy organizations and Vocational Rehabilitation Services, or bureau of rehabilitation services, to increase the talent track. Martinez & Twaronite (2016) and Vogel (2015) identified employee resource groups, or ERGs, as an area of best practice that facilitates the comfort, safety and success of an organization's employees who have disabilities. Group members support onboarding new employees with disabilities, discover the marketing opportunities for products and services for people with disabilities, and review the policies and processes that impact them (Vogel, 2015). ERGs help make a real impact on workplace culture through organized feedback from current employees, while reinforcing the company's commitment to diversity. Further, ERGs create an opportunity for people who share commonalities to support one another and advise the organization on how to better support the needs of a particular community. Within an organization, different ERGs may help one another by communicating their best practices. LGBT ERGs may be a model to disability ERGs, as their identification and disclosure challenges are similar. In addition, some companies have created ERGs for employees with children with special needs (Martinez & Twaronite, 2016).

As stated in chapter one, potential employees with an ASD have specific challenges as they relate to social situations. Job-search processes have subtleties that can be difficult to understand without instructions that are clear. With this in mind,

simple additions such as including contact information for follow up could potentially make navigation easier (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2016). Standardizing this practice reduces the need to self-identify during the interview process as job applicants with disabilities may be hesitant; confusion may develop in how much to share, when and with whom it is to share, and how a supervisor or peers will respond (Vogel, 2009). This can be a tricky road to navigate, because accommodations cannot be made without disclosure. A best practice recognized by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2016) is to allow potential employees many opportunities during the interview process to disclose any tools that they use to help them be their best (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2016). This could be as simple as substituting a larger monitor to aid in office work (Vogel, 2009) to adding headphones to block out noise (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2016). Vogel (2009) also suggested that employers give due diligence to any job descriptions and list the specific requirements, so that prospective employees can make the determination if the job is a good match. For example, if a job requires travel 80% of the time, a disability may or may not come in to play, but if a prospective employee doesn't like to travel, the employer has already refined the search in listing the requirement. Among the most important things students on the autism spectrum request of employers and recruiters is greater transparency (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2016).

Janine Rowe, assistant director of disability services in the Rochester Institute of Technology offers employers additional recommendations as they relate to people with an ASD who may be seeking employment with their organizations. A verbal report of strengths might not give a complete picture of a person with an ASD, but he or she might

astound the employer with a technical assessment as part of the picture. For example, work samples or similar demonstrative artifacts can reflect ability in a way that words cannot (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2016). Rowe went on to offer other tips like working closely with career services to help you recruit students on the spectrum, meeting students on the autism spectrum in "low-risk" settings, and providing a continued spectrum of support like assigning a mentor to assist comprehension of corporate culture and educating them on employee resource groups for their needs and interests (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2016).

Though there are programs that have been designed specifically for adults with an ASD that provide a comprehensive approach to gaining independence (in-residence, social, living, and work-ready skills training), they are very few in number. Two programs were identified as potential locations for this study – Minnesota Life College and Southwest Autism Research and Resource Center (SARRC). Located in Ritchfield, Minnesota, Minnesota Life College is a three-year in-resident program that teaches life, social and work-ready skills in a college-like setting. The curriculum is designed to focus on life and social skills for the first two years, and the emphasis turns to work-ready skills during the third year that culminate in graduation and employment. Additionally, they offer lifetime support through their Community Living Program that provides families with stable communication, structure, and guidance. The mission of the college is centered on the goal of each student living independently upon graduation (Minnesota Life College, 2016)

A second program is located in Phoenix, AZ, at the Southwest Autism Research and Resource Center (SARRC, 2016). First Place ® Transition Academy (First Place

Phoenix, 2016) is a sister non-profit organization to Southwest Autism Research and Resource Center with a mission of integrating adults with autism and other special abilities into the norms of society through employment, healthcare, housing, education, culture, and supportive systems. They have a two-year program taught by SARRC staff, and students live on campus the first year and off campus the second.

These two programs are currently serving as examples for potential expansion of services into Nebraska and other states with a mission of providing a tailored learning atmosphere, supporting integrated working environments, and building stronger communities to enhance independent living for individuals with an Autism Spectrum Disorder or other learning difference.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODS

The purpose of this study is to understand successful on-boarding practices and other retention best-practices of employers who have partnered with an in-residence learning institution for people with an ASD and any impact these practices may have on co-workers and the community.

Research Design

This research study used a multiple case study design, which, as described by McDuffie & Scruggs (2008) involves an in-depth exploration of a single case of the phenomenon under study. Baxter and Jack (2008) explain that this approach to research facilitates exploration of a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources which ensures that the issue is not explored through one lens, but rather a variety of lenses –ultimately allowing for multiple facets of the phenomenon to be revealed and understood. Mertens (2010) explains that case studies focus on the understanding of a particular case within a complex context, and Stake (2013), highlights the difficulty of defining a case study as a unique form of research, because the case study is not defined by the methodology, but by the specificity and uniqueness of its system.

Therefore the purpose of this multiple-case study was to explore the on-boarding processes and other best-practices of employers who partner with an in-resident life-skills organization specializing in placement of people with an ASD.

Research Question

The question that guided this study is: In what ways can employers' experiences provide insight into improving opportunities for ASD employees?

Rationale of Qualitative Methods

Creswell (2014) claims that qualitative research is an inquiry process to explore social or human problems, and that the researcher builds a holistic picture that reports the views of the participants while conducting the research in a natural setting. The use of qualitative methods in this research was supported by Creswell (2014) for the following reasons:

1. Collection of data at the site the participants experienced the issue.
2. The researcher is the one that actually gathered the information.
3. The ability to use multiple sources of data.
4. The use of inductive and deductive analysis by using data to build patterns, categories, and themes.
5. The focus is on the meaning the participants assign to their experiences.
6. The research process is fluid and flexible; it changes as the field experience demands it.
7. It addresses the researcher's process of self-awareness and bias.

Case Selection

In order to gain multiple perspectives, this study used purposeful sampling (Palinkas, et al., 2013). To achieve this, four employer-partners with Southwest Autism Research and Resource Center were selected to be participants of this research study. The participants were selected based on Maxwell's (2013) goals for purposeful selection, focusing on those employers that best represented the setting and with whom the researcher will be able to establish the most productive relationship. Additionally, the researcher established a relationship with the Residential Transition Academy Director at

Southwest Autism Research and Resource Center in Phoenix, AZ and secured input on a diverse selection of employer-partners.

Participants

With the assistance of the director, the researcher identified the participants of this study. The participants of this study were comprised of four employers who partner with Southwest Autism Research and Resource Center in Phoenix, AZ. Participants all held a position of supervisor or higher within their organizations, and all had a direct role in hiring and on-boarding employees with an ASD. The size of the employers ranged from small (doughnut shop) to very large (beverage distributor). All perspectives were drawn from at least one year of supervision, and the experience for some exceeded five years. Three interviews were accomplished in-person and at the job site, and one was performed over the phone. The interviewees are listed as follows:

- Martha is a human resource manager who has been in the food and beverage industry her whole life. She has 470 hourly employees in her region in the southwest United States – five of whom have an ASD. She began working with SARRC about four years ago.
- Julie is a financial aid director at a community college located in the southwestern United States. She supervised an employee with an ASD for a little over a year.
- Casey is a Vice President of operations for a large beverage distributor in the southwest. He oversees the warehouse and distribution operations facilities as well as all the employees. He was at a conference when he was introduced to a large retailer whose programs involved hiring people with an ASD. When he

returned, he contacted SARRC and began looking into the possibility of incorporating similar programming within his organization.

- Brad is a manager for a regional doughnut shop in the southwestern United States.

The researcher contacted the prospective participants and asked them if they were interested in participating in the study. When the prospective participant agreed, the researcher scheduled a visit with the participant and explained the purpose of the study and what participating in the study would entail. For this study, data was collected in the form of semi-structured interviews and researcher notes.

Interviews. The participants were interviewed individually, and the interviews lasted one to two hours and three were conducted on-site at the subject's place of employment, and one was performed over the phone. The interviews were audio recorded, and during the interview, the researcher took notes. Participants were reminded that breaks were allowed if they needed to do so. They were also informed that to protect their identity, they would be provided a pseudonym. Each participant was provided a consent form and was informed that they may withdraw from the study at any point.

A draft interview protocol was developed for this study. The protocol was divided into seven sections. The questions were:

1. What is your process for on-boarding employees, and what (if any) accommodations do you incorporate for people with an Autism Spectrum Disorder?
2. What programs, policies, protocols, tools do you have in place to build and sustain a positive work environment? Do any of these programs,

policies, protocols or tools require accommodations for people with an ASD? If so, what are they?

3. How do you measure customer (consumer) satisfaction? Has any gathered data given any indication to positive trends related to hiring employees with an ASD, and have any of these trends led to any implementation of "best practices"? If so, what has been implemented?
4. How do you monitor workplace morale, and has that data or experience shown any positive correlation to hiring people with an ASD?
5. Other than the above areas, how has hiring employees with an ASD positively affected your business?
6. How do you work with your team to create inclusiveness?
7. Has hiring an individual with an ASD positively affected your life? If so, how?

Data Analysis

Transcription of all interviews and field notes were accomplished prior to the data being analyzed as the transcribing process allowed the researcher to become more acquainted with the data (Maxwell, 2013; Mertens, 2010; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000). The researcher used narrative analysis as the unit of analysis for coding, and the content was numbered sentence-by-sentence. Mertens (2010) explained that narrative analysis focuses on the stories that are told in different format, and pays more attention to the content than to the way the story is told.

This study followed a multiple case study design where the data was analyzed case-by-case through triangulation of data (Maxwell, 2013; Mertens, 2010) to prevent the

biases of a specific method. After the initial analysis of the data and subsequent re-reads, the researcher created descriptive codes by identifying regularly occurring phrases. (Creswell, 2014).

Validation Strategies. Validation of the research assures that the findings of the researcher are accurate from other points of view (Creswell, 2014) and is the linchpin to allow for correct conclusions based on the data obtained from an assessment (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000). Credibility for this study was achieved using the validation strategies of triangulation, researcher reflexivity, and peer debriefing.

As stated before, the data was triangulated with the different pieces of information collected. Researcher reflexivity was a constant process throughout the interviews to ensure that researcher bias or preconceptions were internally acknowledged. Finally, the researcher secured the assistance of a peer debriefer who was familiar with qualitative data analysis and who agreed to serve in this role.

Ethical Considerations. All participants were treated in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association (APA) and the University of Nebraska Institutional Review Board (IRB). Although there were no identifiable risks of participating in this study, some considerations were kept in mind. First, there was the potential that the research subjects may have felt pressure to answer all the questions designed for the interview given that they wished to project a positive employment environment. Second, since the subject matter deals with positive deviance, there was the possibility the research subjects may have embellished the results. These considerations were incorporated during the research design stage, and every caution was taken to

ensure that the participants felt comfortable, and had the freedom to withdraw from the study if they felt the need to do so.

The Role and Background of the Researcher

In October 2015, I had a discussion with my cousin about her son. He had come home one day excitedly talking about college possibilities and potential; it seems his friends were talking about where they might be looking to attend college in the next year or two. When he asked his mom about where he might be going, she had to tell him that he would not have the same choices as his friends.

Kyle was adopted from Russia, and he suffers from the effects of fetal alcohol syndrome. His symptoms present in much the same way as symptoms associated with ASD. Although Kyle is higher functioning, he would need accommodations that would exceed those associated with a typical academic classroom setting at a post-secondary college or university. And while limited accelerated educational options are a concern for my cousin, there is a constant, overriding fear that is always present in her mind: The thought of what will become of her son when she dies.

Kyle is among millions of students and adults with an ASD or other learning difference who are not, or will not be prepared to live an independent life once family members can no longer support them. While not every person with an ASD or other learning difference has the capability to live a fully-functional independent life, a large percentage of this population does. However, a missing link seems to be post-secondary opportunities to continue their education in a setting that is comprehensive in scope and focuses on building social, living, and work-ready skills that will enable them to exercise choice as they navigate a complex social structure that can seem so foreign to them.

My conversation in October has inspired me to discover ways to expand services similar in scope to SAARC and Minnesota Life College with a mission to provide a tailored learning atmosphere, support integrated working environments, and build stronger communities to enhance independent living for individuals with an Autism Spectrum Disorder or other learning difference.

My connections to this research and my own personal experiences will be at the same time an asset and a possible deterrent as they pertain to the analysis of any findings, as qualitative research expects some researcher bias. It cannot be denied that my personal experiences have marked me deeply and have shaped the person I am today, generating a number of biases that might affect any research I choose to attempt if I am not aware of their presence. It is my personal responsibility to identify them and set them aside during this research.

Interviews for this study were performed during the week of January 2017 in Phoenix, AZ; three were performed in person and at the place of employment, and one was performed over the phone out of convenience of the interviewee. All interviews were arranged with the assistance of the Residential Transition Academy Director at Southwest Autism Research and Resource center in Phoenix, Arizona.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The purpose of this research study was to explore methods and practices that employers utilize to enhance the success of employees with an autism spectrum disorder. The following seven protocol questions were the foundations for this study: (1) What is your process for on-boarding employees, and what (if any) accommodations do you incorporate for people with an Autism Spectrum Disorder?; (2) What programs, policies, protocols, tools do you have in place to build and sustain a positive work environment? Do any of these programs, policies, protocols, or tools require accommodations for people with an ASD? If so, what are they?; (3) How do you measure customer (consumer) satisfaction? Has any gathered data given any indication to positive trends related to hiring employees with an ASD, and have any of these trends led to any implementation of "best practices"? If so, what has been implemented?; (4) How do you monitor workplace morale, and has that data or experience shown any positive correlation to hiring people with an ASD?; (5) Other than the above areas, how has hiring employees with an ASD positively affected your business?; (6) How do you work with your team to create inclusiveness?; (7) Has hiring an individual with an ASD positively affected your life? If so, how?

During in-depth interviews, the participants described their experiences with hiring employees with an ASD, any accommodations required and any positive trends, data, or correlation with improved customer impact, workplace morale, or personal or professional growth. The research findings that this chapter reports are based on analysis of semi-structured interviews and field notes.

Background

The participants contributed differing amounts of information to the four themes that comprise the narrative. All participants discussed all the themes at length, although some elaborated and provided more details than others. Therefore, all participant's voices and views are represented in this study. While the themes are reported as being discrete, there is some overlap among them.

Theme 1: Accommodations were necessary to enhance the chances of success for your employee with an ASD.

Food and Beverage Industry Employer

Martha was Mark's employer. She said:

> We used to start his [Mark] day and end his day here in my office, because I am very close to where his worksite is. Then that kind of accommodation, if you will, just having me here for him to stop into on the way in and out I think aided his longevity with the company.

Specifically with regard to interviewing and on-boarding, Martha indicated that the process of hiring employees is typical and the questions she asks are the same for every employee. There are some accommodations that occur once she makes a decision on who she thinks will be the best fit:

> Once we made a decision on who I think will be the best fit, I will get with one of their [SARRC] job developers and the candidate and we talk specifically what challenges [they may have]. As you know, every person with Autism is different; you can't standardize the process. So I try to create an action plan before we even engage in the orientation process. We are going to find out if that person has, is it

> auditory, is it, can they listen, can they engage vocally, are they going to be able to go through the orientation without distraction? Do we need to do a one-on-one? So we try to figure out what that individual's needs are.

During her tenure, Martha has led the accommodation process on her own, prior to the beginning of their new ADA accommodation program. Now they have a 3rd party vendor, so the process is going to change.

When asked about creating a positive work environment, Martha described a process where they set up their employees with an ASD for success once the interviews and accommodation plans have been completed:

> After we have done all that, we will organize, we would set a date for orientation. It's usually about 2-3 weeks later. In that 2-3 weeks, I am going to bring SARRC resources into the work place. I designate a small team that is going to work with the individuals. So for instance right now, we have Sam, who is a graduate of the Beneficial Beans program. He is working as a barista at my coffee shop at the airport. We have one hourly employee on the team, one hourly supervisor, one restaurant manager and then myself, so a four-person team dedicated from the company that is going to work. We are going to do sensitivity training before this individual even attends orientation, so that whatever needs to be addressed specific to his needs.

Community College Employer

Julie was Xavier's employer. She said:

> The only different thing I did, was I found some champions in the office that understood how autism was – I mean one of them had some interaction with

> autistic children and another one had an autistic relative. So, finding them – and they would be also the people that the person we hired would have to go to for assistance, because they were like the experts in that system too.

Julie also indicated that when trying to build and sustain a positive work environment, her goal was to incorporate respect and tolerance, but not just for the employee with an ASD:

> I think basically the biggest accommodation that we ever make in our area is tolerance – and we all tolerate all of us (laughter)! We all have our own little characteristics. We ended up employing Xavier, and Xavier was a CNN junkie . . . his sense of humor was a little different . . . once in a while he'd say something where you would go – oh – you know, you wouldn't understand it because he's a lot smarter than we were, or it was a little off color.

Beverage Distributor Employer

Casey said the accommodations he incorporated revolved mostly around the assistance provided by SARRC in the form of a life (job) coach:

> We were able to work with SARRC and brought in a life coach, Rocky, and we actually brought in three gentlemen that were interested in working in the warehouse. Before they came in, Rocky came in and she had a meeting with myself and then we scheduled meetings with all our managers that would be around and working not specifically with these folks. And then specifically with our night warehouse manager. His supervisors and their needs and really explain some of the mannerisms that these individuals might have and the way they might react to certain things. Really try to help them understand how to talk to them and

> how to treat them and what kind of response you might have. Rocky came in and spent about three weeks. She actually was right alongside working; she worked her tail off. I was a little concerned because of union [rules] . . . [but] they were totally fine with it. Two of the guys within a day or two determined they did not want to do this [which is] absolutely typical; if we hire three people, two of the people will think they will want to work here but realize it's nights or it's too hard or just physically too hard. But Martin was the gentleman that stayed. Once he worked out and he went through the whole process of being hired. And I remember he was a difficult thing for our HR specialist to get information from him that they needed to do the orientation. So I actually sat through the entire thing with him. [He] will be five years in March. He has worked out fantastically.

Regional Doughnut Shop Employer

Brad stated:

"For our store, when we hire somebody, they've gotta be able to run everything – we don't have specific dishwashers . . . everybody does pretty much everything." During the on-boarding process:

> I have great communication with SARRC . . . we touch base a lot through e-mail, and I think before we hire, we sit down and try to interview the person who is coming in to work for us. And so, when we are thinking about hiring them or any accommodations, well, we gotta make sure is, is it going to be a good fit, because not every business is going to be a good fit for a person who has autism. Our business is a little different – it's a fast-paced business, so we've learned that . . .

> when we bring them in, we gotta make sure that they are, you know, how do they communicate with others. Because our business doesn't have a lot of employees – sometimes it's just a few people – so whoever is working with the person with autism has gotta be able to know. So that is how we have to make sure that as we are working with him, that our employees know how to communicate.

Brad described the on-boarding process as "case-by-case", specifically as it related to the amount of time it takes for each employee to feel comfortable working without supervision. "You've gotta create that training per person, and that's where it's talking to SARRC and go "what's their level?". Everybody is different." While he does have a general outline of how long it takes an employee to master the skills necessary to operate without supervision, he is mindful that if the employee needs more time, the time is granted.

Theme 2: Positive effects on workplace morale/camaraderie.

Food and Beverage Industry Employer

Martha attributes some of the positive workplace morale to the attention to detail from one of her employees with autism. "The efficiency is absolutely amazing. So the managers love it, she loves it, the employees love it. It's just a win-win for everybody." She went on to describe how her team has changed:

> You could just see it. I mean, the team back there, they all work so hard just to make sure that she is comfortable. You know they go out of their way to say, "hey Tulia, how you doing [or] do you need anything?" She is the first person that gets invited to come sit at the table at lunch time. You know, people are just very compassionate.

Martha admits that – as with typical job placements – not every job is going to be a good fit for a person with autism. She has had experiences where employees have felt an extra burden by picking up extra weight in the job:

> But when you find the group that clicks, when you find the good spot, the good placement, it definitely improves everything. It makes those folks that would normally become complacent feel like they've got to be on top of their game. They . . . constantly look out for each other. They're setting each other up for success. They're protective; it becomes a family situation – very nucleic. It's really a science to find that placement.

Community College Employer

When asked about creating an environment of inclusiveness, Julie candidly explained that:

> The financial aid team – sometimes we don't like each other. But we are like a family – the only one that gets to pick on us, is us. And so there was sort of an Xavier adoption that happened and we were his champion in all circumstances."

Beverage Distributor Employer

Casey's conversations with his night managers led him to conduct personal observation of his normally stoic warehouse employees who worked with Martin:

> [The warehouse employees] normally didn't go out of their way to help people. Most of the new guys they don't hardly talk to. They might say hi a few times, but that wears off pretty quick. Just kind of how they do. They are tired most of the time because of the hours they work. There might have been someone who knew someone that came in and they would try to go help, but everyone seemed

> to want to go help him (Martin) . . . they actually started treating each other better; they seemed to be helping each other more. Then they were noticing how Martin worked and how he was neat and clean as he worked and that also became more prevalent than it had been before . . . they started talking to him nicer and wanting to help him.

Regional Doughnut Shop Employer

In his answer about how hiring an employee with an ASD has positively affected his business, Brad pushed the positive affect around the business and placed it in the realm of his other employees:

> Well I think it – for me – it more positively affects not necessarily the business, but those that are – the other employees. Because it helps them to see how they can work and be beneficial in helping someone go beyond just, you know, like you said many of whom they graduate high school and then what's the rest of their lives. For the people that work here, they like working with Darla. I think the positiveness is that we can get the other employees to interact and not feel distance from what they need to be outside from a person with autism or another disability.

Theme 3: Connections to increased or improved customer relations/satisfaction.

Food and Beverage Industry Employer

Martha measures customer service through on-line surveys, feedback from managers and direct observation. During our interview, she said that while she didn't have actual data to be able to compare and contrast employees with an ASD and without,

she was confident that they do get repeat customers, especially where they place [ASD] candidates:

> So at the coffee shop that we were talking about for instance, like I was talking about with our Eva – there is a lot of return customers there. Those are going to be airport employees, not necessarily ours but other vendors that work at the airport come to our coffee shop pre-security during their day. And absolutely you can tell that having Eva there is a positive, it's a value-added. You have folks that make those comments about how great it is to see [us] working with these organizations and giving these individuals an opportunity. You've got people that go there just to see Eva work.

Martha went on to talk about another of her employees with an ASD, Jacob, and his job was to bus the tables at the food court:

> [He] was not as high functioning as maybe Eva . . . there were different challenges. He could not communicate verbally . . . he loves the airport, loves the planes, loves the travelers. That was almost a distraction for him.

In fact, Martha did admit that – while they did hire him to bus tables – there were times that busing tables felt secondary to making conversation with travelers:

> We employed him because he loved the airport so much, so instead of doing his job, he would just walk around and talk to people all day. You know, he would say, "where are you flying to", or he would grab their tickets from them and start trying to figure out where they were going. He almost became like a mascot for pre-security, you know? Was he busing tables? No. But people would go and sit

> there and have lunch and say "hi Jacob, how's it going today?" He was always there on time every day, and people really looked forward to having him there.

Beverage Distributor Employer

Casey explained that he measures customer satisfaction through surveys and load accuracy. Martin's direct customers are the truck drivers for whom he loads the next days' delivery, but he also has an impact on down-line customers:

> As far as Martin goes, if the drivers are coming back complaining that their load was done really bad or there is breakage on it, sometimes if they set it down too hard, there's breakage. What they are supposed to do is get it out of there and clean it [up] and bring back another one. And if they don't, there are people who bring back a lot of breakage. There has never been, as far as I have heard, a complaint about Martin. I just got a call from [a large] grocery store who owns . . . stores here. [The call was from] the distribution manager . . . to tell us how great our people do – how accurate [and] how easy they are to work with the communication. We were able to thank the whole crew and let the people know how much we appreciate that. We don't always get calls like that – that's usually when something's not right.

Regional Doughnut Shop Employer

Brad was discussing workplace morale, when he began talking about the impact Darla had on customer relations/satisfaction:

> Yeah, I do think we get people that know her – especially down here where you have a lot of business people . . . who come in who will know her. So she has got

> that connection. She is able to have a great connection to people and they know who she is . . . it's been great.

Theme 4: Hiring an employee with an ASD had positive effects on professional career and/or personal life.

Food and Beverage Industry Employer

Martha indicated that – though working to employ people with an ASD has not necessarily been easy, it has been the favorite part of her job. Through her time spent assisting with their employment, she has experienced personal growth and a desire to do more:

> Remember that these are human beings and that this isn't just a number on a chart. This is not just because my company wants to look like we care about the community – these individuals need to go to work. These individuals need to become independent. I can tell you that the experience of working with SARRC and other organizations really has impacted my life drastically. If I ever left [this position with this company], I would certainly be continuing my involvement with this organization and the others that I work with.

Community College Employer

Similarly, Julie felt a desire to do more:

> I wish that we had had something that could have taken him to another level, but at the time, I was kind of working on trying to put it into place, but quite honestly my staff wasn't at the point where that could happen. And I think that if I could have done that, Xavier would've been superior to my staff within a short period of time.

Upon further reflection, she gained some new perspective and did away with some personal misconceptions about what a person with autism can or can't do. "The next person we hire, I would be able to feel comfortable with having them do higher levels of work with me."

Beverage Distributor Employer

Casey reflected on the fact that his employer was in the process of building another warehouse in another state – a location that is "hiring like crazy". He indicated a desire to initiate a discussion with HR to see what could be done in that location to hire people with an ASD:

> When you see someone that is successful that you had a part to bring them in to do that – and they're successful and happy . . . that makes you feel good. And I had no idea what it was going to do, what this was going to be about. It makes me want to do more. I would like to see if I can start working with teams in other places to reach out to their local [SARRC agency].

Regional Doughnut Shop Employer

For Brad, he has transferred his experience hiring individuals with an ASD into implementing possible new training programs or even an alternative way of making doughnuts:

> We would like to create a facility where we would have a place where we could do some of our prep work. Our desire is to have a place where we could hire more people from SARRC. We understand it gives them more or they have a certain job that is consistent – all I need to do is stir this and then put it away and then stir this. We have a vision for that. We are not at that point yet, but we are

> trying to figure out how we can hire more of the students from [SARRC] or young adults or older adults.

More personally, Brad said that working with Darla has given him more of a compassionate heart, and he has discovered an increased desire to do more to help others:

> I think it has helped me to gain a better understanding and more compassion to understanding – what we can do to help. What we can do – even if I am not with this company – my wife and I are trying to figure out how we can work with SARRC on a more personal level. I feel like it has given me more of a compassion and more of a desire to – when I hear people talking about it – it has given me more knowledge. More of what can I do.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

This positive deviance study explored the work environment of several different employers who have partnered with a residential educational institution for people who have been diagnosed with an ASD, and the practices those employers have implemented that have improved opportunities for ASD employees. A multiple case study design was used as the approach to capture an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon under study (McDuffie & Scruggs, 2008). Accordingly, four employer participants shared their experiences as they related to hiring, arranging for accommodations, monitoring workplace morale, and employer desire to do more. This chapter provides a brief overview of the study and a discussion of the findings. In addition, implications for policy and practice, recommendations for future research are presented.

Overview of the Study

Since 2012, an average of 50,000 adolescents with an ASD have turned 18 each year, and it is estimated that this population will continue to grow at the same rate through 2023, bringing another half-million people on the spectrum into adulthood this decade (Goehner, 2011). Postsecondary educational participation for ASD youth are lower than for others, with less than 40% of ASD youth ever attending college or receiveing a degree (Cederlund, et al., Hagberg, Bellstedt, Gillberg, & Gillberg, 2008; Eaves & Ho, 2008; Howlin, Alcock, & Burkin, 2005; Kobayashi, Murata, & Yoshinaga, 1992; Szatmari, Bartolucci, Bremner, Bond & Rich, 1989; Howlin, Mawhood, & Rutter, 2000). In addition, fifty percent of people with an ASD do not participate in any kind of paid employment (Hendricks, 2010).

These statistics present a sobering view of life after high school for people with an ASD, but there are organizations that are making inroads to providing necessary, tailored services for the growing population of people with an ASD. In order to gain insight, four employers who partner with SARRC and currently employ or who have recently employed people with an ASD participated in qualitative interviews. Participants included employers ranging in size from a small, regional doughnut shop to a large beverage distributor. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain more in-depth thoughts related to the experience of each employer, and each participant provided a viewpoint for understanding the unique work environment and accommodations incorporated in each.

Discussion of Findings

Currently, very little literature exists that specifically explores the impact of partnerships of employers and residential educational institutions for people with an ASD. Ausenbaugh (2016) and Vogel (2009) suggest that successful recruiting and training programs are associated with solid relationships with advocacy organizations, and the findings of this study seem to bear that out, considering SARRC would certainly fit the definition of an advocacy organization. Martinez & Twaronite (2016) and Vogel (2015) identified employee resource groups, or ERGs, as an area of best practice, and during an interview with one employer, an ERG was identified, although the group was not associated with autism specifically. The literature also presented other tips like working closely with career services to help recruit students on the spectrum, meeting students on the autism spectrum in “low-risk” settings, and providing a continued spectrum of support like assigning a mentor to new employees to help them understand

corporate culture (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2016). It was revealed during an interview with one employer that the practice of assigning a mentor was utilized with positive affect.

Through the participants' experiences, four major themes emerged from the interviews and thus provided insight to the beliefs and perceptions of the participants. The emerged themes were: 1) Accommodations; 2) Positive employee influence; 3) positive customer impact; and 4) Employer desire to do more.

Accommodations

Under the ADA, employers are required to provide reasonable accommodations to qualified employees with disabilities, unless doing so would pose an undue hardship (ADA Handbook). Examples include substituting a larger monitor to aid in office work (Vogel, 2009), adding headphones to block out noise, or during the hiring process, allowing samples of work or other demonstrations that may be a more realistic portrayal of the job seeker's abilities rather than a verbal report of strengths (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2016).

All employers who were interviewed offered at least one source of accommodation at their places of employment, although the degree to which accommodations were necessary varied depending on the employee and the particular performance necessary to complete assigned tasks. Not surprisingly, this finding balanced well with the current literature as it relates to recruiting, retention, and inclusion best practices of many organizations (U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 2013). Additionally, of the four employers interviewed, none had added additional business costs associated with the accommodations implemented. According to a study done in 2015 by several

government agencies to include the Department of Labor, Education and Health and Human Services, the majority of workplace accommodations for people with disabilities have no associated costs to businesses. Further, their research showed that of the accommodations that had cost associated with them, 37% had a one-time cost of $500 or less with only 4% of accommodations resulting in ongoing annual expenses (Iyer and Masling, 2015). All employers spoke to some degree of the importance of communication with the partnering agency (SARRC) and the value of their expertise related to assisting with creating some version of an action plan prior to the employee's first day on the job. Part of this process meant arranging time for fellow employees to take part in seminars that would allow the partnering agency to present information on autism, dispel myths, and talk specifically about the unique challenges of the individual. In a compilation of best practices of many major corporations based in the United States, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce found that a majority of these corporations included some type of sensitivity training as part of their on-boarding process (2013).

Once the training had taken place, all employers utilized a job coach from the partnering agency – again to varying degrees. The purpose of the job coach was to shadow the employee during the orientation process and remain until the employee had gained the degree of confidence necessary to do the job on their own, in addition to facilitating communication with fellow employees. The length of time could be just a few days to a number of weeks, with one employer describing the job coach as being on the job for three weeks and "working her tail off". Job coaching and mentoring – as well as providing employer resource groups – are accommodations mentioned widely throughout disability employer publications (U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 2013; Iyer and

Masling, 2015; Vogel, 2009; Linkow, 2016). Employers from the current literature report that mentors can provide critical support for employees with disabilities both at work and throughout life (Linkow, 2016). Additionally, businesses can use these tools to help increase recruitment and retention, improve organizational culture, and provide guidance to employees and managers about disability issues.

It is worth noting, three of the four employers in this study made reference to personally assisting an employee with some part of the on-boarding process or an attempt at adding a degree of consistency that served as an unofficial beginning and ending to the employee's day. This was an additional workload for the employer, but each noted that the additional steps were not significant, especially since it aided in the productivity of the employee.

Positive Employee Influence

Each employer reported varying degrees of positive employee influence – in the form of either perceived increased compassion, increased communication, or increased individual job performance. In one example, an employer explained that his employees were never known to go out of their way to either say hello to new employees, much less help them in any way. The culture was more one of "to each his own". However, upon encouragement from his night manager, the employer witnessed for himself that "everyone seemed to want to help him (the employee with autism) . . . then they started treating each other better, helping each other more." Similar experiences can be found in the current literature (International Labour Organization, 2010; Blahovec, 2016; Siperstein, Romano, Mohler, & Parker, 2006; Hartnett, Stuart, Thurman, Loy, & Batiste, 2010). Using his own experience as a parent of a child with a disability, Peter Economy

(2014) has seen increased camaraderie with employers who hire people with a disability – in addition to an increased openness to teamwork. Similarly, International Labour Organization (2010) reported increased morale and improved teamwork when employees with disabilities become part of the staff. Locally, Mike Chittenden, Executive Director of Arc of Nebraska has seen similar results in education, adding that when students with disabilities – autism or any other – are included, and the classroom is inclusive, you see higher morale within the [classroom] as well as the student with a disability (personal communication, March 3, 2017).

Another employer mentioned that her employees made "sure she was comfortable" and always "invited her to lunch", although the employer did not specifically state that these things had not taken place prior to the hire of an employee with autism. Similarly, in a study done by Hagner and Cooper (2005), supervisors of 14 successfully employed individuals with autism were interviewed with the purpose of examining their supervisory practices and their perceptions of employees with autism. They found a similar culture of inclusion and positive employee influence, with many fellow employees going out of their way to ensure that the employee with autism was included in activities and genuinely caring about their well-being.

There were two employers in this study who witnessed a positive effect on job performance, with one stating that when other employees observed the job performance of the employee with autism, it made "those folks that would normally become complacent feel like they've got to be on top of their game". The other stated that the other employees "were noticing how Martin worked and how he was neat and clean as he worked and that also became more prevalent [with the other employees] than it had been

before". These findings did not surprise Mike Chittenden. His experience has shown that, generally speaking, people with a disability have not had the opportunity to have a competitive, inclusive job. When the opportunity does come, they generally become the best employees with low rates of absenteeism and high retention (personal communication, March 3, 2017).

Positive Customer Impact

Three of the four employers made varied references to a positive customer impact, although the effect of the impact did not appear to be as significant as the effect found with the other themes. One employer implied that customers felt a level of appreciation toward the business itself for employing a person with a disability, but she also said that "you've got people that go there just to see Eva work" with the implication that, when they do go, they will make a purchase. She had another employee with autism who "was always there on time every day, and people really looked forward to having him there."

Another employer described positive customer impact in the form of exceptional job performance and how that led to an overall positive impact on one of their biggest retailers. In this case, the customer was the truck driver who was scheduled to drive the beverage product to a particular retailer, or secondary customer. The truck driver was responsible for the product being delivered, and if it was not loaded in a very particular fashion, the likely result would be some form of product damage. In the five years Martin (employee with autism) has been employed, he has not had one documented faulty load, which has resulted in happy truck drivers and happy retailers.

With the third employer situated in a downtown hub of a large metropolitan city, he referenced the quick pace as a place where "you have a lot of business people . . . who come in who will know her" and that "she has got that connection" and "they know who she is". Although the positive customer impact may not be explicit, I believe it is still worth noting in this context.

The current literature suggests a larger effect. In a national survey of consumer attitudes towards companies that hire people with disabilities, Siperstein, Romano, Mohler and Parker (2006) interviewed 803 adult consumers and found that over 90% were more favorable or much more favorable toward companies that hire people with disabilities – and found no variance regionally. Additionally, they found that almost all of the public agreed that they would prefer to give their business to companies that hire people with disabilities – consistent across gender, age, and level of education. An Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity study revealed similar results, finding that 93% of customers said that they preferred to purchase from a company that employed individuals with disabilities (Economy, 2014).

In an interview with Lori Golden, Abilities Strategy Leader with Ernst & Young, LLP, emphasis on a diverse workforce has produced better solutions to challenges, better workplace morale, higher retention rates and an expanded customer base because customers prefer to do business with companies that employ people with disabilities (Blahovec, 2016). In his experience at Arc of Nebraska, Mike Chittenden has found similar results of expanded customer bases for businesses that employ people with disabilities:

> When you open your door to an employee with a disability, you are signaling to a community that word of mouth will open up the door to new customers, because families talk and individuals with disabilities talk to each other. When someone is disability-friendly, it spreads throughout the self-advocacy network. People flock to those places (personal communication, March 3, 2017).

He went on to explain that any business that hires people with a disability is signaling to the community that he/she is investing in someone, and that investment is a very positive step toward overall inclusion that is rewarded with an increase in respect from the surrounding community - and likely a subsequent increase in patronage.

Employer Desire To Do More

Each of the four employers who were interviewed indicated a moderate to strong desire to increase their efforts to assist individuals in attaining employment, or in some other way help to improve the lives of their employees with autism, or work to increase awareness in some other capacity on a broader scope. One employer used the word "drastically" to describe how this experience had positively changed her life. She admitted that while the process of hiring and retaining employees with autism has increased her workload, it was still "the favorite part of (her) job. It has been since the day (she) started working with (her business)." She also indicated that her work in this area would continue in the event she ever left her current employer, mentioning that she is a board member of two other organizations with similar missions to SARRC.

A second employer indicated the intent to initiate discussions with a sister warehouse in another state to begin looking at ways they can partner with similar organizations like SARRC, and his vision extended beyond one location using the words

"teams" and "locations". He described a sense of personal fulfillment in his effort to assist an individual achieve independence, adding, "It makes me want to do more." That same desire was indicated by a third employer whose perspective of autism had changed during the course of her employee's tenure. Her misconceptions of autism potentially limited her understanding of the capabilities of an individual with autism, and she indicated a desire to make another hire – unencumbered with the same set of self-imposed limitations on the abilities of an employee with autism.

Finally, the experience of hiring an employee with autism has led the fourth employer to initiate discussions with company owners for a potential company-wide training program, so they can hire more people from SARRC. He also indicated that his experience has led him and his wife to expand their own personal sphere of influence to "try and figure out what else they can do."

Current literature on the effect that hiring people with disabilities has on an employer's desire to do more doesn't draw a direct correlation to a definitive, research-based perspective on increased motivation for altruistic action. That being said, Mike Chittenden provides a personal perspective that lends a voice to understanding why employers may tie their business perspective to enhanced action to positively affect the lives of people with disabilities:

> When you have somebody with a disability that's part of your life – where you see them on a fairly regular basis – they're included, and it's not a charity – it drives you to start thinking – it's just natural. People with disabilities have always been thought of as "charity", so when you see them in an elevated state, you start thinking – "wow, how did they succeed beyond, and how can I make

> something like that happen in another way?" People want to get involved, because they see the success in that one person, and they realize there's something to be done there. We all have that sense of wanting to contribute. Not everybody can write a check, but we all have the commodity of time, and so we make a commitment. We see success, and we want to be part of it (personal communication, March 3, 2017).

There was a tie that bound each of the four employees in this research – each of them had some degree of personal experience with autism. Two employers had sons with autism, one employer had a grandson with autism, and the fourth had ties through autism and other disabilities through his spouse, who worked with students who were diagnosed with a disability. The Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy found that personal experience with people with disabilities plays a large part in managers' employment motivation (Linkow, 2016). This bodes well, as one in five people in the United States has some form of disability (Mike Chittenden, personal communication, March 3, 2017).

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study have numerous implications related to policy and practice for employers as they continue to develop hiring strategies to increase employee diversity. The implications for policy and practice derived from this study are organized around the four major themes of accommodations, positive employee influence, positive customer impact and employer desire to do more.

Accommodations

While the ADA stipulates the requirement of employers to make reasonable accommodations for people with a disability, this research allows potential employers to gain an understanding of how to help employees thrive while incorporating accommodations without undue burden. Additionally, while the workload associated with arranging for accommodations may add a perceived burden to the employer, this research has shown that any perceived burden is potentially offset. There is a positive association between accommodating the employment of a person with a disability (autism) and elements of employment that can potentially add to the value of both the employer and employees (positive employee influence/workplace morale, positive customer influence and employer personal growth).

The employers in this study all relied on the expertise of SARRC employees to assist with appropriate accommodations to aid in successfully employing people with autism. The discussions with the employers in this study suggest that this partnership eased concerns as they related to any limitations of expertise in this area of employment law and allowed for accommodations to be perceived as more naturally occurring than that of a burden of requirement. It is recommended that employers initiate and nurture relationships with state vocational rehabilitation and other department of health and human resources agencies as well as advocacy groups, so that they are not only educated on how to approach accommodations with an increasingly diverse employee demographic, but that these accommodations can be approached in a way that focuses on the person, not the disability.

Positive Employee Influence

The implications of this research might suggest that, when presented with an opportunity to help someone, fellow employees tend toward altruism and rise to the challenge to assist an employee with a disability. However, since the study did not take into account any challenges employers may have faced during the on-boarding or employment process, any association is speculative. It is recommended that any future study incorporate this balance to aid in employers' ability to anticipate potential pitfalls that may be associated with employee bias, misperceptions, communication challenges, or ignorance. Still, this study does suggest that with at least one employer, there was a significant impact on a group of people (communication/desire to help) where previous to the employment of the person with autism, had not existed.

Positive Customer Impact

While all of the employers had statements of positive customer impact associated with the employment of a person with autism, a future study is recommended utilizing quantitative methods to discover if any statistical significance exists. Without interviewing the customers themselves, the outcomes of this study relied on second-hand accounts and varied definitions of "impact" as they were perceived by the interviewee.

Employer Desire To Do More

With 50,000 young people with autism graduating high school every year in the United States alone, the need for employment continues to compound as the actual employment rate of this demographic continues to remain below 50% (Hendricks, 2010). This study reveals stories of people with autism, working and thriving in successful employment scenarios, which in turn has allowed each of the interviewees to broaden

their views of how they might be able to increase employment with this particular demographic. One of the interviewees indicated that he "did not know what he was getting himself into" when he embarked on this journey, possibly revealing an underlying caution that may have prevented him from making the hire in the first place, had he not had the courage to do so.

These conflicting feelings of employers may present an opportunity for continued awareness training by state agencies and advocacy groups to allay concerns employers may have as they relate to employment law, accommodations or personal misperceptions of a particular disability. Additionally, training may contribute to employers' ability to properly place employees in positions that are commensurate with ability, rather than allowing interpretation of a disability to limit placement. I believe that it is also worth mentioning that, as both this study and the literature have shown, a desire to do more is certainly admirable (and during the interviews, palpable), but if the desire does not somehow transform or progress into an action step – however miniscule or grandiose – it is simply a silent goodness, never shared. Businesses that have never employed people with a disability have an opportunity to learn from those who have. In doing so, this research suggests that the benefits far outweigh any costs.

Conclusion

Autism affects 1 out of 68 people in the United States (Courtney-Long et al., 2015), and of those who are of employable age, 50% have never been gainfully employed (Hendricks, 2010). As a result, unemployed people with an autism spectrum disorder become life-long dependents until parents or other family support can no longer care for them. This dependency creates a significant financial burden for the parent/family

providing the support, as costs associated with lifetime support are 6-8 times higher than those of a typical dependent (Buescher et al., 2014). This study gives a narrative on some of the successful strategies employers have incorporated into their businesses that have allowed people with autism to succeed in the workplace. The accommodations employers have deployed have been made easier by the support offered by an advocacy agency, and employers reported an increased desire to do more to employ people with autism. Lastly, this study affords the possibility that, when presented with the opportunity to help a fellow employee with a disability, people will rise to the occasion to discover the better angels of their nature.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Internal Review Approval

UNIVERSITY OF Nebraska Medical Center

December 23, 2016

Stuart Stofferahn, Ed.D. Education
UNO - VIA COURIER

IRB # 798-16-EX

TITLE OF PROPOSAL: Preparing for Independence: Best business practices for onboarding and retaining employees who have an autism spectrum disorder or other learning difference

The Office of Regulatory Affairs (ORA) has reviewed your application for *Exempt Educational, Behavioral, and Social Science Research* on the above-titled research project. According to the information provided, this project is exempt under 45 CFR 46:101b, category 2. You are therefore authorized to begin the research.

It is understood this project will be conducted in full accordance with all applicable HRPP Policies. It is also understood that the ORA will be immediately notified of any proposed changes for your research project.

Please be advised that this research has a maximum **approval period of 5 years** from the original date of approval and release.

If the research is completed prior to 5 years, please notify the Office of Regulatory Affairs at irbora@unmc.edu. If this study continues beyond the five year approval period, the project must be resubmitted in order to maintain an active approval status.

Sincerely,

Signed on: 2016-12-23 11:12:00.000

Gail Kotulak, BS, CIP
IRB Administrator III
Office of Regulatory Affairs

Academic and Research Services Building 3000 / 987830 Nebraska Medical Center / Omaha, NE 68198-7830
402-559-6463 / FAX: 402-559-3300 / Email: irbora@unmc.edu / http://www.unmc.edu/irb

Appending B

Informed Consent Form

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Informed Consent:
Preparing for Independence: Best business practices for onboarding and retaining employees who have an autism spectrum disorder or other learning difference

This study is being performed for the sole purpose of obtaining research data.

This study takes into account the looming crisis of supporting a large population of people with an ASD who face a difficult challenge of finding and maintaining long-term employment as a means of living an independent life. This study will focus on employers who partner with a comprehensive, in-resident skills-training organization and the practices they utilize to create a positive work outcome. The primary objective of this research is to discover what practices employers who partner with an in-resident life-skills organization incorporate into their on-boarding process to ensure a positive work environment.

The duration of this study will last between 1-2 hours for each interview, and data will be compiled for analysis over the course of 2-3 months. The interviews will occur in-person or over the phone if the interviewee is more comfortable.

There are no perceived risks to the interviewee.

It is anticipated that the results from this study will add information to the ongoing discussion of how to adequately prepare young adults with an autism spectrum disorder as they transition into the job market. In doing so, the cost to society significantly decreases through less reliance on welfare programs as people with an ASD become more independent.

At any time during the course of this study, the interviewee has the right to withraw.

The principal investigator during the course of this interview is Stuart P. Stofferahn. His e-mail address is 402-560-4627, and e-mail address is stustof@gmail.com. You may feel free to contact him at any time.

Appendix C

Introduction and Interview Outline

APPENDIX C: INTRODUCTION AND INTERVIEW OUTLINE

Dear (Interviewee) –

My name is Stuart Stofferahn, and I am a Doctor of Education candidate with the University of Nebraska at Omaha in Omaha, Nebraska. I have recently begun work on my dissertation, and I am interested in interviewing employers who partner with Southwest Autism Research and Resource Center to provide opportunities for their students.

The primary research question this study seeks to answer is what practices do employers who partner with an in-resident life-skills organization incorporate into their on-boarding process to ensure a positive work environment?

Specifically, I am interested in articulating the positive deviance of such practices; I want to know what works.

I was given your name from Dr. Paige Raetz, Residential Transition Academy Director at Southwest Autism Research and Resource center in Phoenix, Arizona.

The interview itself consists of seven questions, and I anticipate that the time commitment will be approximately 60-90 minutes. The preference will be to conduct the interview in person, but if it is more convenient for you, the interview can be done over the phone. At any time, you may contact me with any questions or concerns regarding the research.

Thank you very much for participating in this research. I will be following up to arrange for a specific appointment time after January 3, 2017.

Sincerely,

Stuart P. Stofferahn
Doctor of Education Candidate
University of Nebraska at Omaha
E-mail: stustof@gmail.com
Phone: 402-560-4627

Appendix D

Interview Protocol

Appendix D: Interview Protocol

BECOMING INDEPENDENT: EMPLOYER PRACTICES THAT ENHANCE SUCCESS FOR EMPLOYEES WITH AN AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

QUESTIONS

1. What is your process for on-boarding employees, and what (if any) accommodations do you incorporate for people with an Autism Spectrum Disorder?

2. What programs, policies, protocols, tools do you have in place to build and sustain a positive work environment? Do any of these programs, policies, protocols or tools require accommodations for people with an ASD? If so, what are they?

3. How do you measure customer (consumer) satisfaction? Has any gathered data given any indication to positive trends related to hiring employees with an ASD, and have any of these trends led to any implementation of "best practices"? If so, what has been implemented?

4. How do you monitor workplace morale, and has that data or experience shown any positive correlation to hiring people with an ASD?

5. Other than the above areas, how has hiring employees with an ASD positively affected your business?

6. How do you work with your team to create inclusiveness?

7. Has hiring an individual with an ASD positively affected your life? If so, how?

Appendix E

Field Notes Form

APPENDIX E: FIELD NOTES FORM

Participant _____

Interview Date:_____ Location _____

Start Time: _____ End Time: _____

Notes :

Appendix F

Themes

APPENDIX F: THEMES

Numbers represent numbered lines from the transcripts

Theme Name		Martha	Julie	Casey	Brad
Accommodations		22-25, 49-65, 107-120, 131-134, 161-186	23-29	31-38, 45-48, 134-138,	8-17, 24-43, 66-76,
Positive Employee Influence/Workplace Morale/Camaraderie		233-240, 278-284, 304-311, 313-316	137-140	51-56, 62-65, 303-312, 320-323, 325-326	182-185, 214-219
Positive Customer Impact		213-216, 227-237, 257-268		252-258, 267-276,	207-212
Employer personal growth/Desire to do more		343-347, 350-354, 356-358, 370-374	101-106, 148-150	94-98, 110-111, 344-346, 350-358	237-250, 292-294, 304-308, 312-315