



# JOBS

## AUTISM HITS THE JOB MARKET

*A Protocol for Optimal Employment*

BY DAVID S. GESLAK

A few years ago, my Exercise Connection student Anthony asked me to be his job coach. I had been his exercise coach for three years, we had built a strong relationship, and he was comfortable with my help in navigating uncharted territory. Having worked as a para-educator and Fitness Coordinator at a school for children on the autism spectrum, I was also interested in how companies were dealing with autism.

Anthony was a 16-year-old applying for his first job at a grocery store. The bagger position is a common first job for individuals with autism and other disabilities. And for many of these individuals it can be a lifetime position.

During the interview, he didn't need much support. I think he just felt more confident in having me there. The Human Resource (HR) representative asked a typical question, "What are your strengths and weaknesses?" Anthony

uncommonly and confidently responded, "I have autism and I need things broken into steps to help me learn."

I was proud of his response and from the body language of the HR rep, she seemed surprised by his candor. Many individuals and their families are not comfortable disclosing the autism diagnosis, believing that this may prevent them from getting a job. To assure success in the workplace, business owners, managers, even co-workers need to know in my opinion. Educating the business community to have a better understanding of autism will showcase the abilities, loyalty, and dedication this community can bring to the workforce.

Anthony got the job, and when he shook the HR rep's hand and said, "Yes, I accept," I can't tell you whose smile was bigger: Anthony's, mine or the HR rep's. It was a day I will never forget.

## GETTING WITH THE PROGRAM

The next part of the job process was the training program. Going through the training was Anthony, two individuals with Down Syndrome, another with autism, and a handful of inattentive teenagers crowded around the bagging station.

The grocery store manager began by saying, “You are the last part of the customer experience and your job is very important.”

Then a representative from the bag company described the bag and showed how much weight it could handle. Kudos for the visual support; we were off to a good start.

After the brief pep-talk, it was time to practice bagging. For this critical customer service experience, the grocery store had dedicated 15 minutes to train eight new employees.

“When you bag the hot soup, it should be tied like this,” said the grocery store rep as he bagged a can of Coke—not hot soup. Next, he showed them how to bag the meat and poultry. Coming down the conveyer belt was a plastic piece of chicken, something out of a five-year-old’s toy set of play food. Individuals with autism are very visual learners and these inaccurate examples present a huge disconnect in their mind.

After the demonstration, the store manager said, “Who wants to try?” No hands went up, even though practicing for any new job is critical. It should have never been an option. And in this case, since they were using the wrong samples, they still would have had problems when bagging the real products. The grocery store had unintentionally set their new hires up for failure in a job that they said was so critical.

For the next six months, I continued to help Anthony on his road to independence, but found myself spending more time educating his managers and co-workers. When I offered them feedback and explained how they could change the way they phrased questions to Anthony, it made sense to them. Their ongoing communication got much better—less blank stares from Anthony, less frustration for management.

I shared Anthony’s story with my business mentor, Jay Goltz, who was writing the “Small Business Blog” for *The New York Times*. He felt that Anthony’s story needed to be shared with the business community because he saw a tremendous opportunity for both to work together. Jay understands that bringing someone with autism into

the workplace without proper preparation is a recipe for needless disaster. Jay was confident this story would resonate with both business owners and parents.

Jay was right. Doug Williams, CEO of Hart Schaffner Marx (HSM), is a business owner and the parent of a 17-year-old son with autism. He called and asked me, “Can you help me get my company ready to hire individuals with autism?”

## SUITED FOR CHANGE

Doug knows first-hand the challenges parents face with the lack of opportunities in employment for individuals on the spectrum. He also understands the strengths that those with autism can bring to the workplace. He was determined to provide job opportunities at his 130-year-old men’s suit company, but recognized that he would need help.

Doug and I envisioned creating a model that could be replicated in other companies. As you probably know, adult agencies across the United States are dependent on state funds, and are overwhelmed with adults who desperately need jobs. In the situations I’ve observed, agencies do the best they can with their limited resources, but their approach is outdated. Typically, agencies contact businesses one by one, advocating for their client and explaining his or her strengths. This effort is costly, time consuming, and requires job coaches who are difficult to hire and hard to retain.

This approach only focuses on the individual, but does not assist the businesses in making necessary adjustments.

It is also important to remember that a job is different than being in school. From age three through 22, people with autism are motivated in schools by stickers, food (unfortunately) or something personal to complete new tasks. Then at 22 years old, they are suddenly thrown into an “internship” by a well-meaning school or organization. The kids have a hard time making this transition without their motivators. In the business world, motivators are called paychecks. The fact is, we need to make a transition. These kids can do productive work and Doug and I feel they should be paid.

The Autism Workforce (AW) Team was ready, willing and able to change this paradigm. AW consists of Ashley Palomino (Director), Amy Willer (Employment Specialist), and me. We have all spent over 15 years teaching in special education. We took what we learned from the

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▶ **A STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION**—Signs were added throughout HSM to help individuals independently navigate the football-field sized factory and offices.

classroom setting and retrofitted HSM to do the same. This new approach aligns the needs of both autism and business.

### THE RIGHT START

After reviewing the roles and responsibilities of the various departments in HSM, AW was given the task of helping to hire for 10 positions. Unlike the traditional agency approach, we started where all job candidates begin: the Human Resource (HR) department.

Many families complete the job application and all related documents for their children. There are three reasons for this:

1. The individual had not been properly educated on how to do this.
2. The documents are often difficult to read (font is too small) and difficult to fill out (not enough space for traditionally poor handwriting).
3. They don't realize that taking this out of the kids' hands just continues the process of dependency.



Even after making modifications to HSM's HR documents, we still have parents filling out job applications. This goes back to the anxiety of both the parents and individuals wanting to present themselves in the best possible way. It makes sense, we all do this, but as parents and professionals we need to design the system to build confidence and independence.

We created a job application with visuals (not board maker visuals), expanded areas in which to write, adjusted font size and used color coding systems, all while staying consistent with government regulations. This application was universally designed and is now used to hire all new HSM employees. We also adjusted their employee handbook and tax forms and created an HR Training Manual for both the individual and HSM managers to follow.

Once this was complete, we trained their HR department on how to better understand and interact during an interview. Since that training, we have now built a Mock Interview Program, offered monthly by their HR department to local schools, transition programs, and adult agencies. Individuals throughout Chicagoland now have a real opportunity to practice their skills and receive feedback. This is good for everyone involved.

Education and training was expanded beyond the HR department. We have trained over 130 employees in various departments where the individuals are working in or interacting with on a regular basis. We start with a 60-minute training session and once the person is hired, we update managers and co-workers to help them understand their new hire.

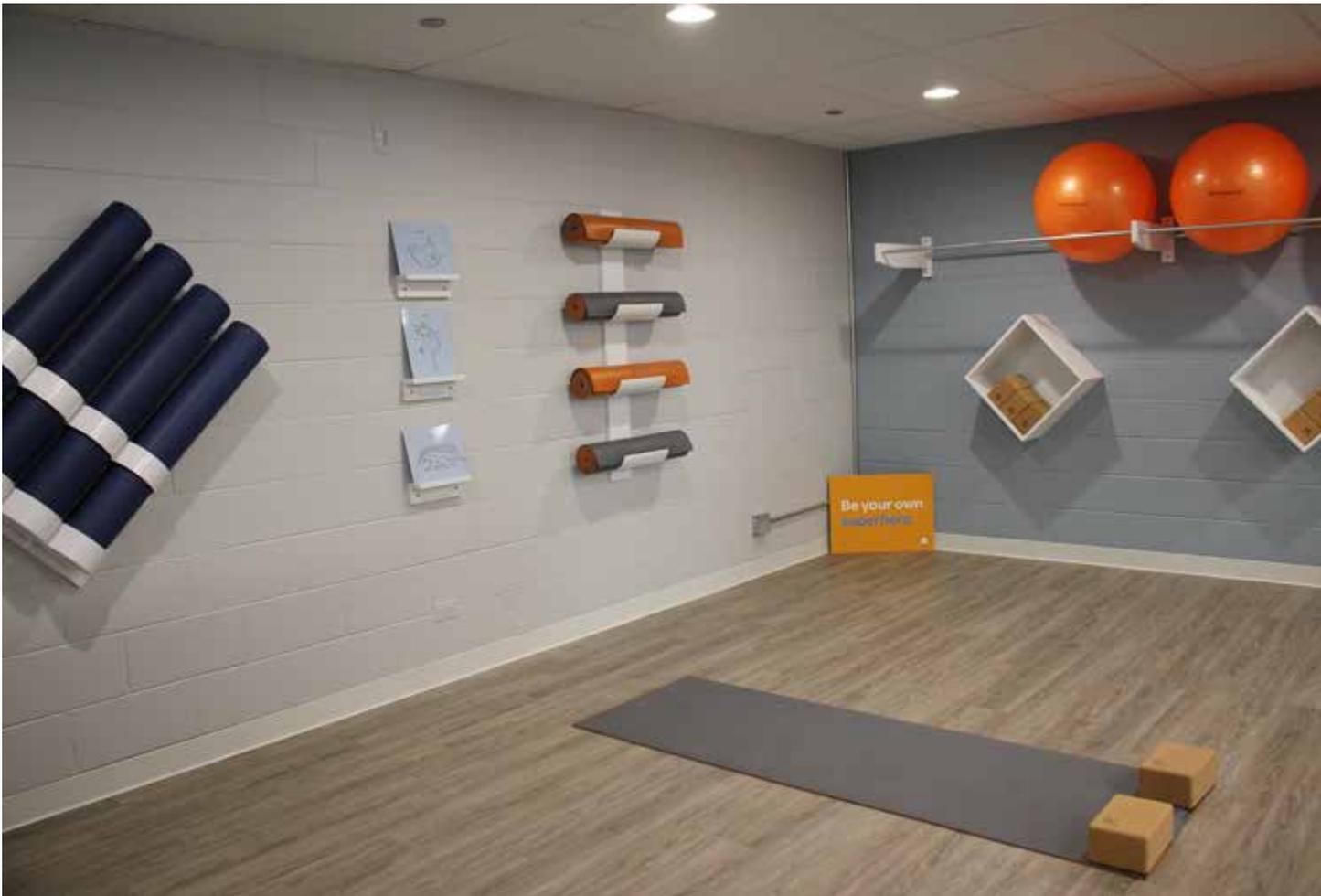
### AN AUTISM READY ENVIRONMENT

As former educators, we understand the important role the environment plays in engaging or distracting students from their daily responsibilities. The office areas were all painted white, typical of most corporate offices, giving it a stale-dull feeling.

▶ **A NATURAL TOUCH**—a  were repainted and live plants added to bring a more calming effect to the office area. This has benefited all employees.



▼ **GETTING FIT**—The stretching area within the Exercise Facility utilizes the therapeutic effects of color to create a sensory and autism ready environment. Lights are also on dimmers and this space is now being used by all employees.



Utilizing the known therapeutic effects color has, we repainted all offices with blue and beige tones giving a more calming effect. This is benefiting all employees.

Live plants were also added to the workspaces. And throughout their factory, which is the equivalent size of a football field, we added signage so the individuals could independently navigate throughout the facility. This was especially helpful because the HSM factory contains many sensory challenges including conveyer belts, forklifts, and loud sewing machines.

### THE EXERCISE CONNECTION

Doug understood that addressing the sensory needs of individuals with autism is critical to managing their symptoms and behaviors. Exercise provides input for the sensory needs that people on the spectrum have received their whole lives through OT, PT and sensory diets. And he

► **WORKING THINGS OUT**—A sensory-friendly wall (astro-turf) was added and the exercise equipment throughout focuses on the Exercise Connection's Five Components of Fitness for Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders.





▲ **AN EMPLOYMENT PIONEER**—Jordan, the first individual hired, works as a Swatch Specialist. He fills swatch orders requested by the HSM sales team and sends them directly to their customers. Since being hired Jordan has had additional responsibilities added to his job.

▼ **WORKING HIS WAY UP**—Andy has helped to improve productivity within HSM's Shipping Department by preparing boxes for five packagers. Andy has progressed, because of the Autism Workforce Model, and within three months of being hired, he is now moving to a packager for the HSM's Made-to-Measure line.



knew that when children mature they need a way to calm their bodies and minds in constructive and beneficial ways.

We built a custom 1,000 sq. ft. exercise facility and carried the blue calming colors and live plants into that as well. All individuals hired workout with an Exercise Connection staff

member 30 minutes prior to their work shift. And they are paid.

Not only are we using exercise to promote a healthy lifestyle, research has proven that exercise can increase focus, promote on-task behavior, and calm the stereotypical behaviors associated with autism. Adding exercise in the workplace is one more tool that helps the transition from childhood to healthy and productive adulthood.

### OUR NEW WORKFORCE

HSM has now successfully hired four individuals: Jordan, Marice, Max and Andy. Jordan and Marice are coming up on one year of employment and both are now independent at their jobs working in two different departments.

Max works as an independent contractor and videographer creating videos that are used to help other employees with autism successfully do their jobs. Andy is a Stock Associate working within a team of eight in the shipping department.

Using the same protocol, we are currently working with the IT and Accounting Departments to find new jobs.

### GOOD ENGINEERING PAYS GREAT DIVIDENDS

After 18 months, Anthony left the grocery store because the inconsistency of his schedule was causing him severe anxiety. Interestingly enough, he was the last person remaining from the original training group. While this is clearly a success for Anthony, the company could have done better.

The bagger position typically has high turnover, and with minor accommodations (a soft mat to stand on, a routine scheduling system, and better training), grocery stores have the opportunity for longer-term employees and happier customers. This is a great return on investment.

How a company starts sets the course for a successful outcome: 90% execution will result in failure as it doesn't take much to throw these kids off. I want to be clear: the business model that we have created will not help every individual get a job, but it will definitely help more. We are documenting and collecting data to show this can be a smart and cost effective investment for businesses. Thanks to Doug and his team, HSM is becoming a shining example of how—if done properly—this can be a great benefit to all parties involved. ◀

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## THE REAL THING

*Actual employment with just enough supports—and exercise!*

By Pauline Shoback

It probably does take a village—or at least the owners, managers and many employees of the factory, as well as Exercise Connection, experts on autism and exercise—to give a positive and real world job experience to someone with autism. Our daughter Marice has autism and now is involved with this amazing opportunity to do data entry work at the Hart Schaffner & Marx clothing factory in Des Plaines, IL. She works as an expeditor of special orders and is successful because of the commitment of Hart Schaffner & Marx to employ individuals with autism as well as the wonderful support provided by Exercise Connection and job coaching by Have Dreams.

Finding a real job after graduating from high school was very challenging for Marice. We knew she had some strong skills and loved to work but we understood the limitations caused by her autism. To be successful, she would need certain accommodations and step-by-step training with good visual supports for any potential job. Searching for a position in an environment conducive to letting her contribute her skills and succeed as a real employee was difficult. Some positions combined unrelated skills, like data entry with answering the phone. Although she would love the computer portion, answering the phone would not be an easy task for her. Convincing an employer to cut up job responsibilities and make accommodations also was not easy. In one part-time data entry position where we paid for a job coach, the position did not work out because the immediate boss did not follow the requested accommodation of using checklists and written communication for tasks. Marice was frustrated because she felt responsible for her failed job attempt.

When we learned about the Hart Schaffner & Marx opportunity, we quickly realized that it would be different because of Exercise Connection's role. Even before Marice knew about the position, Exercise Connection, understanding the strengths and challenges of an individual with autism, had made the crucial physical accommodations to the factory to make the workplace more accessible and comprehensible for someone with autism. Also, they had identified the skills needed for Marice's specific position and had put together very detailed visuals for all the steps necessary to perform her job well, such as when to come into the building, when to



clock in, when to go to exercise, how to perform the specific tasks of her position and many, many others. The training was at her pace and the strategy of laying out the details of her work and her day, coaching her during her training for the position, and fading back to see how she performed on her own, is a recipe for *real* job success.

The additional bonus of her job is daily exercise! Hart Schaffner & Marx has created a small gym onsite where the employees with autism have a daily workout with a coach from Exercise Connection. In the past, Marice had worked on building strength, endurance and focus with trainers from Exercise Connection at our local YMCA so she was very excited to continue workouts when she started her new job. She is more poised, self-confident and mature since she started this job, partly because of the regular exercise, but also because of the positive encouragement of the Exercise Connection coaches.

The greatest facet of this program is the commitment of factory managers and employee peers, who work with Marice and value her contributions to the enterprise of Hart Schaffner & Marx. Even an employee not directly responsible for working with Marice took the time to ask about what her interests were and what foods she would like for holiday lunches. Marice loves going to work and she is so conscientious that she only wants to take a family vacation when the factory is closed!

### PAULINE SHOBACK ...



...is Marice's mom and an attorney, who since Marice's birth has worked as an attorney periodically in part time corporate and employee benefits positions, and volunteers with organizations that advocate for individuals with special needs.