

# Predictors and outcomes of postsecondary employment and education for young adults with autism

A research report for families and community partners

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*We recognize that individuals in this study have a range of preferences for how they identify as being on the autism spectrum. To respect their perspectives, we use person-first language (“person with autism”) and identity-first language (“autistic person”) interchangeably throughout the report.*

## Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness about the importance of supporting autistic young adults in securing employment and pursuing postsecondary education (PSE). However, maintaining a job or PSE enrollment may be just as difficult as obtaining those opportunities in the first place. To improve employment outcomes for autistic adults, it is critical to understand what helps someone get a job as well as keep a job.

## Purpose of the Study

Funded by a five-year National Institute of Mental Health grant, the Charting the Course of Autism in Adulthood (CCAA) project had three main goals:

- ❑ **Goal 1: Understanding changes in jobs and school over time**—We want to learn how often young adults with autism experience changes in their jobs or education over a three-year period. Some changes are positive, like getting a better job or finishing school. But others are not, like getting fired or dropping out. We are tracking these changes to understand how common they are and what they mean.

❑ **Goal 2: What factors help or hurt success in jobs and school—**

We are looking at how personal traits (like individual skills or mental health challenges), family life (like supportive relationships, stressful life events or income), and community support (like services available or supports at school) affect whether young adults with autism are working or in school—and whether they stay there over time.

- ❑ **Goal 3: How instability affects well-being—**We want to understand how losing a job or leaving school affects a young person's mental health, daily skills, and overall quality of life, and whether these challenges also make it harder to stay in work or school.

## Who's in the Study: Participant Demographics

A total of 199 autistic adults between ages 18 and 45 participated in the broader study. Most (about two-thirds) identified as male and around half of the participants were diagnosed with autism before age 9. All participants had left high school and were no longer receiving school services.

During the first wave of data collection, 131 participants were working for pay. A smaller group of 108 working adults completed additional questions about their job satisfaction and are the focus of the job satisfaction analysis in this report.

Participants held a wide variety of jobs—from stockers and cashiers to lab techs and researchers—working in sectors like transportation, food service, office administration, education, health care, and more.

## How Jobs Relate to Satisfaction and Mental Health

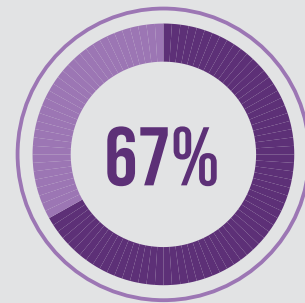
### Job Satisfaction Findings

We looked at how people felt about their jobs. Specifically, we examined how satisfied they were with different aspects of their job. Participants answered questions about how satisfied they were with their supervisor, their coworkers, their pay, their promotion opportunities, and the work itself.

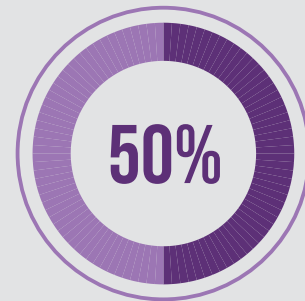
Overall, autistic adults in our study reported similar job satisfaction to adults in the general population.

## Participant Demographics:

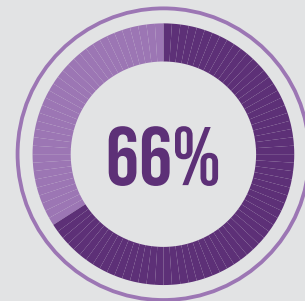
Male



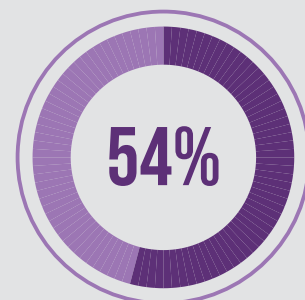
Diagnosed with autism before age 9



Working for Pay



Completed additional job satisfaction questions



## We tested which job conditions predicted higher satisfaction. Here's what we found:

Workplace climate (how fair, safe, and inclusive the workplace felt) was strongly linked to higher satisfaction across every category, including satisfaction with coworkers, supervisors, pay, promotion opportunities, and the work itself.

Whether someone worked full-time or part-time had little effect on satisfaction.

Receiving job supports (like help from a job coach) was also not linked to higher satisfaction—though this may be because only a small number of people received supports and their needs varied widely.

## Mental Health Findings

In addition to satisfaction, we examined mental health for participants who were working. The most important work-related factor that predicted mental health for working autistic adults in our sample wasn't the number of hours or the type of work they were doing—it was how they perceived their workplace climate. Adults with autism who felt valued and included at work and who had positive working relationships with supervisors reported a stronger sense of psychological well-being. This was especially true for adults in their late 20s and early 30s, suggesting that positive workplace climates become even more critical as autistic adults get older.

**In short: When autistic workers have positive perceptions of their workplace climates, they tend to feel more satisfied with their jobs and better overall.**

## How and Why People Tell Employers About their Autism Diagnosis

In interviews with 92 employed adults, 51 said they had disclosed their autism to at least one employer and 31 said they had never done so. Meanwhile, 3 adults were unsure of whether they had disclosed their diagnosis and 7 reported that their employers had prior knowledge of their diagnosis (e.g., they were hired through a vocational support agency). We identified three key themes that highlighted autistic adults' motivation for disclosing or not disclosing their diagnosis:

- ❑ **Explanatory Disclosure:** Many participants [43%] wanted their supervisors and co-workers to understand certain behaviors. A 21-year-old said, "I'm not very social. Telling people I have autism stops people thinking I'm rude." While this approach often improved day-to-day interactions, many adults feared that disclosing their autism diagnosis would result in discrimination and negative treatment from their employer.
- ❑ **Instrumental Disclosure:** Some adults [24%] disclosed simply to access formal accommodations or supports—whether that meant flexible hours, remote work options, or written instructions. As one 34-year-old explained, "I told them so I could work from home when I needed quiet space." Those who did not disclose their autism diagnosis saw no need for accommodations, feeling it was "not relevant to my competence."
- ❑ **Identity-Mediated Disclosure:** For some [10%], sharing their diagnosis was simply part of being authentic or advocating for broader acceptance. "I believe in honesty—this is who I am," said one 28-year-old. Others decided not to disclose their autism diagnosis because of the stigma often associated with their diagnosis, fearing that their employer may have biased or ableist views of autism.

These patterns reveal that disclosure is never a one-size-fits-all decision: it's shaped by individual needs, workplace structures, and personal values.

## Conclusion

The analyses presented here are from our first wave of data. We expect to learn much more from this study about how employment changes over time and how to support positive employment pathways among adults with autism. We are grateful to the autistic adults and their family members/friends who participated in this research; their contributions are critical to our ability to understand ways to improve employment outcomes.

To support autistic employees and the organizations that hire them, several key resources are available at no cost:

| National Resources for Autistic Job-Seekers & Employers |                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|---------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Job Accommodation Network (JAN)</b>                  | Confidential guidance on reasonable adjustments.<br><a href="https://askjan.org/index.cfm">askjan.org/index.cfm</a>                                                                                               |
| <b>State Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Services</b>    | Local agencies offering assessments, job coaching, and on the job support.<br><a href="https://tn.gov/humanservices/ds/vocational-rehabilitation.html">tn.gov/humanservices/ds/vocational-rehabilitation.html</a> |
| <b>Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP)</b>    | Federal best practice toolkits and hiring initiatives.<br><a href="https://dol.gov/agencies/odep">dol.gov/agencies/odep</a>                                                                                       |
| <b>Autism Society Employment Toolkits</b>               | Practical guides for crafting autism friendly workplaces.<br><a href="https://autismsociety.org/employment/">autismsociety.org/employment/</a>                                                                    |
| <b>Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN)</b>            | Peer led advice on disclosure, rights, and self-advocacy.<br><a href="https://autisticadvocacy.org">autisticadvocacy.org</a>                                                                                      |

## Spotlight on the Principal Investigators

**Julie Lounds Taylor, Ph.D.** (Vanderbilt University Medical Center) and **Leann Smith DaWalt, Ph.D.** (Waisman Center at the University of Wisconsin–Madison) are national leaders in autism and adulthood research. Together, they lead this study that follows autistic adults over time to learn how different jobs—and job environments—impact well-being. Their work combines data collection across multiple states with a deep focus on the lived experiences of autistic adults in real-world employment settings.

We are grateful to the individuals who took part in this study.  
Please email [transitions@vumc.org](mailto:transitions@vumc.org) if you have any questions.