

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ): What is the Role of Occupational Therapy in Supporting Employment of Young Adults with Disabilities?



1. Why is employment of young adults an important issue?

Employment provides social identity, status, productive use of time and outlets for socialization (Neff, 1985). Employment allows individuals with disabilities to connect with others without known disabilities in perhaps the only societal role open to them (Case, 2003). Employment appears to have a psychologically steadying effect on those who are engaged in it (Yerxa, 1998) while work helps an individual develop a sense of who he or she is and allows the individual to develop commonly shared experiences and relationships with others outside his or her family or neighborhood (Yerxa, 2000). Work supports meaningful participation and attainable productivity, which are essential for people's health and well-being. The National Association of Governors' Committees on People with Disabilities recognizes that workers contribute to the nation's economy and is committed to removing barriers of employment for persons with disabilities.

Individuals with disabilities are much less likely to be employed than those without a known disability. Twenty-one percent of individuals with disabilities ages 16 to 64 are employed compared to 59% of those without known disabilities (Harris Interactive, 2010). The individuals with disabilities who are employed tend to work part time or are underemployed. They often have jobs that do not include health insurance or receive income at a level that results in the loss of Medicaid benefits. (Department of Labor, 2010). This lack of health insurance coverage and other benefits results in individuals with disabilities living at lower

socioeconomic levels than their nondisabled counterparts (Harris Interactive, 2010).

2. What are the unique contributions of occupational therapy in supporting employment?

Moll, Huff, and Detwiler (2003) identified the strengths of occupational therapy and its parallel nature to the employment process to include: value of meaningful occupation; patient-centered approach; goals based on individual preferences; job placement based on function and skill level; identification of job modifications that promote successful outcomes; expertise in environmental assessment and fit between person, environment, and occupation; and understanding and advocacy of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Occupational therapy practitioners are skilled at evaluating unique factors including the assessment of the environment and task analysis of the barriers to participation of the worker. They provide services to develop or increase the ability of the client to participate in and manage productive work, maintain health, adhere to safe work practices, and prevent work-related disability. The scope of occupational therapy practice includes:

- Facilitating organizational and problem solving skills related to time management, personal workspace, productivity, and task completion.
- Matching the individual's strengths and interests to those in the work environment including sensory preferences, endurance, and physical capabilities as well as the ability to maintain and shift focus as needed.

- Addressing communication and social demands in the environment including: following directions, asking for help, and initiating and concluding conversations as well as identifying vocabulary specific to work environments.
- Incorporating and building self-advocacy skills including the ability to express the need for accommodations, assistive technology, adaptive equipment, and environmental preferences (e.g., lighting, noise, temperature, etc.).
- Supporting activities associated with a job search including practicing for interviews, initiating job contacts, and following up with contacts.
- Coaching employers and co-workers in disability awareness including specific strategies to facilitate interaction and cooperation between workers with and without disabilities.

Occupational therapy practitioners have longstanding expertise in providing services to clients that incorporate technology, assistive devices, and environmental modification, often in collaboration with other professionals (AOTA, 2010). A variety of strategies and tools can enhance both the functional capabilities and the quality of life of persons with disabilities, including individuals with significant disabilities or autism spectrum disorders (ASD). Occupational therapy practitioners can use low-, mid-, and high-level technology tools to provide visual representation, help modulate sensory input, clarify receptive language, assist with expressive communication, provide motor alternatives, help explain behavioral expectations, support social interaction, and more.

3. When and where would occupational therapy services be provided to support employment outcomes for youth with disabilities?

Employment is a meaningful occupation; learning occurs from cradle towards college and career. It is never too soon to develop and embed positive work habits. Occupational therapy practitioners not only have skills to work within the schools but also within the home and community. The preparation for work starts in the early years. Occupational therapy practitioners are in the home and preschools to help a child develop soft skills, (i.e., paying attention, following directions, developing self-care, social skills, etc.) that are foundational for building essential work habits necessary for employment. In junior and high school the formal transition process begins and students can be assisted to apply their learning to actual worksites and tasks. Occupational therapy practitioners provide work-related services in a variety of settings, including but not limited to: business and industrial environments, acute care and rehabilitation facilities, psychiatric centers, sheltered workshops, schools, and community settings. Within these settings occupational therapy practitioners provide services that address employee



conditioning, pre-work screening, functional capacity assessment and ergonomics, prevocational assessment and training, sheltered employment, supported employment, and the transition from school to work. The occupational therapy process includes continuous evaluation, intervention planning, implementation, and review, and outcome monitoring in real-life context. The key services include wellness and injury prevention services, restorative and compensatory interventions, consultation, education, advocacy, and case management (Arbesman & Logsdon, 2011).

4. What steps can I take from here? Where can I learn more?

If you work with preschoolers and in early intervention:

- Review and share AOTA's resources and documents within the Early Intervention–Early Childhood area with your families. <http://www.aota.org/en/Practice/Children-Youth/Early-Intervention.aspx>
 - Focus on building the child's strengths and relate to future occupations such as employment
 - Refer to *Promoting strengths in children and youth* in AOTA's School Mental Health Toolkit (AOTA, n.d.a.) <http://www.aota.org/~media/Corporate/Files/Practice/Children/SchoolMHToolkit/Promoting%20Strengths%20REVISED.ashx>
- Consider joining the (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) IDEA Partnership's Cradle to College and Career Practice Group to network and review their transition collection at www.ideapartnership.org

If you work with K-12 students:

- Identify the transition coordinator in your district and become familiar with transition programs and services
- Review and share AOTA's transition documents:
 - *The role of occupational therapy in facilitating employment of individuals with developmental disabilities* (AOTA, 2010a) <http://www.aota.org/~media/Corporate/Files/AboutOT/Professionals/WhatIsOT/>

CY/Fact-Sheets/Workers%20with%20DD%20fact%20sheet.ashx

- *Transitions for children and youth: How occupational therapy can help* (AOTA, 2008b) [Fact Sheet] <http://www.aota.org/~media/Corporate/Files/AboutOT/Professionals/WhatIsOT/CY/Fact-Sheets/Transitions.ashx>
- *FAQ: Occupational therapy's role in transition services and planning* (AOTA, 2008a) <http://www.aota.org/~media/Corporate/Files/Practice/Children/Browse/Transitions/transitions.ashx>

- Explore and develop opportunities to embed work habits and skills within school routines such as working in a student-run store, assisting in the cafeteria, and volunteering in the library.
- Conduct an inservice in your school about the role of occupational therapy so the team is aware of your abilities to support transition.

If you work with young adults:

- Learn about accommodations available at post-secondary institutions.
- Visit a disability center at a community college, vocational program, or university.
- Instruct individual and their support team in the need to advocate for oneself.
- Become familiar with available resources for adults in your area including vocational rehabilitation, bureau for the blind, and community health programs. See the list of additional resources listed on page 4.
- Build business partnerships and check with specific companies for employment opportunities:
 - Walgreens Inclusive Workplace
 - Walmart
 - Marriott Corporation
- Review and share AOTA's documents:
 - *Students with disabilities in postsecondary education settings: How occupational therapy can help* (AOTA, 2013a) [Fact Sheet] <http://www.aota.org/en/About-Occupational-Therapy/Professionals/CY/Fact-Sheets/Postsecondary-Education.aspx>

If you work with individuals with an ASD:

- Review and share AOTA's resources and documents at the Autism microsite <http://www.aota.org/Practice/Children-Youth/Autism.aspx>
- Refer to relevant *OT Practice* articles and other resources:
 - "Workin' on it: Helping adults with autism ease into the work world," by Andrew Waite, in February 11, 2013, *OT Practice* (Waite) <http://dx.doi.org/10.7138/otp.2013.182f1> See more at: <http://www.aota.org/Publications-News/OTP/Archive/2013/2-11-13/Feature-Autism-Work.aspx#sthash.Ta2ZURsy.dpuf>

- "Autism is lifelong: Community integration of adults on the autism spectrum," by Lisa Crabtree, PhD, OTR/L, in July 4, 2011, *OT Practice* (Crabtree) <http://www.aota.org/~media/Corporate/Files/Publications/OTP/OTP/2011-OTP/OTP%20Vol%2016%20Issue%2012.ashx>
- "Plotting next steps: Transitions for adults with developmental disabilities," by Melissa Y. Winkle, OTR/L, & Amanda L Cobb, OTD, in November 29, 2010, *OT Practice* (Winkle) <http://www.aota.org/~media/Corporate/Files/Publications/OTP/OTP/2010/OTP%20Vol%2015%20Issue%2021.ashx>
- *Living with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD): The high school years.* (AOTA, 2012) <http://www.aota.org/~media/Corporate/Files/AboutOT/consumers/Youth/Autism/ASD-High-School.ashx>
- Review the Autism Speaks Employment Toolkit <http://www.autismspeaks.org/family-services/tool-kits/employment>

If you work with individuals with cognitive impairments:

- Review and share AOTA's resources and documents including:
 - *Supporting community integration and participation for individuals with intellectual disabilities.* (AOTA, 2013b) <http://www.aota.org/en/About-Occupational-Therapy/Professionals/WI/Facts/Intellectual-Disabilities.aspx#sthash.6slh71EO.dpuf>
 - *Returning to work with cognitive impairments* (AOTA, 2012b) <http://www.aota.org/~media/Corporate/Files/AboutOT/Professionals/WhatIsOT/WI/Facts/Cognitive-impairments.ashx>



Resources

Disability.gov

<https://www.disability.gov/search/list?fq=topics%3A%22Employment%22&facetPrefix=1%2FEmployment&fq=locations%3Anational>

National Association of Governors' Committees on People with Disabilities (NAGC)

<http://www.dol.gov/odep/alliances/nagc.htm>

A Better Bottom Line Document from National Governors Association <http://www.aapd.com/resources/publications/a-better-bottom-line.pdf>

Pathways to Positive Futures

<http://www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu/>

ED.gov State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies

http://wdcrobcolp01.ed.gov/Programs/EROD/org_list.cfm?category_ID=SVR

National Secondary Technical Transition Center

<http://www.nsttac.org/>

References

- American Occupational Therapy Association. (2008a). *FAQ: Occupational therapy's role in transition services and planning*. Retrieved from <http://www.aota.org/~media/Corporate/Files/Practice/Children/Browse/Transitions/transitions.ashx>
- American Occupational Therapy Association. (2008b). *Transitions for children and youth: How occupational therapy can help*. Retrieved from <http://www.aota.org/~media/Corporate/Files/AboutOT/Professionals/WhatIsOT/CY/Fact-Sheets/Transitions.ashx>
- American Occupational Therapy Association. (2010a). *The role of occupational therapy in facilitating employment of individuals with developmental disabilities*. Retrieved from <http://www.aota.org/~media/Corporate/Files/AboutOT/Professionals/WhatIsOT/CY/Fact-Sheets/Workers%20with%20DD%20fact%20sheet.ashx>
- American Occupational Therapy Association. (2010b). Standards of practice for occupational therapy. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 64(Suppl.), S106–S111. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5014/ajot.2010.64S10.5014/ajot.2010.64>
- American Occupational Therapy Association. (2011). Occupational therapy services in facilitating work performance. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 65(Suppl.), S55–S64. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5014/ajot.2011.65S55>
- American Occupational Therapy Association. (2012a). *Living with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD): The high school years*. [Tip Sheet] Retrieved from <http://www.aota.org/~media/Corporate/Files/AboutOT/consumers/Youth/Autism/ASD-High-School.ashx>
- American Occupational Therapy Association. (2012b). *Returning to work with cognitive impairments*. [Fact Sheet] Retrieved from <http://www.aota.org/~media/Corporate/Files/AboutOT/Professionals/WhatIsOT/WI/Facts/Cognitive-impairments.ashx>
- American Occupational Therapy Association. (2013a). *Students with disabilities in postsecondary education settings: How occupational therapy can help*. [Fact Sheet] Retrieved from <http://www.aota.org/en/About-Occupational-Therapy/Professionals/CY/Fact-Sheets/Postsecondary-Education.aspx>
- American Occupational Therapy Association. (2013b). *Supporting community integration and participation for individuals with intel-*

- lectual disabilities*. Retrieved from <http://www.aota.org/en/About-Occupational-Therapy/Professionals/WI/Facts/Intellectual-Disabilities.aspx#sthash.6slh71EO.dpuf>
- Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, Pub. L. 101–336.
- Arbesman, M., & Logsdon, D. W. (2011). Occupational therapy interventions for employment and education for adults with serious mental illness: A systematic review. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 65, 238–246. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5014/ajot.2011.001289>
- Case, D. J. (2003). *Improving Work Performance for Individuals with Severe Disabilities, Unpublished doctoral dissertation*. Wayne State University, Detroit Michigan.
- Crabtree, L. (2011). Autism is lifelong: Community integration of adults on the autism spectrum. *OT Practice*, 16(12) 8-13. <http://www.aota.org/~media/Corporate/Files/Publications/OTP/OTP/2011-OTP/OTP%20Vol%2016%20Issue%2012.ashx>
- Harris Interactive. (2010). *2010 survey of Americans with disabilities*. Retrieved from <http://www.2010disabilitysurveys.org/octsurvey/pdfs/surveyresults.pdf>
- Moll, S., Huff, J., & Detwiler, L. (2003). Supported employment: Evidence for a best practice model in psychosocial rehabilitation. *Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 70(5), 298-310.
- Neff, W. S. (1985). *Work and human behavior* (3rd ed.). Hawthorne, NY: Aldine. U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2010). Projecting potential demand for workers with disabilities. *Monthly Labor Review*, 10, 133. [PE: Formerly Kruse, Schur, & Ali (2010)...]
- Waite, A. (2013). Workin' on it: Helping adults with autism ease into the work world. *OT Practice*, 18(2), 9-13. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7138/otp.2013.182f1> See more at: <http://www.aota.org/Publications-News/OTP/Archive/2013/2-11-13/Feature-Autism-Work.aspx#sthash.Ta2ZURsy.dpuf>
- Winkle, M. Y. (2010) "Plotting next steps: Transitions for adults with developmental disabilities." *OT Practice*, 15(21) 13-16. <http://www.aota.org/~media/Corporate/Files/Publications/OTP/OTP/2010/OTP%20Vol%2015%20Issue%2021.ashx>
- Yerxa, E. J. (1998). Health and the human spirit for occupation. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 52, 412–418. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5014/ajot52.6.412>
- Yerxa, E. J. (2000). Occupational science: A renaissance of service to humankind through knowledge. *Occupational Therapy International*, 7, 87–98.



This document was developed in conjunction with AOTA's Transition and Autism Work Groups. 2013

Copyright © 2013 by the American Occupational Therapy Association. All rights reserved. This material may be copied and distributed without prior written consent. For all other uses, please e-mail copyright@aota.org.

The American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) represents the professional interests and concerns of more than 140,000 occupational therapists, assistants, and students working in practice, science, education, and research.

The American Occupational Therapy Association
4720 Montgomery Lane, Bethesda, MD 20814
301-652-AOTA (2682)

www.aota.org

Occupational Therapy: Living Life To Its Fullest™