F.I.T for Success on the Job!

Creating Successful Employment for Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder

OCALI
Lifespan Transitions Center

Five **I**mportant **T**argets
for Success on the Job

When preparing to employ or when working with an employee with autism spectrum disorder, always consider the F.I.T. (Five Important Targets)!

Addressing these five critical areas will improve the likelihood of a good overall job match.

The F.I.T. begins by reviewing the five areas of the "SCARS"

S: Sensory

C: Communication

A: Activity or Task

R: Routine and Predictability

S: Social

SCARS are target areas that offer an opportunity to improve employee productivity and workplace success! While the analogy of the **SCARS** may seem a bit corny, it can help the employer and coworkers quickly remember areas of the employment environment that could be confusing for the employee with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

Is the work environment compatible with the employee?

How do everyday experiences such as sound and touch make the job more difficult or easier?

What can be done to improve the fit?

Sensory Sensitivities for People with ASD

People with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) can find it difficult to work in certain physical environments. Or may prefer certain experiences or types of sensory input. Examples of sensitivities that may cause difficulties at work may include:

Sounds: The loudness, pitch, or predictability of the sound

Temperature: Heat or cold may be preferred

Space: Needing personal space like a desk, cubicle or table or bench

Visual: A visually organized environment

Movement: May need to have opportunity to walk or pace

Evaluate the Environment

Ask yourself these types of questions and consider the impact on job performance.

· How does the office, store, building or other workplace environment sound? Is it loud? Quiet? Constant noises? Unexpected noises? Lots of talking? Music? Machines?

· Are uniforms required that might be difficult for the person to tolerate?

· Is personal space available? Or an area that can be used to take a break? Is there space and opportunity to move around?

· Is the temperature tolerable for the individual?

· Are there multiple odors in the workplace, either as part of the job or from co-workers

Basically, how does the environment feel, sound, smell and look? Will this be a good FIT with the employee with ASD?

Ideas to Improve the Sensory FIT

If there are areas of concern, are there ways to adapt the environment so that it is a better fit for the employee? Ideas include:

· Using **headphones** - Silencing type or with music

· Assigning jobs that require **walking and other movement**

· Providing work areas **away from people that wear perfume** or in areas of deodorizers

· Allowing the use of radios or fans as a **"white noise"**

· Identifying an area such as a table in the break area as **personal space**

· Arranging the desks/tables and chairs to create a **"personal space"**

· **Allowing preferred clothing**, gloves, etc. to modify touch sensitivity

· **Providing "pre-warning"** when the environment may change in sound levels, temperature, available space, cooking odors, etc.

S.C.A.R.S. TWO
Communication Fit

How does the job's communication system fit with the individual's communication style?

Do the workplace communication procedures work for the employee with ASD?

Or are there other modes of communication needed to suport understand and responding?

Communication Style of Individuals with ASD

· Some individuals with ASD may be very talkative while others have very few words. However, almost all individuals with ASD have difficulty at some time with communicating to others. Difficulties may include:

· Understanding what is being asked or explained

· Understanding body language or vocal intonation

· Remembering directions accurately, especially verbal directions

· Asking for help, asking questions, or explaining to others where and why he is confused

Much of the communication challenges occur because the person with ASD may not be able to "see a situation through someone else's eyes" or "put himself in someone else's shoes". Conversations become confusing and directions difficult to remember. Predicting or guessing what the boss might want may be impossible.

Evaluate Current Communication System of the Workplace

· What are the formal and informal communication systems on the job?

· How are employees expected to know what to do?

· How are changes or new information provided?

· Who delivers information or directs employees?

· Is this a job where employees are expected to interact with customers?

· Who answers employee questions on a typical day?

· Do co-workers have an informal communication system?

· Is there company or job "jargon" that requires understanding?

· How much of the communication system requires understanding facial expressions and body language?

Ideas to Improve the Communication FIT

· **"When in Doubt, Write it Out!"** - Visual format is always a good choice. Always consider putting directions, routines, reminders, and other communication in a concrete visual format.

· **Use clear concrete words and phrases.** Jargon and vague requests can be misunderstood. "I need that in 5 minutes" is much better than "I need that ASAP".

· **Teach workplace language.** Both formal and informal.

· **Use email systems** to give and receive information

· **Check for understanding.** Do not assume your message was accurately understood, especially if it is new or multiple pieces of information.

· **Avoid using body language or facial expressions** as a clue to the meaning of the message. Instead, say or write the exact message. When messages require "reading" the face or body language, teach the employee what it means.

The way the job activities or tasks are organized or taught can have a direct impact on how well the person preforms the job. Sometimes allowing the person to complete the job in a unique manner will offer more independence, better quality or more timely results.

Work Style of Individuals with ASD

Many people with ASD prefer to complete their jobs or tasks in unique ways that support their learning or work styles. This means that the employer may observe work traits such as:

· Desire for a consistent structure or work pattern

· Preference to work alone or removed from co-workers or confusion

· Prefer limited social interactions while concentrating on a work task

· Request to see or understand the completed job when assigned a specific aspect or step in a process

· May avoid tasks that require extensive handwriting

· May work at a rapid or steady pace, without breaks

Evaluate Current Activity or Job Task

Analyze the job activities assigned to the person with ASD. "Peel back" the layers of the job in an effort to better understand the steps or components of a job. Be sure to consider the social, communication and sensory aspects of the task. Use the questions below as a place to begin in the job or task analysis:

· What are the actual steps required to complete a task or job?

· What knowledge doses the person need? What type of language does he need to understand?

· What is the required pace of the job?

· Where is the job located? Must it be located in only one area? Is the location an area that can be overwhelming or is it calm?

· Does the job task change regularly? Or is it a routine?

· Who are the people involved? Are they consistent or do they change? Do these other people have a compatible work style to the employee with ASD?

Ideas to Improve the Activity or Task FIT

· **Consider tasks that are routine as a priority** (Note: "Routine" does not mean boring or never changing. "Routine" refers to "predictable")

· **Show** the person specifically how to complete each step in a task

· Provide a **picture or video** example of the task or activity

· As possible, **change location or environment** to be more conducive to the employee's work style and sensory preferences.

· Give **regular and specific feedback** on what the person does well and how to improve performance

· Allow **co-workers to "mentor"** and teach expected performance of the job. Provide information to co-workers on how to successfully interact.

S.C.A.R.S. FOUR
Routine and Predictability Fit

Does the job offer a sense of predictability and routine?

Is it a structured situation that makes it easy for the person to know what to expect?

Is there a general job structure that helps provide all employees with routine?

The Importance of Routine for Individuals with ASD

The employee with ASD often will perform best in a situation where the job is clearly structured so the steps or required activities of the job are consistent. Knowing what will likely occur on a regular basis can alleviate stress or anxiety from the unknown.

Predictability is important in the daily schedule, the tasks of the job, and the social expectations that may be associated with the job. Predicting when things might change allows the employee to accept the change.

Relying on routine does NOT mean that work can never change. People with ASD can accept and even thrive in a changing environment when there is a structure to communicate the change.

Evaluate Current Routines of the Workplace

Review the formal and informal aspects of the job to determine:

·   What is the schedule of the job? Do certain events occur at the same time everyday (such as break, lunch, deliveries, meetings, etc.)?

·   Are there aspects of the job that are more predictable than others? Are these jobs part of the work assigned to the person with ASD?

·   Can employees create their own routines within the job without affecting the overall productivity and successful job completion?

·   Is the schedule posted or written? Are the steps of the job available in a written or picture format in any location?

·   How are employees notified of changes that occur?

Ideas to Improve the Routine and Predictability FIT

·   **Make schedules and job routines available** to the employee on a regular basis in a visual format. Use words and pictures if necessary.

·   Create a way to **let the employee know if the schedule changes**. Use the visual schedule as a means of communicating and reviewing the changes. Email prior to the work day beginning can also be helpful.

·   Have a regular **routine to begin and end the work day** to add structure.

·   Have a supervisor **briefly interact with the person each workday** at the beginning of the day to provide an opportunity to preview the work of the day.

·   If activities do not generally occur at a specific time, avoid putting a clock time on the schedule, instead give a **sequence of events**. For example, instead of "9 AM: Data Entry, 10 AM: Break, 11 AM: Filing", use the sequence of "First: Data Entry, Second: 15 minute break, Third: Filing".

S.C.A.R.S. FIVE
Social Fit

For many employees with ASD, the social interactions that occur on the job can be the most difficult aspect of the work environment. How will the employee with ASD learn about and understand the social expectations of the job?

The Social Profile of the Individual with ASD

Individuals with ASD are often described as socially awkward or socially challenged. These challenges stem from difficulty reading the social situation in order to understand how to act or what not to do. Other social skills that may be difficult include:

· Reading facial expressions or body language

· Understanding the message associated with vocal intonation

· Recognizing subtle social messages meant to cue or prompt

· Expressing or regulating emotions

· Learning from simply observing others behaviors

Although social skills can be difficult, individuals with ASD usually **want** to be part of a social community. They may, however, need to participate gradually or may involve themselves in a few social interactions. A plan to help the employee with ASD understand and remember the "social rules" of the job can promote co-worker interactions.

Evaluate Current Social Environment of the Workplace

To assist the employee with ASD to have social success on the job, begin by understanding the current social expectations and supports. This will help identify what needs to be taught or communicated to the employee.
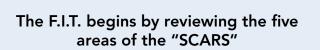
· How do people socially interact on the job? Is it formal or informal?

· What are the unwritten rules of the workplace? What do co-workers expect others to "figure out" by observing or experiencing. This can include the when, how and what of conversations, break and lunch behavior, and other issues that may not reflect the actual job.

· How do people learn the "unwritten rules"?

· How important are these rules to the operation of the business or the completion of the job?

Ideas to Improve the Social FIT

· **Review the social rules** with the employee with ASD. Provide these in writing as well as verbally.

· **Identify a mentor(s)** who will help the employee remember the social expectations and can assist to problem solve difficult social situations.

· As possible, match the employee with ASD with **jobs that have limited social requirements** and/or have predictable social interactions.

· **Be clear, direct and specific about the social expectations.** When a social mistake occurs, respectfully explain what was done, why it is not acceptable and what should be done differently. Provide this information visually through a written message, pictures, photos, or even video.

F.I.T
for Success on the Job

Five Important Targets
Consider these five critical areas to improve the likelihood of a good job match for the employee with autism spectrum disorder.

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AIM
AUTISM INTERNET MODULES

Autism Internet Modules (AIM) are free, on-line resources written by experts from across the U.S. designed to promote understanding of and respect for persons with ASD.

Information specific to employment is available in several of the AIM modules.

www.autisminternetmodules.org

OCALI
Lifespan Transitions Center

Ohio Center for Autism and Low Incidence (OCALI) serves families, educators, and professionals supporting individuals with autism spectrum disorders.

OCALI online resources are available at www.ocali.org or call OCALI at 614-410-0321

Contact Lifespan Transitions Center:
www.ocali.org/transitions

Ohio.gov

These agencies provide support for individuals with disabilities including those with ASD.

Department of Developmental Disabilities
visit www.dodd.ohio.gov or call 1-800-617-6733

Rehabilitation Services Commission (RSC)
visit www.rsc.ohio.gov or call 1-800-282-4536