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Case Study: Shelving and the Autistic Employee

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Using college students to shelve library books in a university library has always presented a variety of problems. Attention spans are short, dedication to this repetitive task as well as socializing can be a problem for the average student. For the past 9 years, Oakland University’s Kresge Library has employed a young man with autism to shelve their books and journals. It has been a positive experience for both the Library and the employee. This article is a case study on employing an individual with autism to shelve books in a university library and the implications involved.

KEYWORDS Employment, library, hiring, managing, training

AUTISM: A DEFINITION

The Center for Disease Control’s Autism Center defines autism as one of a group of disorders known as autism spectrum disorders (ASDs). They continue that ASDs are developmental disabilities that cause substantial impairments in social interaction and communication and the presentation of unconventional behaviors and interests. Many people with ASDs also have atypical ways of “learning, paying attention to, or reacting to different things” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.). The thinking and learning abilities of people with ASDs can vary—from highly gifted to severely challenged—presenting itself before the age of 3 and lasting throughout a person’s life.

KRESGE LIBRARY’S SHELVING HISTORY

Getting the shelving efficiently completed in our Library had always been a problem. The university students that we hired each semester would quickly
tire of the repetitive routine and either slow down to an unacceptable speed or just place the books at the ends of the shelves simply to empty the cart. Not even constant monitoring by supervisors and frequent shelf reading could ensure accuracy. Initially, we hired students who would only shelve books but later combined the desk and shelving tasks to add diversity to the position and break up the repetition of shelving. Compounding the issue, high volumes of book returns at the end of each semester in December and April would result in 10 or more carts of books not being shelved at the end of the day. Neither scenario resulted in accurate, timely shelving of our large collection of monographs and journals, nor provided a good service model for our patrons.

When Clarkston High School, in Michigan’s Oakland County, called and asked if an autistic young man, Mark, could volunteer to shelve books at our Library, the Manager of Access Services was hesitant. Mark had been with the Clarkston Community Schools Center (CSC) Program for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) for Oakland County Intermediate School District for 12 years prior. Seeking a way for Mark to participate in meaningful work, the CSC Program hoped to find a way to incorporate prior library experience and sustain his fairly independent life. Having had success placing other CSC program participants in other positions on campus, it was clear that they wanted to place Mark in a paid position, and currently the library had no openings. In addition, he could never qualify to be employed at the University under its current job descriptions. This was explained to the school representative, and an agreement to accept him as a volunteer was set.

**A NEW BEGINNING**

After discussing his past experience and the lack of funding available, the CSC Program for Students with ASD negotiated that Mark could volunteer 4 hours per day but that we could not provide compensation for his services. The benefit to Mark was gaining more workplace experience while building his skill set. Prior to his first day, his CSC teachers came to the library, where they were trained in Mark’s job duties and procedures and were versed on how long each task should take. In turn, on Mark’s first day, they came to the library with him and taught him those procedures in a manner to which he could relate. Additionally, they remained with him to see that he completed his tasks correctly and in a reasonable amount of time. Although Mark had previously worked at a public library, part of his learning included transitioning from the Dewey Decimal System to the Library of Congress classification. During Mark’s first month, he quickly showed us that he could do an excellent job of the work that 10 students had previously not been doing well. Our department eagerly requested library administration to hire him on a part-time basis, and was able to do so albeit without benefits.
In under a year, arrangements were made via the University’s Human Resources department to employ Mark on a contractual basis with benefits. Further, the contract stipulated that his only duties could be shelving of books and related tasks, as articulated by the union. Funding was provided by taking monies previously allocated from our student budget. Once the decision was made to hire Mark, he would continue to attend school for about 1 hour each day, and the school’s transportation system would bring him to work.

After his first year or so of employment, at 26 years of age, Mark was no longer eligible to participate in the CSC program. However, the school helped his parents find an apartment and a roommate so that he could live nearby independently. Due to the limitations of his bus transportation’s schedule, we were able to only schedule him for 7 hours per day.

HOW IT WORKED

The Manager of Access Services met with the family social worker regarding his work performance. The social worker pulled together the loose ends and helped her client navigate services to meet his needs. At the time of writing, she managed a case load of 30–32 clients and saw each client, including our employee, approximately once a month and in various locations (home, work, and family home). Based on the relationship that she forged with Mark, she was able to evaluate his pleasure and displeasure. One of her goals was to ensure that he did not develop behaviors that were not socially acceptable when new tasks were introduced. Allowing these behaviors to “build up” could cause employer frustration and lead to termination of employment. Now that Mark has established a routine, she occasionally comes by to see him on his lunch break and will stop to see the Departmental Manager for a current update.

A written task list is prepared daily—with scheduled break and lunch times—and Mark carries it with him throughout the day. We have found that written directions work very well, especially when assigning him a new duty or changing his schedule. While his task list is not time constrained, predictable workflow patterns have emerged. When Mark comes to work, he always asks how many carts are waiting and wants the number written on his task list.

Currently, we ask Mark to complete a daily task-completion form by recording the cart number, the time he started shelving the cart, and the completion time. Although this form was designed to help his goal-oriented behavior and his need to keep track of this type of information, we have benefited from this form. Using the task-completion forms, we examined the number of carts shelved and the time taken to complete each cart. Once we learned that Mark could consistently shelve a 75% filled cart (about 85–90
books) in approximately 1 hour, we were able to predict how many carts he would shelve and set his schedule based on this number. We also discovered that creating 100% filled carts decreased his productivity considerably.

A common characteristic of those with autism “is the individual’s ‘insistence on sameness’ or ‘perseverative’ behavior” (Edelson, 1999). This fits well for someone who would be repeating the same task (shelving books) throughout the day with little variety in assigned work. One of his teachers asserted that in time, he would learn the location of each book in the Library (assuming that every book was checked out and reshelved). Augmenting this good fit was his characteristic tendency not to get involved in typical college student social behaviors that tend to lessen productivity.

Hagner and Cooney (2005) describe that many individuals with autism exhibit a high degree of accuracy in visual perception, concentration ability, long-term memory, and a high tolerance for repetitive activities, which maps well onto the attributes sought in personnel who shelve. Other tasks at which Mark excels are shelf reading and shifting of books. He quickly knows when a book is out of order, and with clear directions he is able to measure space on the shelves and leave the specified number of inches. Mark is especially fond of shifting and has a compelling need to complete a section before he will stop working.

**LIMITATIONS**

Over time we have found that Mark works in relation to the amount of work to be done. When there are many carts, he completes the carts at a faster rate than on days when there is less work. Even though his CSC teachers told us that he does not know how to waste time, we have found that Mark is much more productive when the workload is greater. Further, we attributed Mark’s decline in productivity of shelving 100%-full carts to his perception of the amount of work to be done, which affected his shelving rate. The additional effort to push a full cart, and the longer walking distance needed to complete the total cart, could also contribute to the decline in his shelving rate with 100%-full carts. Additionally, Mark is strongly disinclined to start a task unless he knows he can complete it, and directing him to do otherwise causes him distress. To reduce any upset, his daily workflow is sometimes modified to fit his break and lunch schedule. In instances where it is necessary to disrupt his established schedule, we were advised by his CSC teachers to rely upon behavioral modification techniques that were used when Mark was trained to work in the library.

Initially, his Clarkston School teachers prepared a card that he could read if a patron approached to assist with his communication skills. Subsequently, he has been able to direct patrons where to seek assistance. For patrons with
a call number, needing help locating a book, he will quickly take the patron to the correct location.

Health and Well-Being

For the most part, our employee has been healthy. As with many autistic individuals, our employee belongs to the one in four people with ASDs who develop seizures (National Institute of Mental Health, 2004). He has had two seizures during work hours, and these have been managed with little disruption of library routine. He takes daily medication and tells a supervisor when he is taking his medicine so that we are aware of this important detail. Twice, during his employment, we have had to call his parents when it was obvious he was not feeling well. Morgan (1996) notes that “adults with autism are very poor at recognizing when they are ill”; so, it is important for supervisors to pay attention to variations in his usual behavior and appearance. To date, the number of hours lost due to illness and general absenteeism is substantially less than that exhibited by our students and staff.

Another facet of autism can be comorbidity, where multiple conditions occur at the same time. Schreibman (2005) notes that “while retaining the autism diagnosis, it is not unusual for these individuals to receive other diagnostic labels.” Mark presents perseveration, which his Social Worker described as repeating a response after the original stimulus has ceased and is not symptomatic of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder but rather of autism. This behavior has manifested itself in the need to repeat his name when swiping his timecard, an inventory of his personal effects when hanging up his coat, phrases such as, “It's 11:30; it's my lunch time” many times. Telling him that he can only repeat the inventory or phrase two additional times will cause him to stop the cycle, but over extended periods, it will escalate and he will need to be reminded again.

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

Hagner and Cooney (2005) identified some strategies that would assist in making this experience work for both the autistic employee and the employer:

Job Modification:

- Maintain a consistent schedule and job duties.
- Provide organizers to help structure and keep track of work.
- Add activities to reduce or eliminate unstructured time.
- Keep the social demands of the job manageable and predictable.
Supervision:

- Be direct and specific when giving directions.
- Verify that communications are correctly understood.
- Explain and help the employee deal with changes on the job.
- Assist the employee in learning social rules and interpret social cues encountered on the job.

Coworker Relationships:

- Encourage coworkers to initiate interactions.
- “Keep an eye out” for the employee.

Support Services:

- Provide a sense of familiarity and reassurance until the employee and the company staff get to know one another.
- Transfer relationships and supports to company employees.
- Maintain a liaison role for nonwork issues that affect the job.

Implementing these tactics has helped us manage our nontraditional employee and help him have a positive work experience.

CONCLUSION

“Unfortunately, for every autistic person who succeeds in the workplace, there are eight or nine who fail” (Anthes, 1997). These workers, Anthes continues, “need quiet, stable and predictable work environments and they must be given very clear goals and objectives.” Consequently, they do not make good team workers, nor are managerial duties appropriate.

For the most part, certain library tasks are a good fit for the attributes exhibited by the autistic person. The problems and interactions that have been discussed are definitely worth the improved appearance of our collection and very definitely worth the effort it takes to retain such an employee on a library’s payroll. This has been a good experience for our library and for the employee. Mark is excited to return to work daily, and we continue to count ourselves lucky to have found our gem.

NOTE

1. Employee's name changed to protect identity.
REFERENCES


