

# Testimony to House Committee on Small Business

“Ready, Willing, and Able to Work: How Small Businesses Empower People with Developmental Disabilities.”

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**Autonomy**Works

## **Introduction:**

Chairman Chabot, Ranking Member Velázquez and members of the Committee on Small Business, thank you for inviting me to this hearing and providing the opportunity to tell my story about “How Small Businesses Empower People with Developmental Disabilities.”

I am David Friedman. I have spent the better part of the last thirty-five years working in consumer marketing. I have had the good fortune to work for exceptional organizations, such as Accenture, Microsoft, and Publicis. Just over five years ago, I founded AutonomyWorks, a small business located outside of Chicago.

My professional career has little to do with why I am sitting in front of you today. I am here because of my son, Matthew. Matthew is now 22 years old. Like many 22-year-olds, Matthew is a sports fan – avidly following the Bears, Sox, and Bulls. He runs, plays in a basketball league, and loves his electronic devices.

Unlike most other 22-year-old men, Matthew has autism. Matthew has a lot of skills. He is exceptional with numbers and is a strong visual learner. That said, Matthew’s autism presents him with real challenges. He has challenges with organization and planning and he struggles to succeed in even the simplest social situations.

Matthew attended our local public schools. When students with disabilities reach 14 ½ years old, the school system begins a process called Transition Planning – setting in motion an effort to transition young adults into the “real” world of work or college. At the time, we felt that Matthew was unlikely to be successful in a traditional college. His lack of organizational and social skills required were too much of a barrier.

The team from the school, my wife and I began looking for alternatives – jobs and careers where Matthew could contribute and succeed. We were stunned by what we found. There were very few jobs available to people with disabilities. The ones that existed were low skill and did not leverage his unique skills and talents.

Matthew is not alone

## **The Problem:**

Over 3 million Americans are living on the autism spectrum. It is the fastest-growing disability in the country, doubling in the past 15 years.<sup>1</sup> Autism, or autism spectrum disorder (ASD), refers

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<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2016, April 1). *Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)*. Retrieved from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention web site: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/data.html>

to a range of conditions characterized by challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviors, speech and nonverbal communication, as well as by unique strengths and differences. There is not one autism but many types, caused by different combinations of genetic and environmental influences.<sup>2</sup>

Since the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was passed in 1990, schools systems have made great progress in the availability and effectiveness of interventions and support for students with autism and other disabilities. Eventually, young adults with autism graduate from school systems into the world of work. Approximately, 50,000 individuals with autism spectrum disorder turn 18 each year in the United States.<sup>3</sup>

The work place is largely unprepared for this wave of workers. Despite their talents, there is a profound shortage of jobs for people with disabilities. Only 20.9% of people with disabilities are in the labor force – compared to 68.3% of people without disabilities. People with autism have the lowest employment rate of any category of disabilities.<sup>4</sup> Based on current statistics, 80% of people with autism will be unemployed or underemployed as adults.

A recent study found that only half (53%) of young adults with an autism spectrum disorder had ever worked for pay outside the home in the first 8 years following high school. This is the lowest rate among disability groups even when controlling for impairment severity, household income, and social demographics. Only 34% were employed at the time of the survey interview. One in five worked full-time with average earnings of \$8.10/hour, significantly lower than disability comparison groups.<sup>5</sup>

For most, the employment gap is not the result of technical or functional capability. Many people with autism possess skills that are valuable for today's economy. Often, they possess intense focus, comfort with numbers and process, and a passion for repetitive, process-intensive tasks.

However, people with autism often have challenges that make it difficult to manage the complex interpersonal interactions present in most workplaces. Businesses – large and small – lack the knowledge and experience required to hire and manage this hidden workforce.

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<sup>2</sup> Autism Speaks. (2018, May 4). What is Autism? Retrieved from Autism Speaks web site: <https://www.autismspeaks.org/what-autism>

<sup>3</sup> Autism Speaks. (2016, December 12). *Mounting Evidence of Critical Need for Adult Transition Support*. Retrieved from Autism Speaks: <https://www.autismspeaks.org/science/science-news/top-ten-lists/2012/mounting-evidence-critical-need-adult-transition-support>

<sup>4</sup> United States Department of Labor Office of Disability Employment Policy. (2018, April). *April 2018 Disability Employment Statistics. Ages 16 and over*. Retrieved from United States Department of Labor. <https://www.dol.gov/odep>

<sup>5</sup> Shattuck. (2013, September 16). *Study confirms low rates of employment for young autistic adults*. Retrieved from Medical News: <http://www.news-medical.net/news/20130906/Study-confirms-low-rates-of-employment-for-young-autistic-adults.aspx>

Job training and placement services have attempted to address this problem. People with autism typically learn best through hands-on experience with real-time feedback. Unfortunately, most existing programs fail to transition participants into sustainable jobs and careers. In addition, shortages of public and private funding have limited their ability to scale.

People with autism want to work. This lack of job opportunities severely limits the ability of many adults with autism to support themselves and live independently. Nearly two-thirds (63.9%) of young adults with autism receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits.<sup>6</sup> While each individual requires different types and amounts of support, it is estimated to cost as much as \$2.4 million to support a single individual with autism throughout their life. The total annual cost of supporting this population is over \$260 billion per year.<sup>7</sup>

### **AutonomyWorks Solution:**

My wife and I were shocked to discover the magnitude of the gap between the desire and talents of people with autism and the workplace. We knew that our son and many others had the skills to contribute. Companies just needed to understand the potential and possibilities. In 2012, I left my corporate career and founded AutonomyWorks.

AutonomyWorks is a for-profit, commercial business. We have been operating for five years and serve more than fifteen commercial clients. Each week, our team of nearly thirty Associates with autism delivers hundreds of discrete tasks for our clients – at exceptional levels of quality.

AutonomyWorks was established to breakdown the barrier between potential and reality by creating thousands of jobs for adults with autism. We leverage the talents of people with autism – attention to detail, focus through repetitive tasks, and dedication to quality – to provide our clients with essential services. Our team frees companies from the burden of repetitive processing work so they can focus more time and attention on strategy and results.

AutonomyWorks creates jobs for unemployed and underemployed people with autism. Without their jobs at AutonomyWorks, most of these individuals would be relying on public assistance or the support of their families. Working at AutonomyWorks enables them to earn income while building skills applicable to many other jobs.

AutonomyWorks has created a business system to enable adults with autism. We restructure and reengineer client work to create tasks and jobs well-suited for our Associates. We provide a custom-tailored working environment optimally suited to their capabilities and needs.

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<sup>6</sup> United States Department of Health and Human Services. (2017, October). *Report to Congress: Young Adults and Transitioning Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorder*. Retrieved from the Health and Human Services website. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/2017AutismReport.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Buescher, A. e. (2014, August). *Costs of autism spectrum disorders in the United Kingdom and the United States*. Retrieved from PubMed: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/24911948>

Associates receive training, occupational support, and job coaching. We track performance and identify opportunities for additional training, expanded responsibility, and intrinsic and financial rewards.

AutonomyWorks is based outside Chicago in DuPage county. Our employees live across the Chicago area – commuting from as long as 90 minutes each way to their jobs.

AutonomyWorks partners closely with government agencies, school systems, and local service providers to coordinate and amplify our impact. For example, AutonomyWorks is part of a three-way collaboration with the Illinois Division for Rehabilitation Services (DRS) and the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) to develop information technology jobs for adults with disabilities in the Chicago area.

AutonomyWorks has been fortunate to participate in several Federally supported programs. For example, we recently completed a 24-month grant funded through the United States Department of Labor’s Employment and Training Administration (ETA) and the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP).<sup>8</sup> With this support, AutonomyWorks hired 10 people and offered internships, apprenticeships, and training to an additional 54.

### **Specific Benefits:**

AutonomyWorks was built from the start to employ adults with autism. It is the core of our mission and purpose. Every management decision is made with a focus on that objective.

Since our founding, AutonomyWorks has generated more than 70,000 hours of paid employment for adults with autism. Currently, we employ more than 30 people – most in their first paid job. Over 70% of employees are adults with autism. More than 100 times a week, an adult with autism goes to work at AutonomyWorks.

By the end of 2020, AutonomyWorks anticipates employing more than 100 people. By transitioning people from unemployment to work, AutonomyWorks hopes to reduce Medicaid and Social Security costs. As importantly, Associates will be building self-esteem and income while also developing workplace, financial management, and executive functioning skills.

AutonomyWorks has seen the challenge, the potential and the transformation among our Associates. Aaron and Jason are just two examples (note: names are changed to protect their privacy).

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<sup>8</sup> US Department of Labor. (2014, May 27). *Disability Employment Initiative Grants*. Retrieved from Department of Labor web site: [https://dei.workforcegps.org/-/media/WorkforceGPS/disability/Files/DEISGARound5\\_DFA-PY-13-11\\_052714.ashx](https://dei.workforcegps.org/-/media/WorkforceGPS/disability/Files/DEISGARound5_DFA-PY-13-11_052714.ashx)

Aaron: After graduating from high school, Aaron spent three years looking for a job. He applied for dozens of open positions and received rejection after rejection from these employers. He was discouraged and demoralized. In 2015, Aaron learned about AutonomyWorks through our partnership with the Division of Rehabilitation Services.

Aaron has been employed at AutonomyWorks for almost two years now. He works five days each week performing technical, detail orientated, computer work for our clients at an exceptional level of quality. Aaron utilizes public transportation and feels that he has finally found a place where he can contribute his skills and talents to the workplace.

Jason: Jason has a Bachelor’s Degree from a four-year accredited university. For seven years, prior to joining to AutonomyWorks team, Jason found himself stuck, bagging groceries for a few hours each week at a local grocery store. Jason was discouraged with his employment situation – he wanted a job that took advantage of his education and his unique skills and abilities. Jason connected with his vocational rehabilitation counselor and learned about AutonomyWorks.

Jason has been employed by AutonomyWorks for over four years now and uses his communications degree to do digital marketing tasks for our clients. Jason feels that he is well suited for the work he does because of his high level of attention to detail. He has gained confidence, built friendships, and is saving his paychecks to purchase a new car.

As a father, I have seen the transformation first-hand with my son. Immediately after graduating, Matthew often looked back to the safety and support of high school and his transition program. Work has given Matthew a new purpose. He has mastered public transportation. He is attending the local community college. He is learning new skills. He is preparing to live independently.

Matthew is building a life.

**Action:**

There is much more to be done. In the next decade, the workplace will be flooded with over half million adults with autism – talented and eager to work. Small businesses generate a large percentage of new jobs across the United States. Small businesses must be a core part of any solution to the employment challenges facing adults with disabilities.

Small businesses working to address this challenge need your help. Through your actions and support, this Committee has a direct impact on the ability of AutonomyWorks and similar companies to grow and address this wave of workers.

### Expand 8(a) Business Development Program:

The Committee on Small Business Subcommittee on Contracting and Workforce manages a range of programs that enhance participation of small businesses in providing goods and services to the federal government. Unfortunately, today's contracting programs exclude many organizations employing people with developmental disabilities.

Participation in the 8(a) Business Development Program is based on the attributes of the business owner. Many people with developmental disabilities that meet the requirements of the programs lack the skills and experience to establish and manage the operations of the business.

We ask that the Committee consider changing the 8(a) Business Development Program or adding an additional category to include companies employing people with developmental disabilities. Participation in the program should be based on employment outcomes rather than owner characteristics.

### Support Small Business Apprenticeship Programs:

Apprenticeship programs are a proven approach for transitioning people with disabilities into employment. Many people with disabilities learn best through hands-on training. In addition, apprenticeships provide people with disabilities the opportunity to demonstrate their talents on the job.

The recently implemented Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) supports apprenticeships as a tool for workforce development. The scale of small businesses can make it challenging to develop and operate an apprenticeship program. We encourage this Committee to explore and support targeted initiatives that enable small businesses to build these programs collaboratively. For example, ...

- Create targeted technical assistance programs that encourage small businesses to build collaborative apprenticeship programs through consortium models or intermediaries.
- Establish tax credits that help small businesses embrace apprenticeships as part of their employee development strategy.

### Closing:

Chairman Chabot, Ranking Member Velázquez and members of the Committee, thank you for allowing me to share my story and, more importantly, the skills and talents of AutonomyWorks Associates. I look forward to your questions.