



Testimony of
Angela Timashenka Geiger, President and CEO, Autism Speaks
Ready, Willing and Able to Work:
How Small Businesses Empower People with Developmental
Disabilities
Before the Committee on Small Business
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Good morning Chairman Chabot, Ranking Member Velázquez and Members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about a topic that is of great importance to the autism community: how small businesses empower people with developmental disabilities to work.

I am Angela Timashenka Geiger, President and CEO of Autism Speaks. Autism Speaks is dedicated to promoting solutions, across the spectrum and throughout the life span, for the needs of individuals with autism and their families. We do this through advocacy and support; increasing understanding and acceptance of autism spectrum disorder; and advancing research into causes and better interventions for autism spectrum disorder and related conditions.

While we work on issues across the lifespan, Autism Speaks places a significant emphasis on supporting adults on the spectrum, in part by providing tools and resources to expand employment opportunities and workplace supports for individuals with autism. One of our community's most daunting challenges – finding and retaining employment – is being tackled by entrepreneurs and small businesses. Across the country, small businesses are utilizing their unique flexibility to create accommodating and innovative business practices that sustainably employ individuals with autism, expose students earlier in their education to real-world work experience, and provide opportunities for work-based learning and technical skill attainment.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak with you about some of the overarching themes and trends in autism employment.

Recognizing the Need

The employment rates of adults with disabilities are about half of people without disabilities; the employment rates of individuals with autism are lower still. According to the State Employment Leadership Network's 2016 National Report on Employment Services and Outcomes, the workforce participation rate for adults with cognitive disabilities is less than 25 percent – ten percent lower than

the participation rate for adults with any other type of disability.¹ When employed, people with these disabilities are more likely to work part-time and earn much less than those with less significant disabilities.² The need to close this employment gap is clear: each year, an estimated 50,000 youth with autism transition from school into adult life, and over half are disconnected from work or further education and training.³

Some of the barriers to employment for people with autism stem from difficulty with communication and social interaction. Unfortunately, these challenges are often amplified in typical employment scenarios – such as in a traditional interview process, daily interaction with coworkers, or even traveling to the workplace. Many such barriers can be mitigated through appropriate accommodations, tailored to the individual and implemented by the employer. These accommodations are often free or inexpensive. Employers benefit significantly by including a neuro-diverse workforce that contributes to overall productivity and an enriched social climate.⁴

Small businesses, by far, form the “economic engine” of the United States economy and employ 65 percent of the workforce today.⁵ Despite this, a lower percentage of people with disabilities, and more specifically those with autism, are employed in small businesses.⁶ Autism Speaks believes this is an opportunity to improve.

Trends in Disability Employment

While employment opportunities for people with disabilities have substantially improved since the Great Recession, the gap, in comparison to those without disabilities, continues to persist at almost the same rate.⁷ According to the March 2018 Jobs Report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the labor participation rate of people with disabilities age 16-64 was 34.8 percent – less than half of that for people without disabilities (76.7 percent).⁸ Women with disabilities have lower rates of employment than their male counterparts.⁹

However, despite the continued low rates of disability employment, progress is being made. In the last year, employment rates for people with disabilities have increased (up from 32.3 percent in March

¹Winsor, J., Timmons, J., Butterworth, J., Shepard, J., Landa, C., Smith, F., Domin, D., Migliore, A., Bose, J., & Landim, L. (2017). *StateData: The National Report on Employment Services and Outcomes 2016*. Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Boston, Institute for Community Inclusion.

²Winsor, et al.

³Roux, A., Shattuck, P., Rast, J., Rava, Julianna A., & Anderson, K. (2015). *National Autism Indicators Report: Transition into Young Adulthood*. Philadelphia, PA: Life Course Outcomes Research Program, A.J. Drexel Autism Institute, Drexel University.

⁴Austin, R. D., & Pisano, G. P. (2017). Neurodiversity as a competitive advantage. Harvard Business Review, reterived from: <https://hbr.org/2017/05/neurodiversity-as-a-competitive-advantage>

⁵ <https://www.dol.gov/odep/pdf/SmallBusinessFactSheet.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.dol.gov/odep/topics/SmallBusiness.htm>

⁷ Livermore, G., & Honeycutt, T. (2015). Employment and economic well-being of people with disabilities before and after the Great Recession. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, 26, 70 – 79.

⁸United States Department of Labor. (2018, April). Table A-6. Employment status of the civilian population by sex, age, and disability status, not seasonally adjusted. *United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics*. Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t06.htm>

⁹Ibid.

2017).¹⁰ Disability employment has increased steadily over the last 24 months.¹¹ The rate of increase for workers with disabilities is greater than the rate for people without disabilities. These gains are encouraging, but much work remains to achieve parity in employment for people with and without disabilities.

Trends in Employing People with Autism

Despite the low employment rate of individuals with autism, research indicates that many adults with autism are willing and able to work.¹² There continues to be a significant increase in the demand for employment opportunities within the autism community. We have increasingly heard from self-advocates, family members, service providers, and other community members about the need to create employment opportunities for adults with autism.

Autism Speaks witnessed this increased demand at Small Business Town Hall meetings we held in cities across the United States. We testified about these activities before this Committee in 2016 and continue to see demand for replicable, promising practices and opportunities for small businesses. Employers continue to highlight the strengths and achievements of employees with autism and their resulting business success which further increases the interest among the autism and business communities to create work opportunities.

As communities are demanding more employment opportunities for adults with autism, progress is also being made through the implementation of recently enacted federal and state policies. These include the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014, which requires state vocational rehabilitation agencies to focus on serving transition-age youth with disabilities and support competitive integrated employment. In 2017, Autism Speaks began surveying states about the status of the implementation of WIOA and their efforts to serve individuals with autism. As we learn more from these efforts, we are beginning to identify emerging trends not only in best practices but also in service gaps.

In addition, state Medicaid Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS) programs are increasingly reshaping their day services to focus less on non-paid activities and more on paid employment. Forty-six states have adopted Employment First initiatives which strive to make community employment the default outcome for people with disabilities receiving publicly funded services.¹³ Autism Speaks is working hard at the local level to make sure the implementation of these policies is helping people with autism get jobs.

On all levels, small businesses and entrepreneurs are responding to the increasing numbers of adults with autism who are eager to work. Through our continued work on employment, we have identified three trends in autism employment that we would like to highlight for the Committee today.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹National Trends in Disability Employment (nTIDE). (2018). *nTIDE March 2018 Jobs Report: Job Growth for Americans with Disabilities Reaches Two-Year Milestone*. (2018). Retrieved from Research on Disability.

<https://researchondisability.org/news-features/2018/04/06/ntide-march-2018-jobs-report-job-growth-for-americans-with-disabilities-reaches-two-year-milestone>

¹²Roux, et al.

¹³Winsor, et al.

Mission-Driven Businesses

One of the most prevalent and rapidly reproduced autism employment models we have seen is the Mission-Driven Business, wherein a social entrepreneur creates a business whose mission is to hire people with autism or other developmental disabilities. Both AutonomyWorks and Extraordinary Ventures are great examples of this model and are providing a needed service to their local autism communities. Other successful businesses that follow this model include Rising Tide car wash in Florida, Puzzles Bakery in New York, and SMILE Biscotti in California. Although these businesses can be established in any market sector, we most frequently see bakeries and coffee shops, small item manufacturers and high-tech firms.

Diversity Hiring Initiatives

In recent years, a number of employers – including Microsoft, SAP, DXC, JPMorgan, Ernst & Young, and Ford – have announced autism employment initiatives. Most often these are initiatives undertaken by large corporations and firms that seek to diversify their workforce by hiring individuals with autism. Many of these firms participated in the *Autism at Work* annual conference at which Autism Speaks has participated. Attracted by the unique talents of individuals with autism, these larger firms actively seek out neuro-diverse college graduates.

Many employers – large and small – are interested in developing similar hiring initiatives. Autism Speaks regularly connects businesses, service providers, and job seekers, and we are continuing to explore how best we can serve as a central connection point. We hope to systematize and track those connections and partnerships, utilizing our online platforms to collect and disseminate information about these corporate initiatives to job seekers on the spectrum.

Micro-enterprises and Self-Employment

The third major trend we see in autism employment is the increase in the number of micro-enterprises and small businesses established and operated by entrepreneurs with autism. John's Crazy Socks is a perfect example of how entrepreneurship can be a tremendously successful employment option for individuals with developmental disabilities. Previously this committee heard from another successful micro-enterprise – Poppin' Joe's Kettle Corn based in Kansas. Micro-enterprise and self-employment have been particularly successful for artists with autism who can generate income selling their works. Entrepreneurship offers a great level of flexibility and job customization that can be built around the individual with autism.

In an effort to support these entrepreneurs, we are proud to host a page on our website called "Shop a Little, Help A Lot!".¹⁴ This page features products and goods available for purchase that are created by individuals with autism. Customers can shop for gifts and treats while supporting the autism community.

Promoting Solutions

In addition to studying successful business models for autism employment, Autism Speaks is committed to becoming a central resource where employers of any scale can share strategies, best practices, and resources. In exploring these flexible approaches to promote employment of adults with autism, we have identified three overarching themes that have proven successful in increasing employment for people with autism – consultation, collaboration and community resources.

¹⁴<https://www.autismspeaks.org/shop-little-help-lot>

Consultation

Not all small businesses know how to recruit, retain, and advance individuals with autism. We believe that creating communities of experts and invested partners who can share information about accommodations and best practices is essential to helping small businesses unlock the potential of this untapped workforce.

Since 2017, we have focused on bringing high-quality consultation to businesses interested in employing adults with autism. Teams of experienced corporate disability consultants recruited and supported by Autism Speaks and NEXT for AUTISM work with community organizations (such as employment service providers) and national and regional businesses interested in hiring people with autism. This has enabled us to assist companies to develop autism-focused disability hiring initiatives that build a diverse labor and customer pool while providing a positive return on investment. Cintas, Staples, Quest Diagnostics and a number of other companies are working with us on this effort. Each company receives consultation from a member of a team of national disability consultants – experienced professionals who have directed many of the most high-profile disability and inclusion projects in the country, including companies such as Walgreens, Best Buy, Office Depot/Max, PepsiCo, and Mercy Health.

Professional consultation provides a wealth of information to businesses. Businesses often request autism and disability-related training for employees as well as specific training on how to develop job accommodations and leverage natural supports. In addition, consultants have helped employers learn how to source qualified employees and customers with autism and similar disabilities and how to capture tax- and other business-related incentives. Finally, businesses have leveraged content knowledge to market their work in this area successfully: businesses marketing the quality and usefulness of their product – as opposed to marketing the fact that the staff are people with autism – have proven to have more successful campaigns.

Our goal is to mobilize technical assistance experts and disability employment consultants across the country and make their expertise more accessible to the autism and small business communities. Rather than a “one size fits all” approach, technical assistance based on the individual needs, goals, and financial resources of each small business has proved hugely successful. We estimate that for every \$1 Autism Speaks invests in consulting, a person with autism will earn \$27.38 in wages. We hope that others who invest in the space will see similar returns.

Collaboration

There are many organizations and businesses that are working towards increasing employment opportunities for adults with autism, and we have found that collaboration is a critical component to achieving success. Some promising collaborations we have developed include a database on AutismSpeaks.org and the Autism Employment Network on LinkedIn where individuals can share information, learn from one another, and grow their networks in order to create greater opportunities for workers with autism. To further assist employers, we developed An Employer’s Guide to Hiring and Retaining Employees with Autism Spectrum Disorder in collaboration with leading experts in the field, self-advocates and community members.

Through ongoing partnership with Microsoft’s autism hiring initiative, we sponsored the Autism Empowerment Kit. This resource provides employers guidance, recommendations, and strategies for

providing support and workplace accommodations to empower employees with autism throughout their careers.¹⁵

Autism Speaks formed a national funders' collaborative with Kessler Foundation, May and Stanley Smith Charitable Trust, NEXT for Autism, and Poses Family Foundation. This collaborative has committed more than \$7.5 million since 2014 to support groundbreaking work in disability and inclusion in employment. The collective funding allows private companies, non-profit organizations, schools and universities, and public agencies to work together in new and innovative ways to expand employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

The collaborative supports the Pepsi ACT (Achieving Change Together) initiative as well as the US Business Leadership Network® (USBLN®) "Going for the Gold" initiative. Forthcoming efforts will promote the establishment of public-private partnerships in local communities and the distribution of an Employer's Guide to Disability and Inclusion Programs to corporations around the U.S.

This collaboration has also developed online tools and resources for employers designed to help companies recruit, hire, and retain employees with disabilities. These web-based supports include facts and case studies to show how disability inclusion drives business value as well as a do-it-yourself guide that will provide a business all the information it needs to start or enhance a disability employment and inclusion program in seven clear steps.¹⁶

Autism Speaks routinely collaborates with academic institutions, supporting their work with knowledge translation. This collaboration helps bring a "design thinking" framework in innovating for locally developed practices in employment. For example, Autism Speaks is advising Cornell University's Yang-Tan Institute and DXC Technology in their efforts to scale-up their model towards employment solutions for people with autism.

We are also working with other leaders in disability employment as well as state and federal policymakers to improve employment outcomes for adults with autism. Specifically, our Public Health & Inclusion Team is working with Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment and Policy-funded multi-agency effort to identify public policy and programmatic solutions that support employment outcomes and economic well-being of individuals with autism that are receiving welfare benefits. Along with inputs from Social Security Administration and other academic researchers, we are continuing to articulate employment-related support needs for individuals with autism.

Finally, Autism Speaks has made the commitment to contract with businesses that employ people with autism. As other corporations do, we contract with other vendors to supply resources like t-shirts and items for our fundraising walks. Spectrum Designs – which employs people with autism – provides these materials for us and we are their largest client.

Community Resources

Collaboration with employers and other partners on its own is not enough – Autism Speaks understands we must also provide information and resources to assist individuals with autism, family members, service providers, and other community members. To do so, we have developed and shared different

¹⁵ <https://gisc.bsr.org/files/BSR-GISC-Autism-Empowerment-Kit.pdf>

¹⁶ <https://workplaceinitiative.org/guide/>

resources including our Employment Tool Kit which provides resources and information to help adults with autism research, find and keep employment in today's competitive labor market.

In addition, we have developed a parent's guide on how to help one's child gain competitive employment. We maintain an expanding roster of large companies across the country that have made a concerted effort to publish their inclusion and diversity policies and share this database publicly to help job hunters with autism know where to apply. All of these resources are available on our website at www.AutismSpeaks.org.

Finally, we launched www.TheSpectrumCareers.com in 2015, which is a jobs portal designed to promote inclusive employment of the autism community by proactively matching job seekers with businesses as well as employment service providers.

Looking Forward

Autism Speaks is proud to work with an integral part of our nation's economy – small businesses – to improve employment outcomes for individuals with autism, increase individuals' chances for self-sufficiency and independence, and help businesses improve their bottom line. Our collaborative efforts with the small business community and the broader public strive to spread awareness about the benefits of employing individuals with autism, develop innovative and sustainable business models and hiring practices, and provide technical assistance to implement best practices. **What we have learned is clear—the innovation and flexibility unique to small businesses and entrepreneurs enable them to lead the way in employing individuals with autism.**

Small businesses are in a position not only to develop new models that employ individuals with autism but also to innovate in a way that responds directly to local labor market needs. The connection many small businesses have with their communities is vital to creating the partnerships necessary to transition young adults into the local workforce, share best practices with other local businesses, and nurture a workforce comprised of people with varying abilities. The small business community is central to building a society that understands the dignity of work and values the contributions of people with autism.

Capabilities of Small Business

The small business community is uniquely fit to overcome the historical barriers many adults with autism face in their efforts to join the workforce. The barriers to employment associated with autism spectrum disorders themselves – especially difficulty communicating and navigating social norms – are easily mitigated through achievable modifications. Employers report that a high percentage (59%) of job accommodations cost absolutely nothing to make, while the rest typically require a one-time investment of only \$500.¹⁷ Small businesses can work directly with individuals on the spectrum to understand their needs and strengths, find accommodations that work, and implement those practices consistently throughout the workplace and across all phases of employment.

Similarly, small businesses can harness their close community ties to leverage natural and other supports to help individuals with autism achieve employment. Small businesses are in a superior position to benefit from existing community-focused programs meant to prepare and support transitioning students with autism. Through individualized education plans, vocational rehabilitation,

¹⁷ Loy, B. (2005, updated 2017). *Workplace Accommodations: Low Cost, High Impact*. Morgantown, WV: Job Accommodation Network.

and career and technical education, small businesses can partner with these local workforce development initiatives to set up a pipeline of skilled workers with autism.

As part of the local and regional economy, small businesses provide an array of career pathways for individuals with autism. What the small business community must do as a whole is better understand its role in this pipeline and provide increased work-based learning and employment opportunities for youth with autism so that greater numbers of students with autism can match their interests and skills with labor market demand and secure sustainable employment.

Benefits to Small Business

Autism Speaks believes the small businesses will benefit greatly from employing individuals with autism. Increasing the opportunities for individuals with autism to find sustainable employment is more than a social imperative; doing so also yields economic gain for businesses.

Employers can benefit by retaining valuable employees, improving productivity and morale, reducing workers' compensation and training costs, and diversifying their workforce. Employers have found workers with autism to be their most loyal, dedicated, and reliable employees, maintaining consistent hours worked per week for significant periods of time.¹⁸ Businesses also report that while on the job, employees with autism show engagement substantially higher than employees without disabilities, leading to increased productivity.¹⁹ Hiring individuals on the spectrum can also teach companies how to better identify with a growing customer base personally impacted by autism.

Autism Speaks believes the small business community is well-suited to spread awareness of the autism community as an underutilized source of high-quality employees. Awareness about the benefits of hiring individuals with autism and the low cost of providing accommodations must be increased. This Committee, business associations, local chambers of commerce, local industry associations, and other employer networks are in a powerful position to help other small businesses learn about best practices and take steps toward hiring qualified individuals with autism.

Nationally, Autism Speaks and other organizations are working hard to raise awareness within the broader business community about the abilities of people with autism. As businesses of all sizes and from all industries begin to recognize that hiring employees with autism is a cost-effective way to build a diverse and inclusive workforce, real-world testimonials from small businesses will be increasingly important for spreading awareness.

Small businesses are ideally positioned to share their real-world experience with other members of the business community, not just in hiring employees on the spectrum but also in successfully retaining employees with autism.

¹⁸ Schaller J., & Yang N. (2005). Competitive Employment for People with Autism: Correlates of Successful Closure in Competitive and Supported Employment. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*, 49(1), 4-16.

¹⁹ BlueStarRecyclers. (2018, May). A 100% solution. *BlueStarRecyclers*. Retrieved from bluestarrecyclers.org/solution.htm

Benefiting the Community

Employing individuals with autism yields considerable economic and social advantages, simultaneously reducing the support costs for this population.²⁰ Estimated lifetime costs for supporting an adult with autism range from \$1.4 million to \$2.4 million in the U.S., and the degree to which adults with autism fail to achieve independence contributes to increased lifetime care costs.²¹ Research shows that employing individuals with autism, including those who may need substantial job supports saves taxpayer money by reducing the number of benefits that people with autism need when they are unemployed.²² In addition, employing individuals with autism alleviates some of the pressure on the overburdened adult service system; when employment supplants traditional adult day supports, society can achieve greater cost efficiency in these programs.²³

Recommendations

Numerous existing policies impact the employment of individuals with autism, some working to advance it, others to impede. Many do both. Consultation, collaboration and sharing of community resources can certainly help businesses and communities create more job opportunities, but we must also consider other systemic improvements. Autism Speaks wishes to make three systemic recommendations to improve employment outcomes for individuals on the spectrum:

Our first recommendation is to improve transition services in schools. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requires that schools create a transition plan starting no later than age 16 for all students with individualized education plans. For this provision to work as intended, transition plans must include coordination across vocational rehabilitation, special education and career services. Schools must also work with community employers to help match students with available jobs in the local market. The onus does not fall on any one entity – success requires a concerted effort from everyone, and that effort must come as early as possible to maximize the benefit to students.

Our second recommendation is to improve coordination between federal government service providers. In its 2017 Report to Congress entitled *Young Adults and Transitioning Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorder*, required by the Autism CARES Act, the Department of Health and Human Services called for “better coordination across federal agencies, and across service systems at the state and community levels...to adequately meet the diverse needs of the heterogeneous population of transitioning youth and young adults with ASD.”²⁴ Autism Speaks agrees that increased alignment between different entities serving transition-age youth with autism will result in more seamless service delivery for families and improve employment outcomes for adults.

Our third recommendation is to ensure that state-level implementation of workforce programs – including WIOA and HCBS – results in meaningful improvements for individuals with autism. When

²⁰ Jacob, A., Scott, M., Falkmer, M., & Falkmer, T. (2015). The Costs and Benefits of Employing an Adult with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Systematic Review. *PLoS ONE*, 10(10): e0139896.

<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0139896>.

²¹ Buescher, A., Cidav, Z., Knapp, M., & Mandell, D. (2014), Costs of Autism Spectrum Disorders in the United Kingdom and the United States. *JAMA Pediatr.* 168(8), 721-8.

²² Jacob, et al.

²³ Winsor, et al.

²⁴ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2017, October). *Report to Congress: Young Adults and Transitioning Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorder*. Retrieved from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services website: <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/2017AutismReport.pdf>

Congress passed WIOA in 2014, it included provisions designed specifically to improve employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities. These pre-employment transition services provide a substantive framework for supporting individualized planning and training based on skill level and prioritize work-based learning. States are also working to expand access to HCBS and improve those services to emphasize paid work in the community. These efforts are important, and stakeholders must work together to ensure implementation produces positive outcomes for individuals on the spectrum.

Conclusion

Employment is more than the key to independence; our jobs are, in large part, the way we as Americans define ourselves. Individuals with autism share the same right to shape their identities and deserve the same opportunity to maximize their potential and to contribute as full and productive members of society. Small businesses today have a tremendous opportunity to help them do so, improving their bottom line and benefiting their communities at the same time.

Autism Speaks remains dedicated to serve as a conduit between individuals with autism and the small business community, and we look forward to strengthening that partnership today and into the future.