

Ari Ne'eman's New Barriers

By Scott Standifer, Autism Works, Dec. 2011

Autism self-advocate Ari Ne'eman is promoting a new term in the conversation about autism employment: "Barriers of Social Architecture". It is a conscious attempt to frame autism employment issues in the language of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Ne'eman says the language of architectural barriers is a useful way to understand the significance of presumptions about social skills in the workplace.

For Ne'eman, these barriers include the unwritten rules about everything from types of job supervision and reporting expectations to how and when to talk with co-workers. These are the things which are almost never spelled out in traditional job descriptions or explained during the interviewing and hiring process. And yet, for a person who is not able to intuitively figure these elements out, they are critical - the kinds of things that can lead to lack of job offers or to repeated job loss soon after hiring.

Ne'eman explains that many people on the spectrum avoid even applying for certain kinds of jobs because of fears about these unwritten rules – fears born of hard experience. In that way, these social issues block access to jobs in the same way physical barriers can block wheel-chair users or those with blindness.

But Ne'eman is not just talking – he and the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network (ASAN) which he co-founded are taking active steps.



Ari Ne'eman



In September, 2011, ASAN announced a collaboration with mortgage investment company Freddie Mac to provide several internships for adults on the spectrum in the Washington, D.C. area.

These internships will provide paid work experience and add an impressive entry on the resumes of participants. The project matches, in many ways, an innovative and successful program conducted

in the U.K. by the National Autistic Society and investment company Goldman Sachs. That project has led approximately 50 participants into later careers in the financial industry over a number of years. Ne'eman has similar hopes for the ASAN / Freddie Mac collaborative.

Ne'eman and ASAN are also actively lobbying several large corporations to start addressing these social barriers. It is, he says, a way to start breaking down the barriers of social architecture in the workplace.

Like most people on the spectrum, Ne'eman is no stranger to the painful experience of social barriers.

During elementary and middle school in New Jersey, despite having excellent academic skills, Ne'eman experienced significant ostracism and bullying because of challenges with social skills. Ne'eman was diagnosed at age 12 with Asperger's Syndrome, and eventually transferred to a special education high school – two hours away by bus. Frustrated with the low quality of the classes there, Ne'eman lobbied his way back to public school by joining and excelling in after-school academic clubs at the local high school. Soon the teachers sponsoring those clubs began advocating with school administrators for the return to "inclusive education" for this academically gifted young man. He similarly excelled in AP classes and tests at the public high school, including three for which he studied independently.



By his senior year in high school, he was being invited to speak at state and regional educational conferences. During this period, he was appointed by the New Jersey Governor to the New Jersey Special Education Review Commission and was Vice Chair of the New Jersey Adults with Autism Task Force, where he helped review the state's autism services. In 2006 Ne'eman also co-founded ASAN (which is now one of the leading self-advocacy groups in the country, with chapters in 15 cities). He went on to earn a degree in political science from the University of Maryland.

In 2008, Ne'eman served as the first-ever Patricia Morrissey Disability Policy Fellow at the Institute for Educational Leadership in Washington, D.C.

In 2010, President Barak Obama appointed Ne'eman to the National Council on Disabilities.

At the age of 22, Ne'eman was one of the youngest presidential nominees ever. He currently chairs the Council's Policy and Program Evaluation Committee.



That same year, Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius appointed Ne'eman as a public member of the Interagency Autism Coordinating Committee, a federal advisory committee which coordinates all autism efforts within HHS.

Throughout this rising career, Ne'eman has continued as the president of ASAN. ASAN has worked to link autism self-advocates through its own membership, collaborate with other self-advocacy groups, and raise awareness of autism self-advocate positions in public policy discussions. The organization has been an outspoken proponent of the neurodiversity perspective and social inclusion for people with autism. Advocacy for employment issues is a natural extension of this work.



ASAN staff have recently worked closely with the Job Accommodation Network (JAN) in developing a fact sheet on Employees with Asperger Syndrome as part of JAN's Accommodation and Compliance Series. On December 15, 2011, Ne'eman participated in a webinar with JAN staff on autism employment.

Ne'eman and ASAN have recently announced plans for a "resume bank" into which autistic job seekers can submit their resumes. ASAN created the project in response to inquiries from several U.S. corporations seeking to hire college-educated individuals on the spectrum to increase the diversity of their staff.

In the context of these employment efforts, Ne'eman has begun promoting his "barriers of social architecture" perspective for autism employment. "When there is a working assumption that the average employee is able to walk," says Ne'eman, "buildings are built without ramps. Similarly, there is a working assumption that the average employee is able to infer certain things from body language and tone, and from a certain base of knowledge that often isn't present, or isn't present to the same degree, within our community."

Just as ramps and associated changes are relatively easy solutions to architectural barriers, says Ne'eman, we must begin to address autism employment issues by thinking about the social communication equivalent to ramps.

NOTE: More information about Ari Ne'eman and ASAN is available on the ASAN website at <http://www.autisticadvocacy.org/>

Ari Ne'eman will give a presentation on *Barriers of Social Architecture* at the Autism Works National Conference in St. Louis, MO, March 6 & 7, 2011. Details on the conference are available at <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Autism-Works/136057253090452> or at <http://dps.missouri.edu/Autism.html>.

The Autism Works national conference is presented by:



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