

Reframing Autism Stephen Shore on Autism Employment

Dr. Stephen Shore believes that the way to improve autism employment is reframing the way we think about autism itself. "For example, we should look at the style of communication (of a person with autism) - which, for those of us who are verbal, would be factual, detailed, to the point, truthful, and even repetitive - and wonder, 'Gee, where could I use this type of communication style?'"

Shore, an Assistant Professor at Adelphi University in New York State, is a leading voice in the autism self-advocacy movement. Although his research largely focuses on children with autism and the school environment, he has also edited several books about adult self-advocacy, including *Ask and Tell: Self Advocacy and Disclosure for People on the Autism Spectrum* (2004). He is most widely known for co-authoring *Understanding Autism for Dummies* (2006). In 2007 he also co-authored a chapter on vocational rehabilitation of adults with autism for the *32nd Institute on Rehabilitation Issues*, a project of the Rehabilitation Services Administration.



"Instead of looking at autism as a series of limitations and deficits in communication and socialization, restricted interests and repetitive behaviors, can't we just reframe these as characteristics without value judgment?" Shore asks.

For Shore, disclosure is another key issue in employment for adults on the spectrum, and a key solution is also reframing. "I like to bring meaning to disclosure," he says, "So it goes beyond saying 'Hi, I have autism... and it's great to meet you.' Disclosure is about beginning a discussion about the strengths and challenges that an individual may have."

Shore recommends that, during disclosure, a person should begin by reviewing their personal strengths for the other person (potential employer, co-worker, etc.), and then discussing how they use those strengths to accommodate their personal challenges. In this way, the person with autism helps frame the other person's understanding of autism in terms of abilities and effective supports.

"I always use the word 'challenge' instead of 'weakness'" he adds, "You can do something with a challenge; you really can't do anything with a weakness."

Shore's next key point for autism employment is similar – using a person's strong interests to help them engage better in the job. This can sometimes mean a direct link to the type of career position they seek. But when that is not practical, the person's interests can be used as a metaphor or indexing system or job aide, framing the job in a structure that is interesting, familiar, and empowering to them. In this way, the person's passion can be used as a support tool to enhance their job performance.

Shore also sees self-employment is a way to reframe some of the challenges of traditional work environments.

"Self-employment can be a good model because it allows the individual to get in, do what is most important to them - and that is doing the job - and then get out before office politics take their toll," he says.

"If you are in a traditional employee-employer relationship, it becomes quite a tap dance around getting your supervisor or boss to understand that you might have a better way of going about things. People who aren't on the autism spectrum talk about all kinds of strategies to do that. When I am hired as a consultant for a school district, they are hiring me to tell them what is wrong and how to fix it. So I can go straight to the point – this is not working and this is how to fix it."

Tom Duffy, a vocational rehabilitation trainer with the Center on Rehabilitation Synergy at SUNY-Buffalo, has collaborated with Shore and seen him present several times.

"Stephen is a great autism self-advocate in many spheres, employment being just one of them,"
says Duffy.

Duffy says that Shore's core message is also about reframing: "Stephen shows people that there are other ways besides being neurotypical to be happy and successful, but a lot of it is up to you in terms of empowerment and figuring out ways to get what you want."

Shore adds that success for people with autism can have wider implications as well:

"Accommodations made for people on the autism spectrum tend to be good for everybody else. What we need to do is find these strengths and figure out how to use them; how Society can use them."

Dr. Stephen Shore will present the Second Day Keynote address 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>.

Stephen Shore's website is at: <http://www.autismasperger.net/>

The Autism Works national conference is presented by:



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