

Understanding Employment Outcomes for Individuals with Low-Functioning Autism: A Narrative Review

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Abstract

Individuals with low-functioning autism and co-occurring intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) face disproportionately high barriers to meaningful, sustained employment. Therefore, this narrative review aims to synthesise existing literature to examine employment patterns, barriers, and support mechanisms influencing employment outcomes among individuals with low-functioning autism. We discover that most of the employment transpires in supported or sheltered environments, whereas competitive, integrated employment is still rare. A confluence of social-communication difficulties, sensory-environmental barriers, employer discrimination, and policy gaps impedes job acquisition and, critically, long-term retention. While evidence-based support mechanisms such as workplace accommodations, assistive technology, and employer training exist, a significant implementation gap persists. The review identifies critical research gaps, including a lack of longitudinal studies, a historical focus on high-functioning autism, and insufficient investigation of integrated support models. We conclude that a paradigm shift is necessary, shifting from a focus on job placement to one of sustained career support, which requires coordinated efforts from researchers, practitioners, employers, and policymakers to translate the promise of inclusion into a tangible reality.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder, Low-Functioning Autism, Intellectual Disabilities, Special Needs, Supported Employment, Employment Outcomes

Introduction

Employment is widely recognised as a critical determinant of quality of life, fostering financial independence, personal agency, and social inclusion. Within the field of social sciences, access to meaningful work is viewed as a fundamental vehicle for community participation and the exercise of citizenship. However, for individuals with low-functioning autism and co-occurring intellectual and developmental disabilities, this path remains fraught with systemic obstacles. Recent evidence consistently demonstrates that this population continues to face disproportionately low employment rates and limited job diversity compared to their neurotypical and high-functioning peers (DuBois et al., 2024; Nord et al., 2016). While the broader autism community has seen increased vocational interest, individuals with LFA

remain marginalized, experiencing significant barriers that impede both initial job acquisition and, more critically, long-term career retention (Chan et al., 2017; Nord et al., 2016).

The challenges for individuals with autism are not monolithic, yet a persistent disparity exists in research and outcomes between high- and low-functioning populations. Current literature and vocational interventions frequently prioritize individuals with high-functioning autism, focusing on job acquisition through social skills training and interview preparation (Scott et al., 2018; Walsh et al., 2016). In contrast, individuals with LFA often require more intensive, multifaceted, and prolonged support to navigate the complex relationship between their individual capabilities and the sensory or social demands of the workplace (Chan et al., 2017; Martin & Lanovaz, 2021). Despite the development of supportive mechanisms such as the Integrated Employment Success Tool (IEST®), autism-specific supervisor training, and adaptive modifications, these resources remain markedly underutilised for those with significant support needs (Martin et al., 2022; Petty et al., 2022). This implementation gap is further exacerbated by a focus on rapid job placement metrics in vocational rehabilitation, which often neglects the sustained support necessary for career progression (Iwanaga et al., 2025; Roux et al., 2019).

This narrative review addresses a critical methodological and conceptual gap by shifting the focus away from high-functioning populations to specifically map the employment landscape for individuals with LFA and IDD. Its novelty lies in its synthesis of the "acquisition-retention gap," highlighting how current systemic models fail to provide the continuous, ecosystem-based support required by this underserved group (Chan et al., 2017; Scott et al., 2018). By aggregating empirical evidence on sectoral trends, demographic influences, and the efficacy of support mechanisms like assistive technology (Schaap et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2025), this study contributes to the social sciences by providing a framework for more inclusive vocational policy and practice. Ultimately, this review argues for a paradigm shift from simple job placement to long-term career sustainability, offering critical insights to help researchers, practitioners, and policymakers translate the promise of social inclusion into a tangible reality for all individuals on the spectrum (Doda et al., 2024; Maggio et al., 2023).

Employment Opportunities and Patterns

The empirical evidence paints a clear picture of a constrained employment landscape for individuals with low-functioning autism and special needs. The overwhelming majority find work in supported or sheltered employment settings, often in roles characterised by routine and repetitive tasks, such as in retail stocking, records management, or other highly customised positions (Martin & Lanovaz, 2021; Wehman et al., 2016). Competitive integrated employment, in contrast, remains a rare achievement. For the minority who do secure such positions, jobs are typically entry-level and necessitate substantial, ongoing on-the-job support to be sustainable (Wehman et al., 2016). This sectoral divide is stark; while high-functioning individuals are increasingly represented in fields like IT and healthcare, their low-functioning counterparts are predominantly funnelled into roles tailored to their abilities through intensive job matching and customisation rather than sectoral demand (Cordell, 2024).

These employment patterns are reflected in persistently low community employment rates, which studies consistently place between 14% and 21% for adults with ASD and IDD, with a

strong correlation between higher support needs and lower rates of employment sustainability (Nord et al., 2016; Chan et al., 2018). A critical failure of many existing interventions is their predominant focus on job acquisition through methods like social skills training and interview preparation while largely neglecting the more complex challenges of job retention and career progression (Iwanaga et al., 2025). This acquisition-retention gap is particularly detrimental to low-functioning individuals, who often require continuous support to maintain employment.

Demographic factors further influence these outcomes. While higher educational attainment and access to vocational rehabilitation services are generally associated with better employment outcomes, these advantages are significantly less pronounced for individuals with low-functioning autism (Kaya et al., 2016; Sung et al., 2015). Gender also plays a role, with women reporting greater challenges related to workplace stress and social interaction, and men facing more difficulties with executive function and disclosure, pointing to a need for gender-sensitive support strategies (Nagib & Wilton, 2021). Most alarmingly, transition-age youth with ASD consistently exhibit the worst employment outcomes, illustrating the profound value of early, well-coordinated transition planning from school to work (Roux et al., 2020). In summary, employment opportunities for this population are severely limited and heavily shaped by demographic factors, but the universal and paramount need is for individualised, ongoing support that extends far beyond the first day on the job.

Challenges in Employment

The journey to sustained employment is impeded by a confluence of social, environmental, and systemic barriers. The initial hurdle of the job interview itself presents a significant challenge, as individuals with low-functioning autism often face difficulties with conventions such as eye contact, tone modulation, and impression management, frequently leading to less favourable evaluations from potential employers regardless of their competency for the role itself (Maras et al., 2021; Norris et al., 2024). These social and communication challenges persist within the workplace, where mutual misunderstandings, a phenomenon known as the "Double Empathy Problem", can exacerbate social isolation and conflict with neurotypical colleagues and supervisors (Szechy et al., 2024; Finn et al., 2023). The pervasive fear of stigma and discrimination leads many autistic employees to selectively delay or forgo disclosure of their diagnosis, a difficult decision that subsequently limits their access to formal workplace accommodations and supports (Romualdez et al., 2021).

Beyond the social realm, the physical and sensory environment of the workplace can be a formidable barrier. Sensory sensitivities to fluorescent lighting, office noise, and other ambient activity can lead to overload, anxiety, and exhaustion, severely impacting job performance and retention (Waisman-Nitzan et al., 2021; Tomczak & Ziemiański, 2023). Despite the acknowledged need for adjustments such as low-stimulus workspaces, flexible schedules, and noise-cancelling equipment, such environmental modifications are frequently absent or inadequately implemented in most workplaces (Petty et al., 2023).

These challenges are compounded by pervasive discrimination and systemic failures. Formal and informal discrimination, including workplace bullying, social exclusion, and the enforcement of negative stereotypes, remains a common experience for autistic employees and is directly linked to poor employment retention (Lorenz et al., 2021; Yan, 2024). At a

systemic level, disability employment services and state-level policies often prioritise rapid job placement metrics over long-term career sustainability and progression, creating a revolving door where individuals are placed in positions they are not adequately supported to maintain, leading to cyclical unemployment and disillusionment (Roux et al., 2019). In essence, social communication difficulties and sensory-environmental barriers, when combined with systemic discrimination and policy gaps, create a powerful nexus of obstacles that hinder sustainable employment.

Support Mechanisms and the Implementation Gap

A robust body of evidence has identified a suite of effective support mechanisms that can dramatically improve employment outcomes. Workplace accommodations are consistently highlighted as foundational to success. These include sensory modifications, flexible working hours, remote work options, dedicated job coaching, and the use of electronically mediated communication, all of which are highly valued by autistic employees for reducing barriers and enhancing productivity (Tomczak & Ziemiański, 2023; Petty et al., 2023). The role of "natural supports," such as supportive relationships with supervisors and coworkers, is equally critical, often proving as important as formal interventions in improving job satisfaction and retention (Seagraves, 2021).

The potential of assistive technology (AT) is also increasingly evident. From simple prompting applications on smartphones to sophisticated virtual reality job training systems, technology can be essential for skill development, task management, and job performance (Zhou et al., 2025; Smith et al., 2015). The human element, however, remains paramount. Employer and supervisor training programmes, such as those utilising the IEST® tool or the Mentorwijs model, have demonstrated success in improving workplace knowledge and self-efficacy (Scott et al., 2018; Schaap et al., 2024). A genuinely inclusive workplace culture, supported by high-quality supervisor assistance, is repeatedly identified as a critical factor for positive organisational socialisation and long-term retention (Martin et al., 2023).

Furthermore, inclusive communication strategies such as modifying interview questions, providing mentorship, and using clear, written instructions can significantly ease workplace integration (Tomczak et al., 2021). Despite this compelling evidence, a vast implementation gap persists. Accommodations and technologies are severely underused, hampered by a lack of employer knowledge, unsupportive organisational cultures, and the complex, often stigma-laden process that employees must navigate to request support (Chandola & Rouxel, 2021; López et al., 2021). This chasm between knowing what works and making it consistently available represents the single greatest failure in the current ecosystem of employment support for this population.

Research Gaps and Future Directions

The field needs to address several critical gaps revealed by the synthesis of previous studies. Foremost is the population focus itself; the empirical base is disproportionately centred on high-functioning ASD, leading to a notable lack of research specifically investigating the employment needs and effective interventions for low-functioning individuals (Ashworth et al., 2023; Scheeren et al., 2021; Scott et al., 2019; Walsh et al., 2017). Closely related is the scarcity of long-term outcome studies. There is limited evidence on employment retention, career progression, and the sustained effectiveness of integrated, multi-component

interventions beyond the initial placement period (Dreaver et al., 2020). This situation is particularly concerning for transition-age youth, who face the worst outcomes yet for whom research on effective school-to-work transition support remains sparse (Roux et al., 2018). Significant disparities also exist in the delivery of vocational rehabilitation (VR) services. Studies show considerable state-level variation in VR experiences and outcomes, with crucial job-related supports being underutilised among students with autism (Roux et al., 2021). The problem is exacerbated by interdisciplinary gaps and inconsistent professional development and coordination between special education and VR practitioners, which hinders the provision of seamless transition support (Kester et al., 2019).

While employer training interventions show promise in improving knowledge, their long-term impact and widespread adoption require further optimisation and study (Scott et al., 2022). Similarly, while supportive workplace relationships are known to be critical, their specific impact on long-term employment outcomes is under-researched (Grenawalt et al., 2025). Promising integrated models, such as Project SEARCH plus ASD Support and the ACCESS protocol, demonstrate the value of holistic approaches, but more research is needed on ecosystem-based interventions that combine technology, training, and individualised support (Wehman et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2019). Ultimately, these research gaps are mirrored by systemic policy gaps, where inconsistent state and national policies fail to provide comprehensive strategies for supporting the employment of low-functioning individuals (Roux et al., 2019). Addressing these deficiencies requires a strategic shift toward longitudinal, integrated, and individualised intervention research, with a concerted focus on transition support, employer capacity building, and systemic policy reform.

Conclusion and Real-World Implications

In summary, the previous studies unequivocally demonstrate that meaningful employment for individuals with low-functioning autism and special needs, while achievable, is far from being realised at a systemic level. The current landscape is characterised by limited opportunity, where individuals are predominantly placed in supported settings and face a formidable array of social, environmental, and systemic barriers that undermine their ability to secure and maintain competitive work. While multi-component support strategies have been proven effective, a profound implementation gap prevents their widespread adoption. This highlights that the core challenge is not a lack of effective interventions, but rather a critical deficit in their consistent and widespread application.

To bridge this gap, a concerted, multi-faceted effort is imperative. The escalating needs of individuals with autism, and the growing number of transition-age youth who will require support, underscore the urgency of this endeavour (Doda et al., 2024; Maggio et al., 2023). For practitioners, this means evolving from a paradigm of job placement to one of career support, emphasising ongoing, multi-component strategies that seamlessly integrate job coaching, assistive technology, and environmental accommodations. For employers, it necessitates a proactive investment in autism-specific training, the deliberate cultivation of an inclusive culture, and the normalisation of accommodations processes. For policymakers, it demands the creation and faithful implementation of comprehensive, evidence-based policies that incentivise and fund long-term job retention and provide robust support for transition-age youth, moving beyond the current patchwork of inconsistent state-level programmes.

Finally, for the research community, this review underscores the urgent need to prioritize longitudinal studies that track career trajectories, to deliberately include low-functioning populations that have been historically marginalized in the literature, and to develop and rigorously evaluate integrated intervention models within a holistic, ecosystem-based framework. The central challenge is no longer a lack of knowledge about what needs to be done, but a critical deficit of will, coordination, and systemic commitment to implement these solutions at scale. By collectively addressing this challenge, we can begin to move from a paradigm of limited expectation to one of genuine inclusion, dignity, and opportunity for all individuals in the workforce.

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