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**Empowering Neurodiverse Populations for Employment through
Inclusion AI and Innovation Science (B-6970)
Funded to Vanderbilt University**

Policy and Practice Brief ^{1,2}

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² The full report is available from <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/90131>

Executive Summary

The unemployment and underemployment of Autistic people have been well documented. The traditional employment interview process has been identified as one area where the pursuit of employment is often halted for qualified candidates with autism. To explore what barriers and facilitators exist for neurodiverse job seekers, this report summarizes a study conducted by researchers from the Yang-Tan Institute on Employment and Disability at Cornell University, in partnership with the Owen Graduate School of Management at Vanderbilt University, on experiences in the employment interview and at work from multiple stakeholder perspectives (Autistic individuals, service providers, and employers).

The goal of the research is to provide insight into factors that influence success in the employment interview and at work. This NSF C-Accel study is part of a series of studies that is funded to Vanderbilt University entitled *Empowering Neurodiverse Populations for Employment*. The study utilized semi-structured individual and focus group interviews with key stakeholder groups, including Autistic individuals, service providers (community employment service providers and career counselors from educational institutions), and employers who have initiated autism-hiring programs. A total of 23 individuals participated in the study through group or individual interviews. To analyze the findings, the research team used qualitative content analysis, investigator triangulation, and inter-rater tests to capture salient themes and establish agreement on findings.

The findings suggest that Autistic individuals, employers, and service providers are consistent in describing key challenges and opportunities that influence the interview and employment experiences of Autistic individuals. Across all stakeholder groups, some common barriers to neurodiversity in the employment interview included: use of hypothetical and open-ended questions by interviewers, overstimulating or distracting interview settings, and reliance on normative behavioral or social cues (e.g., eye contact, posture, response time) that are not directly connected to future job success. Autistic informants highlighted the importance of having employment support, such as pre-interview training and awareness of what to expect from the employment interview (both environmental familiarity and in terms of questions and expectations). Having the confidence and ability to self-advocate was another central theme among participants with autism, especially when requesting modifications or accommodations within the employment interview process and at work.

Many participants with autism reported that developing skills during employment interviews required much trial-and-error experience and learning. This highlights the importance of service providers in facilitating understanding and working with employers to overcome barriers in the interview process and at work. Service providers were often described as having a central role in bridging information and communication gaps between employers and Autistic job seekers. In addition to helping job seekers “know what to expect,” and what is expected *of them*, service provider participants noted that neurodiversity-inclusive employer relationships often

incorporate innovative strategies, such as, mentor-mentee programs to acclimate neurodiverse candidates with a work space, requesting and navigating alterations to traditional HR processes, and helping employers identify weaknesses in existing approaches to employment interviews that might be unintentionally weeding out qualified candidates with autism.

Lastly, employer participants—all of whom were from organizations with existing autism-hiring initiatives— described the importance of employers demonstrating a willingness to adapt the traditional interview process to be more neurodiversity-inclusive. Employers noted that many of these alterations will benefit candidates across different demographic groups, including job seekers with autism. Strategies for minimizing barriers to traditional employment interview processes challenges closely mirrored those outlined by participants with autism and service providers. These included examples , such as, providing interview questions in advance, allowing time to gain familiarity with the interview setting, reducing the number of interviewers present, focusing on questions that assess job skills rather than hypothetical or open-ended questions that might disadvantage neurodiverse interviewees, and providing pre-interview neurodiversity sensitivity training for hiring personnel to be flexible about response time and provide clarifications as needed. Despite the awareness that the employers showed towards modifying workplace policies and practices to be more neurodiversity-inclusive, a commonly cited challenge involved mobilizing employers to change traditional recruitment, hiring, and workplace practices more broadly (i.e., outside a neurodiversity hiring program), and creating more holistic, less-generalized training for staff that makes actual hiring decisions. Findings were used to inform the development of the interview scripts of an artificial intelligence (AI)-based virtual reality tool, which aims to capture and reflect the real experiences of the stakeholders as they engage in job interviews. Findings are also being used to inform the development of AI tools that will be used to support Autistic individuals in preparing for job interviews and increasing facility in social interaction and collaboration in the workplace.