

Identifying the Strengths of Autistic Individuals and Their Alignment with Job Market Needs: A study in the Indian Context

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Abstract:

Background: Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is prevalent world over. There has been a paradigm change towards understanding the behavioral and cognitive strengths linked to autism. India's job industry is fast changing to one of automation, and digitization; which require focus, precision and detail orientation which are strengths found in the individuals in the autistic spectrum.

Objective: Study addresses the gap in the Indian context of understanding the job market skills needed and align them with the strengths of autistic individuals. The purpose of the research is to identify the behavioral and intellectual assets of autistic individuals in India who are employment ready in the age gap of 18 to 30 and evaluate their correspondence with those appreciated by the employers.

Method: Questionnaires were distributed to therapy professionals and employers. Standardized tools such as DASS-21, VABS, Sensory Profiling and P-Vat to assess the emotional well-being, vocational capabilities, and adaptive comportment of young autistic individuals aged 18 to 30.

Results: Tailored Training & Support (T1), Communication and Social Skill Gaps (T2), Workplace Accommodation (T3), and Mutual Role Clarity & Integration (T4). T1 and T2 were areas in which both young autistic adults and therapists agreed on the need for individualized preparation protocols and communication needs

Conclusion: The study reports that long term employment for autistic individuals necessitates a life-span oriented and interdisciplinary approach that ties advocacy, education, therapy and employment.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder, Employment, Strengths, Job market Identifying the Strengths of Autistic Individuals and Their Alignment with Job Market Needs: A study in the Indian Context.

INTRODUCTION:

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neuro developmental condition that exhibits a wide range of characteristics such as distinct communication patterns, restricted and repetitive behavior and differences in processing the sensory signals (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Traditionally, models that have been prevalent in research of ASD were focused on the deficits. In the recent times, there has been a paradigm change towards understanding and appreciating the behavioral and cognitive fortes linked to autism. The strengths associated with ASD often include, pattern recognition, detail orientation and logical reasoning (Baron-Cohen et al., 2009; Mottron et al., 2006). These perspectives based on strengths or assets are in harmony with the movement towards the acceptance of neurodiversity as natural differences among humans as opposed to pathological disorders that need to be cured (Singer, 2017; Kapp 2020).

If the international context is examined, there is a contrast between the different types of world economies. In the developed economies, there has been a marked increase in the cognizance of the potential contributing partnerships with autistic individuals in specific areas. Numerous neurodiverse hiring programs have been initiated by the multinational companies that recognize the strengths of autistic individuals in specific segments of data analytics, information technology and quality (Austin and Pisano, 2017). If we look at the situation of India which is the highest populated country in the world, over 2 million people are diagnosed to be on the spectrum (India Autism Center, 2022). However, inclusivity in employment strategies remains a gap to be addressed and researched upon. Limited awareness, lack of accommodating infrastructure, bias and stigma, form hurdles for autistic individuals, to participate in the Indian workforce (Mukhopadhyay, 2021). It can also be noted that with India being an information technology hub (World Economic Forum 2020), autistic individuals will have valuable contributions towards this burgeoning sector of workforce.

Thus, we can reason that in spite of the international models of strength-based employment strategies, the Indian context remains largely based on disability welfare. This inadequacy or gap in the system, does not recognize the abilities of the individuals who are autistic. At the same time, as noted previously, India's job industry is fast changing to one of automation, and digitization; which require focus, precision and detail orientation which are strengths found in the individuals in the autistic spectrum.

Our qualitative research study addresses the gap in the Indian context of understanding the job market skills needed and align them with the strengths of autistic individuals. The purpose of the research is to identify the behavioral and intellectual assets of autistic individuals in India who are employment ready in the age group of 18 to 30 and evaluate their correspondence with those appreciated by the employers across various industries. Study seeks to bring valuable insights that can be used for multiple purposes such as a curriculum development for skill development, generate data to improve the policymaker and employer awareness so that they proactively advocate and formulate inclusive hiring practices that appreciate a neurodivergent workforce. In terms of academia, this research provides a contextualized understanding as well as addresses the gap in the autism and employment discourse, with respect to India (Grinker, 2020; Sarrett, 2011).

LITERATURE REVIEW

While discussing the alignment of autistic individual strengths with the job market needs, it is important to talk about the role of employment in one's life. Being engaged in a fulfilling activity that provides economic independence is often taken for granted. Employment not only provides a sense of identity; it also adds structure and social interaction to the day-to-day life (Brown and Lent 2013). Yet most of the autistic individuals are not able to avail of employment opportunities. Studies report that approximately

80% of those in the autism spectrum are underemployed (Baldwin et al., 2014; Scott et al., 2019). There are intrinsic barriers within the employment system that include insufficient understanding of neurodivergence among employers and, stigma (Hedley et al., 2018; Lindsay et al., 2019).

In the recent decades, strength-based approaches to autism and employment opportunities have grown in momentum. These models highlight attributes such as memory retention, concentration, attention to detail and predilection for predictable routines which are advantageous in the Information Technology industry (Hendrickx, 2010; Lorenz et al., 2016). Individuals in the autism spectrum also demonstrate unique creative thought patterns and problem-solving capabilities when they are engaged and enjoying the job tasks (Baron-Cohen et al., 2009; Mottron et al., 2006). Recognizing these assets, companies such as Microsoft and SAP have put in place hiring programs that consider and encourage neurodivergent candidates through personalized interview processes and changes to workplace environment (Austin & Pisano, 2017). These inclusive models have shown measurable improvement in innovation and is proof that we need to engage with this talent pool.

Neurodiversity movement specifically advances the progressive thought that diversity in thinking and experiencing the world from an individualized standpoint should be respected (Singer, 2017; Kapp, 2020). This conceptual and philosophical shift has influenced the practical policies involving education and employment in many developed countries (Robertson, 2009).

The Indian Context

In India, the conventional practices on autism are focused on medical diagnosis, care giving and special education, with less emphasis on employment and long-term adulthood outcomes (Daley, 2002; Sarrett, 2011). For example, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD Act, 2016) distinguishes autism as a disability as reflected in its appellation itself; and hence is rather a deficit-based approach. Moreover, vocational training opportunities remain generic rather than recognizing the individual's abilities or skills required in aligning job. Recent research by Mukhopadhyay (2021) has highlighted that the country's expanding IT and service industries can be entry doors for the autistic individuals if suitable accommodations and trainings are provided. Along similar lines, Srivastava and Solomon (2022) highlight importance of job specific skill development for autistic youth along with awareness building among employers. The 2022 report by India Autism Center acknowledged the lack of well-designed routes from educational institution to successful employment for the autistic individual and stressed on the need for alliance between employers, policy makers and educators. Mamtani et al., (2023) did a case study on barriers to vocational rehabilitation for autistic individuals and arrived at the conclusion that multi-modal interventions that support individual needs, service accessibility, caregiver support and inclusion are needed for meaningful employment.

In 2016 the Centre for Autism and other Disabilities Rehabilitation Research and Education (CADRRE) was established in Kerala, India. CADRRE supports autistic individuals with a team of educators, Psychologists, and therapists.

The other organization Atypical Advantage founded in 2020 by Vineet Sarajwala is a platform in India that connects individuals with disabilities and those in the autism spectrum to employment opportunities. This organization partners with Tata Steel and Amazon to advance inclusive hiring practices.

METHODOLOGY

Design

There have been other studies interviewing educators and employers, to understand the skill sets and has used quantitative methods (Agran, *et al.* 2016, Casner-Lotto and Barrington 2006, Ju *et al.* 2012). Studies have also used exploratory qualitative approaches (Scheef et al. 2019). We have used a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative assessments. Questionnaires distributed to therapy

professionals and employers, included both open-ended and closed questions in order to obtain comprehensive responses and build a deep understanding of the discourse on the existing strengths and skill sets to be developed in the autistic individuals in order to help them to be employment ready. Standardized tools such as DASS-21, VABS, Sensory Profiling and P-VAT assess the emotional well-being, vocational capabilities, and adaptive comportment of young autistic individuals aged 18 to 30. The qualitative responses generated from all three stake holders have been used to evaluate the situation. Quantitative measurement results have not been used in this article, since for true comparisons between the stakeholder responses; thematic qualitative results are needed. The quantitative results were further used down the lane to develop a curriculum plan and execute for the young autistic individuals to be ready for employment in various fields where each one's aptitude for certain jobs were considered. The quantitative part of the results will not be discussed in the paper.

TABLE 1. Demographic data of autism support professionals

Variable	Category	n = 20	%
Gender	Male	5	25
	Female	15	75
Age in years	18-25	2	10
	26-35	5	25
	36-45	5	25
	46-55	5	25
	56-65	3	15
	66-75	0	0
Location	India	15	75
	US	2	10
	UK	2	10
	Australia	1	5
	Germany	0	0
	Rather not to say	0	0
Employment Status	Currently employed	12	60
	Self employed	6	30
	Not currently employed	2	10
Payment status (for those employed)	Paid	20	100
	Unpaid	0	0
Employment Type	Psychologist	5	25
	Speech Language Pathologist	5	25
	Occupational Therapist	5	25
	Special Educator	5	25

Participant Profiles

The study focused on interviewing three principal participant sets. The first was set of (n=20) professionals who are having direct experience in working and supporting autistic individuals in clinical, educational and vocational training scenarios. The group included occupational therapists, psychologists, speech-language pathologists and special educators from India (n=15), United States of America (n=2), Britain (n=2) and Australia (n=1). The demographic data is given in Table 1.

The second group included an initial pool of 300 participants aged between 18 and 30 years, in the first phase of the interview. Based on the responses 30 individuals along with their caregivers were shortlisted based on a clear autism diagnosis, age criteria, co-occurring medical conditions, caregiver support, whether on medical intervention and geographical constraints. The demographic data of the selected individuals (n=30) is given in Table 2.

The third group of participants were prospective employers (n=20) with backgrounds in IT, hospitality, manufacturing and education sectors to understand the soft and hard skills requirements for the particular industries. The demographic data is given in Table 3.

TABLE 2: Demographic data of employers

Variable	Category	n = 20	%
Gender	Male	10	3
	Female	10	3
Age in years	18-25	5	2
	26-35	10	3
	36-45	3	1
	46-55	2	1
Location	India	15	5
	US	3	1
	UK	2	1
Employment Status	Currently employed	18	6
	Self employed	2	1
	Not currently employed	0	0
Employment Type	IT	5	2
	Hospitality	5	2
	Manufacturing	5	2
	Education	5	2

TABLE 3: Demographic data of Autistic Individuals

Variable	Category	n = 30	%
Gender	Male	26	87
	Female	4	13
Age in years	18-25	28	93

	26-35	2	7
	36-45	0	0
	46-55	0	0
Location	India	30	100
	US	0	0
	UK	0	0
Employment Status	Currently employed	0	0
	Self employed	0	0
	Not currently employed	0	0
Autism Diagnosis	Clinically Diagnosed	25	83
	Self Diagnosed	0	0
	In process of diagnosis	5	17

Questionnaire Development and Data Collection

Professionals supporting Autistic Individuals

The questionnaire was developed in consultation with the professionals (Psychologists, Occupational Therapists, Speech Language Pathologists and Special Educators) and the central theme was to identify the possible job opportunities for those in the autism spectrum. Questions were centered on general understanding and perspective about the autistic individuals, job market and opportunities, training and skill development, employer engagement and support, therapist's role and best practices, challenges and solutions, long term career development, collaboration and interdisciplinary approach, community and social integration, innovations and future trends, research and evidence-based practices, personal insights, ethical considerations and policy advocacy.

Questionnaires were emailed to the professionals to obtain the responses. Interviews for 10 participants were conducted over Google meet where each interview lasted for 45 minutes to one hour each. The rest of the participants in this pool preferred to answer them via. Email.

Prospective Employers

Questionnaires for the prospective employers focused on the skills which the employers consider to be critical for the autistic individuals for job placement and positive outcomes in the long term. The questions were meant to evaluate communication skills, social interaction skills, technical skills, organizational skills, adaptability and flexibility, professionalism and work ethic, cognitive and problem-solving skills, sensory and environmental considerations, workplace accommodations and success stories.

Questionnaires were emailed to obtain responses from the prospective employers.

Autistic Individuals and Caregivers

In the case of autistic individuals and caregivers, evaluations were conducted by trained professionals using standardized methods as described below. Evaluations were meant to understand behavioral, developmental, adaptive and cognitive functioning areas in order to understand the strengths of the autistic individual. A set of 50 questions were developed to measure the strengths in work settings. It was based on literature on autism and employment and expert consultations (Hedley et al., 2017; Baldwin et al., 2020). Questions were examined and revised by (n=10) professionals that belonged to various sectors (Example: occupational therapist, speech language pathologists, clinical psychologists and Human Resource professionals). The new questionnaire was used to evaluate a small sample of

individuals in the spectrum, two times, with an interlude of two weeks in between. The consistency of answers was assessed using reliability testing (Cohen et al.' 2011).

Assessment Methods for Autistic Individuals and caregivers are explained below:

Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales (VABS)

The *Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales*, is a standard tool developed to assess adaptive behavior in the individuals (Sparrow et al; 2016). It evaluates the skills required for everyday functioning. In this research study, the scale was used to appraise the employment readiness and work place support needed by the individuals in the autistic spectrum.

Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS-21)

The *Depression Anxiety Stress Scales-21* (DASS-21) was developed by Lovibond and Lovibond (1995). It is a self-report instrument that is combination of three subscales evaluating anxiety, depression and stress. Each subscale has seven terms assessed on a 4-point Likert scale and helps to study the intensity of distress in the previous week (Henry & Crawford, 2005; Park et al., 2020).

Pre-Vocational Assessment and Training Tool (P-VAT)

The *Pre-Vocational Assessment and Training Tool* (P-VAT) is designed to assess the employment readiness of those with development disorders. It is relevant in the Indian context, where vocational training pathways are emerging for autistic individuals (Wehman et al., 2018)

Sensory Profile

The *Sensory Profile* developed by Dunn (1999) studies the sensory responses across auditory, tactile, visual, oral and movement dimensions. The responses are categorized to sensitivity, seeking, registration or avoiding. The results are used to make recommendations for workplace accommodations.

Ethical Considerations

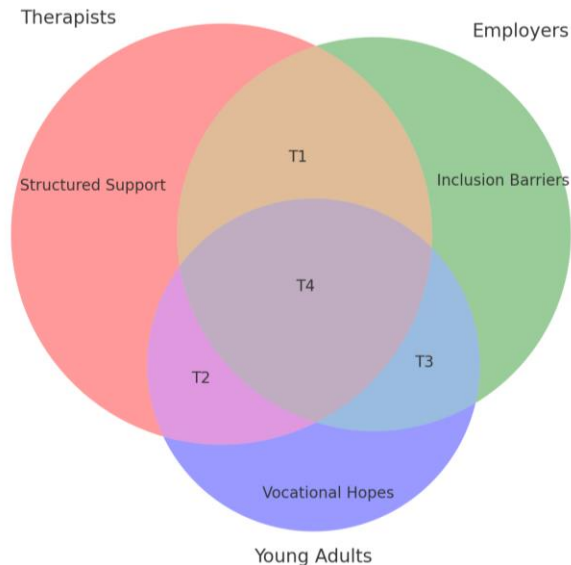
Approval for conducting the research was obtained from Center for Autism and other Disabilities Rehabilitation Research and Education. Informed consent was obtained from all the autistic individuals and caregivers. Confidentiality was ensured through anonymization and voluntary participation in the study.

Data Analysis

Data collected was collated into a Microsoft word document for analysis. Descriptive coding methods as put forth by Saldaña (2013), were used to analyze the content. An initial coding in responder's own words was done, followed by pattern coding which further evolved to categories and broader themes

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study is unique in the sense that three pools of stakeholders in the employability schema of autistic individuals have been involved to understand overlapping themes and the ones which are specific to each stakeholder. Hence the participants pools consisted of therapy specialists, young autistic individuals and prospective employers. Even though quantitative tools were used to elucidate the responses of young autistic individuals, we have used the qualitative results for the purpose of writing this research article. This method of qualitative analysis was used for true comparison purpose between the responses. The qualitative and the quantitative results obtained were used to develop an individualized employability skill curriculum program for the young autistic individuals which will not be discussed in this paper. The thematic analyses across the three participant groups i.e. therapy professionals, prospective employers and young autistic adults provided us with connected motifs such as employment blockades, individual strengths, support structures and system gaps.

Figure 1: Thematic Overlaps in Autism and Employment Research**Theme Legend:**

T1: Tailored Training & Support

T2: Communication & Social Skill Gaps

T3: Workplace Accommodation

T4: Mutual Role Clarity & Integration

Figure 1. Venn diagram illustrating thematic overlaps among therapists, employers, and young adults with autism based on qualitative analysis. Theme codes include: T1 (Tailored Training & Support), T2 (Communication & Social Skill Gaps), T3 (Workplace Accommodation), and T4 (Mutual Role Clarity & Integration). This visual represents shared and unique insights across stakeholder groups in the context of autism and employment outcomes.

The general themes that emerged were overlapping in some areas and is illustrated using the Venn diagram in Figure 1. Four major themes were found from the analysis of perspectives of therapists, employers and young adults with autism with respect to employment support. Tailored Training & Support (T1), Communication and Social Skill Gaps (T2), Workplace Accommodation (T3), and Mutual Role Clarity & Integration (T4). T1 and T2 were areas in which both young autistic adults and therapists agreed on the need for individualized preparation protocols and communication needs. This was in alignment with previous findings on transition planning for autistic individuals (Carter et al., 2012). T3 emphasized the mutual awareness between employers and young adults regarding workplace accommodation needs for long term retention. This finding is in corroboration with the previous study reports (Hedley et al., 2018). The central section T4 is the recognition of all three participant pools that sustained success in employment depends on strengths-based approaches, shared understanding of the roles and collaborative adaptation of the work place (Nicholas et al., 2019). The converging insights stress the need for a multi-perspective and systemic approach to the employment pathways for individuals on the autism spectrum.

The other major emerging themes are discussed below.

Social Integration, Individual Expression and Communication

Young autistic adults upon assessment proved that Autism is indeed a spectrum and each one had

specific capabilities and support needs. Social participation by the autistic individuals was varied with some exhibiting own initiative to connect to the peer groups, whereas other had a strong penchant for private or solitary routines.

The communication profiles were heterogenous in nature. Some expressed fluent multilingualism while other relied on non-verbal cues such as gestures and echolalia. Some individuals had constrained verbal communication. These research learnings are corroborated by research finding in the literature. For example, the study reports by Tager-Flusberg (2005) highlighted the practical variation in communication and language abilities among the individuals with ASD.

Responses from the prospective employers stressed the importance of individualized structure for interviews, language use within the context of interaction and tailored programs to improve meaningful social engagement (Austin & Pisano, 2017).

Therapists in the study emphasized the pragmatic coaching approaches, roleplay and supportive platforms to build competence in the social engagement area.

Vocational Interests and Cognitive Strengths

The thematic assessments revealed that across all participants, assets such as long-term memory retention, spatial-visual reasoning, pattern recognition and task execution in a focused manner were of importance. These research findings align with the theory of hyper-systemizing developed by Baron-Cohen et al., (2009). It is the strong need for the autistic individual to understand the rules of the system and a talent to predict the outcomes based on a set of rules. This is often characterized by extreme attention to details, patterns and rule-based reasoning. These characteristics suggest that such individuals will be successful in detail oriented and structured roles. Autistic participants expressed interests in computer based, technology driven and artistic vocations. Prior studies on neurodivergent populations have reported similar preferences for employment (Kapp et al., 2013). This corroborated with the employer response that autistic individuals excel in roles that call for analysis and precision. Therapists promoted the need for tailored training programs that cater to the individual's cognitive strengths and vocational interests.

Executive Functioning and Sensory Processing

Young autistic adults frequently expressed sensory sensitivities, especially to auditory stimuli, especially to loud sounds. This phenomenon co-occurred with emotional dysregulation. Some also reported tactile sensitivities and certain sensory avoidance behaviors. These sensitivities mean that the workplace environment has to be quiet and such accommodation should be provided by the employer for smooth functioning. Some of the executive functioning challenges put forth were organization, adaptability and time management. From literature, this is a common phenomenon and employers usually adopt coaching strategies, digital tools and structured written instructions to support and mitigate these challenges. Therapists have recommended sensory regulation techniques such as sensory breaks and sensory kits containing fidgets, into the training protocol in agreement with earlier practices in this field (Chiang et al., 2013)

Professional and Community Support

Therapist group was the key advocates of employability, and stressed about behavioral and emotional support. Therapist also put forth facilitating self-advocacy and pragmatic skill development. Tactics such as coping strategies, mock interviews and systematic vocational training were recommended. This agrees with eco-system models for success and long-term retainment in employment (Wehamn et al., 2013). Mentorship programs with neurotypical peers at workplace, community partnering, and collaborative networks among educators, psychologists and occupational therapist were the key ideas. These support systems not only help in retaining the job, but also improves the psycho-social well being

of the autistic individual.

Organization inclusion and Intrinsic Challenges

Employers who practiced inclusive hiring practices reported improved productivity, retention and cultural cohesion. Strategies they adopted to achieve success were regular feedback mechanisms, structured onboarding and workplace accommodations for sensory sensitivities.

However, systemic challenges remain visible – especially the gap between therapy based readiness and actual hiring practices in the real world situations. Participants across the three groups advocated for school-to-job transition support models, inclusive hiring incentives and a collaborative design that incorporates autistic voices into workplace activities and policies. This aligns with the literature put forth by Kapp et al., (2013) and Austin and Pisano (2017).

DISCUSSION

The findings of the current research support the emerging body of evidence supporting strength-based approaches that call for affirming neurodiversity and supporting inclusive hiring practices. The consistent stress on tech affinity, cognitive talents and affinity for detail oriented tasks reflects the hyper-systemizing model described as the drive to understand and develop rule-based systems that follow “if -p. then -q patterns (Baron-Cohen et al., 2009). Structured tasks involving design, data and logistics represent viable employment paths when appropriately supported.

Despite the emphasis on strengths, barriers such as communication and social integration differences, sensory sensitivities and executive function challenges point towards the fact that conventional models of employment are not viable in this situation (Robertson & Simmons, 2013). As professionals and therapists prepare individuals for employment; employer must counter by adapting expectations, roles and work place environments. The paybacks of inclusive hiring and retention practices such as job customization, mentorship and on-going structured feedback have provided evidence for improved job performance and a progressive organizational culture (Austin & Pisano, 2017)

CONCLUSION

The study reports that long term employment for autistic individuals necessitates a life-span oriented and interdisciplinary approach that ties advocacy, education, therapy and employment. In future, studies should focus on longitudinal outcomes, policy changes and narrative-based interventions to raise autistic lived experiences. Systemic coordination can realize the full potential of neurodivergent individuals and thus provide meaningful engagement and employment in the long run.

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DECLARATION OF INTEREST STATEMENTS

Authors state that no funding has been received for this research work.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Authors declare that there is no conflict of interests.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors declare that there are no competing interests

FUNDING

Authors declare that no funding has been received for this research

ETHICAL APPROVAL

Ethical approval has been obtained from concerned authorities

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

Consent to participate has been taken from the participants and care givers

CONSENT TO PUBLISH

Consent to publish has been obtained from the concerned authorities

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