

Barriers to Employment for Young Adults with High-Functioning Autism (HFA)

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ABSTRACT

The workplace participation of individuals with high-functioning autism (HFA) continues to be a challenge. The purpose of this article is to explore the experiences of young people with HFA in finding and keeping a job, with a particular focus on existing barriers to employment. Research seeks to answer two research questions. First, what barriers to employment and to keeping a job are identified by some young adults with HFA and their mothers during the job-seeking process? Second, what are the ways to overcome those barriers? In this this small-scale qualitative research three individuals with HFA with employment experience and their mothers participated in semi-structured interviews to reflect upon their job-seeking and job-finding experiences. The results show that the identified barriers that young people with HFA faced both when looking for a job and when in the working environment were successfully overcome, and they cannot really be considered as barriers or limitations for particular individual. However, we found several obstacles that were common to people with HFA. Obstacles both in finding and keeping a job that were directly related to the disorder were identified, for example, in the occurrence of sudden changes at work, unpredictability, uncertainty, and multitasking. There were identified effective ways to overcome difficulties and specific characteristics which are common for people with ASDs which can even be an advantage in employment are discussed.

Keywords: high-functioning autism, autism spectrum disorder, young adults, barriers to employment, overcoming barriers

Introduction

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) proclaims that everyone has the right to work and the right to protection against unemployment. The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union also guarantees the right for everyone to engage in work (European Union, 2000, Article 15). Thus, European

countries are continuing the shift in focus toward a social and anti-discrimination approach to the employment of people with disabilities. Unfortunately, neither of the policies has assured the complete inclusion of people with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) in the European labor market (Bunt et al., 2020). Internationally, high rates of unemployment among young adults with ASDs have been repeatedly highlighted (Roux et al., 2013; Scott et al., 2019). Adults with ASDs have more difficulties and disadvantages when searching for jobs and experience problems even when they are employed. Even young adults with high-functioning autism (HFA) who are considered as persons who have higher personal capabilities compared to other forms of autism and have a good education have problems with getting a job, and they do not reach high employment rates (Hendricks, 2010; Vogeley et al., 2013; Baldwin et al., 2014).

HFA is used to describe individuals with higher functional capabilities compared to those with other forms of autism. Individuals with HFA have average or above average intellectual capacity. At the same time, they can experience challenges with social interaction and communication, and they may have restricted and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests, and activities (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). According to Richards (2015), Asperger syndrome is widely viewed as being at the “high-functioning” end of a wider spectrum of autistic conditions.

Young people with HFA have a deficit in their social cognition, which can have a significant impact on their interactions with other people and can affect their integration into the workforce. The unemployment and underemployment of persons with HFA poses social, health, and economic issues both at an individual level and for the community (Hayward et al., 2018), it can have a negative impacts on economics (Nicholas et al., 2019). Indeed, employability is one of the predictors of quality of life for autistic adults (Mason et al., 2018). In contrast, employing them can promote economic benefits for the community and businesses (Knapp et al., 2009). Young people with ASDs can face significant transition barriers when entering the world of work and have specific transition needs (Griffiths et al., 2016). Nevertheless, there are cases where persons with ASDs can be successful in competitive, entry-level employment (Hillier et al., 2007). There are many personal advantages for young adults with HFA who are employed, such as improved physical abilities, cognitive abilities, and social skills (Stephens et al., 2005). Young adults with HFA can also be quite useful in the workplace due to the skills, abilities, and personal characteristics they have; furthermore, they can offer a specific autistic perspective to their employer (Cope & Remington, 2022).

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of young people with HFA in finding and keeping a job, with a particular focus on existing barriers to employment. As there is a growing population of young people with HFA completing general education in Latvia, more and more adolescents and young

adults will be entering working life either in the summer for short-term employment or after completing their secondary education or higher education studies. Therefore, further knowledge would be helpful to better understand employer perspectives and guide employers' capacity for engaging and supporting individuals with HFA in the workplace (Nicholas et al., 2019). Furthermore, this is the first such research that has been carried out in Latvia, and therefore it is important for the Latvian context and can also bring some new aspects to the international debate about people with HFA finding and keeping a job.

There are two research questions we would like to explore. First, what barriers to employment and to keeping a job are identified by some young adults with HFA and their mothers during the job-seeking process? Second, what are the ways to overcome those barriers and integrate them in the workplace?

Theoretical background

Shahin and colleagues (2020) conducted a scoping review to investigate environmental facilitators and barriers relevant to workplace participation for young adults aged 18–35 with brain-based disabilities. The majority of the studies (77%) highlighted factors in the services, systems, and policies domain, such as inclusive and flexible systems and well-defined policies at the organizational level. Social support, mainly from family, friends, employers, and colleagues, was reported as a facilitator (68%), followed by physical accessibility and, finally, the availability of assistive technology (55%). The attitudes of colleagues and employers were mostly seen as a barrier to workplace participation (48%).

Personal factors and symptoms associated with ASDs have been found to adversely impact employment (Holwerda et al., 2012). Harmuth and colleagues (2018) distinguished three main barriers that hinder young adults with ASDs in workplace employment success:

- Person-related barriers, such as obsessive adherence to routine and resistance to change;
- Environment-related barriers, such as a lack of long-term workplace support programs or a lack of access to such programs and the negative attitude of employers, managers, and coworkers, which can heighten existing social anxiety;
- Work-related barriers, which relate to the job itself and the required tasks, such as low wages, poor conditions, shortened hours, and/or no opportunities for growth.

Bury and colleagues (2021) explain that work task barriers are those that an individual with ASDs can experience while completing work tasks and completing social tasks that are related to their work. People with autism experience

difficulties with interpreting work protocols and the behavior of others and have problems with personal executive functions.

Autistic employees have mentioned several barriers to success: a difficulty with focusing, being fatigued by high levels of social interaction, and needing notice about events in advance (Flower et al., 2019; Bury et al., 2021). Bury and colleagues (2021) revealed that types of social challenges for ASD employers were individually oriented or associated with the work environment. Individuals also faced barriers when learning how to engage in social situations in the workplace or in work relationships.

Researchers have reported that social, emotional, and communication difficulties in human interaction are barriers that are frequently experienced by autistic employees (Lorenz et al., 2016; McKnight-Lizotte, 2018; Soaker, 2020). Bross and colleagues (2021) found that there are several barriers to employment for individuals with ASDs: pre-employment challenges, logistics, little on-the-job support, and a disconnect between interests and job tasks. These barriers can also include mental health issues, a significant decrease in services following high school completion, and a lack of communication and collaboration across stakeholders and settings (Griffiths et al., 2016).

Young adults with HFA can have both certain strengths and limitations due to their developmental difference. Specifically, problems can arise because of impaired communication and social skills that are vital for the workplace. Hayward, McVilly, and Stokes (2018) reported that the principal challenges for individuals with HFA at work were communication, social interaction, and stress, together with poor mental and physical health.

According to Richards (2015), most barriers and subsequent discrimination appear because employers have difficulties in reflecting the needs and interests of people with HFA. Young adults with HFA in work-related situations may struggle with several important issues:

- the idea of others having thoughts and feelings different from their own;
- executive functioning;
- information processing;
- overload from light, texture, tastes, and/or smells, which can lead to a temporary breakdown in the nervous system (Richards, 2015).

Finally, Mai's study (2019) found that employers' beliefs were the primary barrier to their selection of qualified autistic candidates to fill open positions.

Thus, young adults with HFA can face several barriers throughout the employment process – at the recruitment phase, during the selection stage, and during their employment. The barriers can be related to the person with HFA or to the employers/hiring agents.

Methodology

Participants

To be included in this study, young adult candidates had to have participated in the labor market during the study or before they had employment experience. Those who have already completed their university studies, those who are still studying, those who have both long-term jobseeker and work experience (at least 3 years), and those who work short-term jobs (for example, in the summer) were all eligible for inclusion. An important element for inclusion in the study was that the participants identified themselves as a person with HFA. The recruitment process involved contacting the Autism Society of Latvia, and the researchers spread information and invitations for participation through the society's Facebook page. Therefore, the candidates were found through parents (specifically mothers) who are members of the Latvian Autism Society and have access to the Facebook group (followed by over 3,000 people at the time). Mothers forwarded the request for participation to their children. Unfortunately, we only managed to receive three positive responses; all of whom fulfilled the inclusion criteria (see Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1. List of participants (persons with AST/HFA/Asperger's)

Name	Age	Sex	Education	Professional experience	Length of professional experience	Living condition	Age at which condition was identified/ diagnosed
Jānis	26	Male	Master's degree	Tour guide	4.5 years (two workplaces)	With mother	13
Roberts	18	Male	Vocational secondary education	Project work/IT	4 years (part-time)	With mother	4
Ernests	18	Male	Vocational secondary education	Assistant, to social pedagogue, social services	Three months (summer period)	With mother	10

Table 2. List of participants (parents of persons with AST/HFA/Asperger's)

Name	Age	Role	Education
Evita	53	Mother of Jānis	Higher
Dace	43	Mother of Roberts	Higher
Laura	(did not want to provide the data)	Mother of Ernests	–

Ethical issues

Participants gave their informed consent to the study. All names have been changed to ensure the participants' anonymity. Ethical approval was granted through UL Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

Data collection

After semi-structured interviews were prepared by the first researcher, the second researcher, who has experience working with HFA people and has a professional background in special education, examined the questions. Open-ended questions were added to make the interviews more flexible. The semi-structured questions were structured around the following topics: job-finding experience, working experience, keeping a job, difficulties related to ASD/HFA/Asperger's in finding and keeping a job, and ways to overcome the difficulties.

The questions were almost identical for the young adults and their mothers. For example, if we asked the son about his experience in finding a job, we asked his mother the same question as she could tell us about her son's experience in finding a job. The interviews lasted between 18 and 29 minutes. The second researcher and the respondents chose the location for the interviews. Two interviews (with mothers) were organized online using Zoom and Microsoft Teams, while the others were face-to-face interviews. The interviews opened with the researcher reading an informed consent document to the interviewees that included participation eligibility criteria and the purpose of the study. It was read to the interviewees. Participants were informed that their responses would be anonymous. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The completed transcriptions were reviewed and checked for errors, and then the interviews were anonymized by the second researcher, who excluded words that could allow the interviewed persons to be identified (for example, the workplace name). After that, the transcriptions were analyzed by the first researcher.

Data analyses

Qualitative research is especially suited to exploring new topics where there is not enough existing knowledge (Creswell, 2013). We, as researchers, wanted to emphasize the unique subjective experience of young people with HFA and their mothers by exploring their views of barriers to employment, thus using a phenomenological method without pre-established theories. The data were analyzed using content analyses. We chose an inductive (data-driven) and idiographic (individual-focused) approach, as there is not enough knowledge about the research topic to do otherwise, especially in the Latvian context. As suggested by Elo and Kyngäs (2008), units of analysis were selected in the inductive content analyses during the preparatory phase. Three interviews with young adults with

HFA and three interviews with their mothers were analyzed. The preparation phase was followed by the organization phase, where the open coding of relevant quotes to support codes was carried out, followed by creating categories and abstraction (see an example in Table 3).

Table 3. Example of analyses

Quote	Sub code	Code	Abstraction
“The obstacle has been the lack of that work experience. Because, for example, there are jobs where it is required to have some years of work experience there” (Jānis, age 26)	Insufficient previous experience	Barrier experienced by every young adult jobseeker	Barrier to getting a job

While reading the transcriptions, the researcher took notes and wrote down headings. The text was read several times. After that, the categories emerged from the headings. Finally, some abstraction was carried out to answer the research questions and a mind map was created. This process did not involve the use of any specific software. At the end, a dialogue between the two researchers was set up to agree on the way in which the data should be analyzed and the results organized. The researchers met several times to discuss and review the results. This resulted in several themes for answers to each research question.

A thematic analysis was conducted to explore the research question, following the steps specified by Braun and Clarke (2006) as a guideline. This required a thorough familiarization with all interviews, the creation of initial codes and candidate themes, and refining and renaming them to identify the final themes to report.

As there were not many respondents, all the results are presented in the following section.

Results

Barriers identified by employees with HFA

While looking for a job

As Jānis’ mother, Evita, pointed out, when looking for a job, it was important for her son to learn the skills to write a motivation letter and CV and fill out applications. Initially, until these skills were mastered, when applying for a job, her son received rejections from several places of employment. Realizing that such skills were missing, her son, with his family’s support, purposefully developed those skills. Jānis himself said that his mother and grandmother helped him a lot as they corrected his applications and taught him how to write a CV, and by practicing, he learned how to write a good application himself. After that, Jānis not only managed to get a job but also applied for various scholarships.

Jānis stated that the main obstacle was his lack of previous experience. Job advertisements often ask for previous experience and knowledge in a specific field, for example, knowledge of a specific language:

The obstacle has been the lack of that work experience. Because, for example, there are jobs where it is required to have some years of work experience there.
(Jānis, 26)

On the other hand, Ernests' mother said that the biggest difficulties were related to insufficient experience in the job search process itself. Her son initially sent his application to the employer but then did not check whether his application had been received at all, did not call the employer, and did not ask if he was hired. As Ernests' mother explained, it seems that he has good skills in searching for information, including on the Internet, but lacks specific skills in searching for a job, such as finding job offers on relevant websites and communicating in writing or by phone with the employer.

At work

The main difficulty in the workplace, as claimed by one of the young people interviewed, was the fact that several jobs had to be done at the same time, so-called multitasking:

Performing multiple tasks at the same time. If I start to do one task, then I do one and then the next one. That was the hardest thing. (Ernests, 18)

Ernests' mother explained that the difficulties were caused by uncertainty due to a sudden change in the work environment:

Yes, it could be because of a drastic change of plan, change of workplace, change of working hours, non-observance of rules, non-observance of laws by others at the workplace. This could create a stressful situation for him. (Laura, Ernests' mother)

Roberts' mother agrees with this statement, adding to the list of stressors by stating that difficulties are directly caused by unclear instructions and indirect communication (people with ASDs need to be told everything precisely and clearly), for example, about the results to be achieved:

Unclear instructions, lack of structure, uncertainty about what the results will be and how those results will be achieved. (Dace, Roberts' mother)

Citing a well-known limitation for people with ASDs, Roberts' mother also underlines the fact that a young person with an ASD might be reluctant to change

jobs or to look for something new, thus limiting their potential professional and personal growth:

He has difficulty modeling the future and imagining that it might be better elsewhere, that he should change jobs. (Dace, Roberts' mother)

How to overcome employment barriers

While looking for a job

Jānis' mother explained in her interview that the most important thing when looking for a job was her son's positive mood. Her son was not afraid to try.

He is an optimistic person in any case; he knows that he is very good, very good ... He is a very good worker. Very accurate worker. And he wasn't afraid that he wouldn't get a job. I was more afraid. (Evita, Jānis' mother)

Jānis agreed with that and said that you have to be brave and not be afraid of failure. Jānis added that, hypothetically, a person should be able to communicate their special ASD problem to an employer so that "the employer understands and takes it into account in the future."

However, out of the three interviewed, two – Jānis and Roberts – indicated that they had not disclosed their problem to their employers and would not say anything in the future if they were not asked specifically. Ernests has not disclosed his diagnosis either, but he felt that he could reveal his disorder to his employers in the future.

Nevertheless, Jānis said in the interview that employers should be prepared to hire and work with professionals who have Asperger's syndrome. Jānis' mother explained that her son was hired for his first job by an employer from the USA. As Evita pointed out, in the USA, employers are used to working with people with ASDs and have both knowledge and experience of how to communicate with autistic people. Therefore, the employer understands and does not get angry about what the young person with ASD does not do or does differently. They understand that it is not because the individual is bad, lazy, or negligent, but simply that is characteristic of the disorder.

Jānis thinks that, in the future, employers should be specifically educated about ASDs and Asperger syndrome:

I would say that an external resource could be for psychologists to hold educational seminars for employers about this issue of Asperger's. (Jānis, 26)

In such workshops, it would be best to involve people who have ASDs or Asperger syndrome themselves so that they can share their personal experiences. Workshops should be based on practical examples and not on general theoretical

statements. Such seminars should also be held for young people with Asperger syndrome, who could thus learn from positive examples.

Family also played an important role in job searches. First, the three mothers shared information with their sons and forwarded job advertisements and other useful information to them (Jānis and Evita). Secondly, they provided support for the preparation of motivation letters, CVs, and applications. Thirdly, one mother found a job for her son in her workplace (Roberts and Dace).

At work

The first factor that was mentioned by young adults that helped them successfully integrate into the workplace was the fact that, during childhood and while at school, they were taught by specialists and teachers about how to overcome various difficulties related to the specific characteristics that they had due to their ASD:

Already in my childhood, when I was diagnosed with all this, I was immediately taught all the most important things that must be taken into account, for example, when you communicate with people or when you come across such a social environment where people, for example, can misunderstand you. (Jānis, 26)

Another important aspect for Jānis was that, even as a child, he learned to learn from every life situation, for example, to cooperate, to listen carefully to suggestions, and to follow them literally. In addition, he continues to learn and improve his competencies even now, participating in various personal development courses. Jānis explained that he has also learned to use help and ask for it if needed. The other two young adults identified this skill as important too. Therefore, teamwork can be very useful.

Working in a team can make you feel much safer because at least you have additional forces – experienced colleagues as mentors who can explain and help you in every way. (Jānis, 26)

Although none of the young people had experienced having a specific mentor in the workplace, it could be useful, according to them. They also suggested asking for advice from more experienced colleagues:

I would advise those young people who have Asperger syndrome (be it in a strong or weak form) – don't be afraid, you have to try if you are hired, and if you have an experienced colleague there, don't be afraid. You can ask that colleague for advice, he will help you and explain. (Jānis, 26)

Another important aspect that was identified was that there should be stability in the organization where the young person with HFA works. It helps if the boss is constructive in the workplace, communicates in a very straightforward way, specifically and accurately, and explains how to act at work, how not to act, and what the desired behavior is. It is important that the boss explains “*what we do and what we do not do under any circumstances*” (Jānis). It is important to have clear instructions and clarity in requirements not only so that the employee does not make a mistake but also so that he knows what he did wrong if he does. As Evita pointed out, “*frames*” are important for Jānis. The precision that is learned then helps her son to clearly meet the employer’s requirements. What a young person can do themselves is to improve their professional knowledge. For example, they can learn independently before starting a working relationship.

Summary

As a result of the analysis, we identified an important theme: the inherent characteristics of ASDs that can help in the work environment. Both the young men and their mothers mentioned characteristics that are directly linked to ASDs but which can be very useful in the work environment. For example, Evita mentioned that her son likes to work in the same job and does not like to change. She explained that while her son has been working in one workplace for four years, several employees have already changed. The fact that he remains at this workplace is highly valued by the employer, who says that Jānis is very faithful and loyal to the workplace.

Roberts’ mother, Dace, explained another characteristic. While young people with ASD have difficulties with multitasking, they can focus on one thing without taking into account the surrounding social stimuli instead. That could be important in a particularly stressful situation when others can become very emotional but the work nonetheless has to be done on time.

In summary, employees with HFA reported four specific employment barriers, but their mothers reported an additional six. Young adults with HFA mostly reported barriers during the job-seeking process, while mothers reported barriers during employment. Every young adult or adolescent who enters working life could experience some of these barriers, but some are specifically related to ASDs (see Figure 1).

Many positive solutions for overcoming the barriers mentioned in Figure 1 were found (see Figure 2). One relates to every young adult who is searching for a job, but the others are specifically ASD-related.

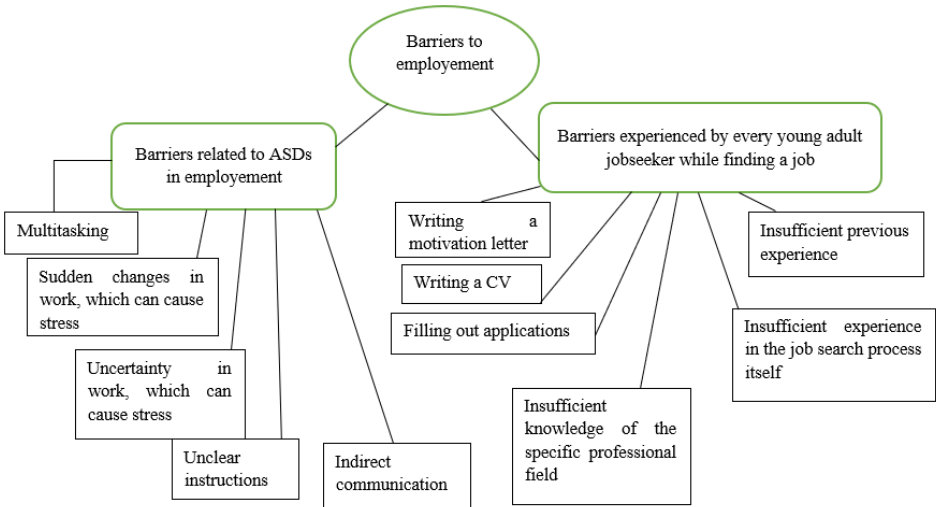


Figure 1. Barriers to employment

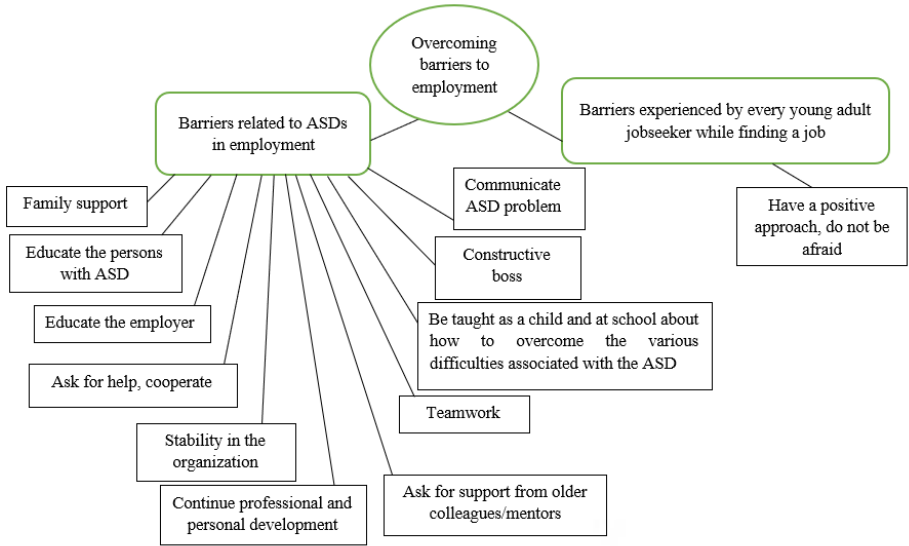


Figure 2. Overcoming barriers to employment

Discussion

The study contributes to our knowledge of the existing barriers to employment for three young people with HFA and the possibilities of overcoming them in the Latvian context. The results confirm that in all three cases, each young person who had been identified and in Latvias context diagnosed with HFA in childhood was able to overcome the existing barriers, find a job, and keep it, either in the short term, for example, in the summer period or in project work, or in the long term after the completion of their studies. The results correspond with previous research that found that people with ASDs were more likely to find paid employment if they were

- 1) older,
- 2) from a higher-income household, and
- 3) had higher functional skills (Roux et al., 2013).

Every young adult who enters work life could experience some of the same difficulties, but those with HFA can experience even more. Each person is unique, and each individual with HFA can demonstrate a variety of required characteristics across the diagnostic criteria when searching for a job. At the same time, there can be difficulties related to their neurodiversity.

Our results agree with previous research that people with HFA face some very common difficulties. For example, prefer single-tasking and avoid multitasking (Annabi et al., 2017). As our research revealed, this can both be a barrier during employment but can also become a characteristic that can be very useful to the employer in certain situations. It refers to previously made concusions by other researchers how important is to find synergies between the skills and strengths of individuals with ASD (Annabi et al., 2017).

People with ASDs prefer straightforward communication, being given clear instructions on what is expected of them. Any unplanned, unexpected changes create anxiety, anxiety can become a real workrelated problem (Parr et al., 2013). Our research agrees that unpredictable situations, uncertainty, and chaos in an organization can cause stress to young adults with HFA. To overcome such barriers, it is important for employers to know about specific HFA-related characteristics and use this knowledge in the best way possible. As was described by Jānis' mother, the employer from the USA who had knowledge and experience working with autistic people communicated in a very straightforward way, which was helpful for Jānis to keep his job. The importance of educating both employers and employees would therefore be a good solution to assist the successful integration of young people with HFA into the workplace.

Based on previous research, we know that parents of autistic children are the most important factor in autistic people finding a job. Holwerda and colleagues (2012) found two factors that facilitated the employment of autistic people: (1) education and (2) family support. Parents are those who provide protection,

acceptance, and occupational security and prepare their children for collaborating in groups (Krieger et al., 2012). We found in our research, specifically, that mothers were assisting their sons.

We did not find that specific helpful workplace accommodations (Baldwin et al., 2014) were provided for those with HFA in Latvia. But another very important factor was mentioned, which was that young people were taught as children at school and in other services to understand their diagnoses and overcome the various difficulties associated with their ASD.

Conclusions

The task of this small-scale qualitative research was to find out as much as possible about the participants' views of the existing barriers to employment for young people with HFA in the Latvian context. The identified barriers that young people with HFA faced both when looking for a job and when in the working environment were successfully overcome, and they cannot really be considered as barriers or limitations for particular individuals. Every young person entering the labor market faces some of the identified barriers (for example, a lack of experience, a lack of knowledge in the specific field, or a lack of job search skills); however, we found several obstacles that were common to people with HFA. Obstacles both in finding a job and keeping a job that were directly related to the disorder were identified, for example, in the occurrence of sudden changes at work, unpredictability, uncertainty, and multitasking. All three young people, however, confirmed that they were able to adapt and even use these obstacles as advantages and demonstrated their determination and willingness to learn and acquire the lacking skills. The skills acquired in childhood, both in school and outside of school, and their understanding of their disorder have been of great importance to young people with HFA. These have helped them not only to acquire the lacking skills but also to become good learners and continue their professional development. The young people interviewed named many effective ways to overcome difficulties and obstacles both when looking for a job and when they are in the work environment. It is helpful if the organization in which the young person with HFA plans to work has stability, if the boss uses a constructive communication style, and if teamwork is present. Specific characteristics which are common for people with ASDs can even be an advantage in employment; for example, a reluctance to change can promote loyalty. The role of the family and especially mothers' support for young people with HFA during their job search was identified as an important aspect. We found that mothers helped their sons in three ways: (1) by sharing information and forwarding job advertisements and other useful information to them, (2) by providing support in the preparation of motivation letters, CVs, and applications, and (3) by finding them a job in their own workplace.

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