

Improving Inclusion in Registered Apprenticeship Programs for Neurodivergent Youth

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Introduction

Although Registered Apprenticeship (RA) Programs offer valuable opportunities to gain core job skills, industry-specific knowledge, and earn wages, a 2015 report published by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) uncovered they are often underutilized as an employment option for people with disabilities. This resource emphasizes the potential for RA sponsors and employers to work together with direct support professionals (DSPs) from state, education, and community-based organizations to create apprenticeship pathways that enhance employment access for neurodivergent youth¹.

According to the Job Accommodation Network, neurodiversity describes the natural way that people think, learn, perceive the world, interact and process information differently and in unique ways. Although this term is often used to refer to people on the autism spectrum, it also includes a wide range of people with cognitive, intellectual, developmental, and neurological conditions that shape how people think and learn. In 2024, MyDisabilityJobs.com "Neurodiversity in the Workplace Statistics" notes that 15% to 20% of the population is considered to be neurodivergent. According to a 2024 meta-analysis featured in Enhancing Employment Opportunities for Individual with Autism Spectrum Disorder, only 6% of individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) land in competitive employment in the United States. Further analysis from 2023 found that even adults with ASD who accessed vocational rehabilitation (VR) services still struggled to break into the workforce, with between one-third and one-half of those who exited the VR system remaining unemployed from 2017 to 2020. Educational attainment can only partially close this gap as analysis of data from 2015 in the Journal of Postsecondary Education & Disability revealed that even young adults with a postsecondary degree only reached an employment rate of 68.9% compared to an employment rate of 61.7% for young adults on the autism spectrum with a high school diploma and no further education. The struggle of people on the autism spectrum to achieve competitive employment is surprising considering the unique benefits they bring to the workplace, such as better creativity, focus, memory, efficiency, and honesty.

Employment must be both gainful and inclusive to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to thrive and contribute. This typically refers to jobs that provide economic independence, stability, fulfillment, and inclusivity. **Competitive Integrated Employment (CIE)** can help achieve gainful and inclusive employment by ensuring that individuals with disabilities earn fair wages and have equal opportunities for advancement. According to the <u>LEAD Center</u> brief <u>Federal Legal Framework that Supports Competitive, Integrated Employment Outcomes of Youth and Adults with Significant Disabilities, CIE refers to work that is:</u>

- Paid directly by employers at or above minimum wage, comparable to the rate paid to employees without disabilities performing similar duties.
- Occurs in a standard work environment where employees with disabilities engage with their coworkers and others, providing them with opportunities for career advancement and job mobility comparable to those available to others.
- Preferably full-time or part-time and offers the same benefits to all employees.



¹The Office of Apprenticeship collaborates with disability employment partners to address the underrepresentation of people with disabilities in registered apprenticeships. Key resources are integrated throughout these documents to support partnerships that close the gap and promote equity in Registered Apprenticeships for people with disabilities.

Employers often misunderstand neurodiversity, which can result in neurodivergent employees holding positions that do not align with their skills or interests. This is not only demotivating but highlights the need for solutions to these unnecessary outcomes. With the right support, neurodivergent apprentices who work in roles that match their talents, abilities, and interests experience increased productivity, job retention, and make positive contributions to the workforce and culture. When employers take the time to understand each apprentice's unique strengths and tailor job roles to fit these abilities, they can create a more diverse and innovative workforce. This approach not only supports employees with disabilities but also brings fresh perspectives and enhanced problem-solving skills to the team, benefiting the entire organization.

ODEP defines **person-centered planning** as a process led by the person receiving support. This approach organizes services and resources based on the person's specific needs, preferences, and goals. It emphasizes the person's voice and choices, focusing on their strengths and using these as a foundation for personal and professional development. This method respects their right to make decisions about their own life, aiming to create a tailored plan that aligns with their aspirations and needs.

Integrating person-centered planning into RA Programs facilitates tailored support systems that help neurodivergent youth navigate their career pathways more effectively. Person-centered planning can ensure that apprentices receive the support necessary to thrive in their apprenticeships, leading to greater job satisfaction and career advancement opportunities. It may include adapting training techniques to suit varied learning styles and needs, or regularly reviewing and adjusting the apprenticeship plan to ensure it remains relevant and effective, ensuring that apprentices can fully engage and succeed in their roles. For RA employers and sponsors, this approach can lead to a more diverse workforce, improved retention rates, and a positive workplace culture that values inclusiveness and innovation.

Overcoming Barriers to Employment

Neurodivergent youth possess a diverse range of unique abilities that can greatly enhance the workplace. However, they often face significant barriers to employment. Many individuals on the autism spectrum excel in tasks requiring high precision and accuracy, while some people with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder or dyslexia can offer innovative solutions through their unique problem-solving approaches. Exceptional memory skills and the ability to enter states of hyperfocus are additional strengths of some neurodivergent people that can be highly valuable in various roles.

Despite these abilities, neurodivergent youth may need varying levels of support while on the job. Some may benefit from job coaching or other on-the-job supports, while others might require more extensive reasonable accommodations or no support at all. By recognizing and addressing these needs, RA sponsors and employers can create more inclusive and supportive work environments that allow neurodivergent youth to succeed and contribute to their full potential. To help overcome barriers to employment, youth workforce development programs, including work-based learning opportunities like pre-apprenticeships and RA Programs, can be structured to support neurodivergent youth in navigating the workforce. These programs provide career planning, education and training, work experience, and personal development.

To provide support in this process, if needed, RA sponsors and employers can collaborate with DSPs from state, educational, and community-based organizations to engage neurodivergent youth early in their career journey and offer these opportunities. DSPs can serve as job coaches, job developers, and transition specialists. The Association for Employment First offers a <u>Certified Employment Support Professional credential</u> to recognize DSPs as employment support professionals who have



demonstrated a sufficient level of knowledge and skill to provide integrated employment services to a variety of populations. Their goal is to equip neurodivergent youth with the necessary skills, support, and competencies to navigate the challenges of adolescence and adulthood successfully, ultimately preparing them for the workforce. Focusing on early intervention and emphasizing career choices that are meaningful can foster a more inclusive and supportive employment landscape.

By developing and supporting high-quality, inclusive RA Programs, sponsors and employers can significantly contribute to providing equitable career paths to neurodivergent youth. Inclusive apprenticeships can develop a strong and diverse pool of skilled workers, essential for the success of all individuals, including neurodivergent youth, in the global economy and for business growth. With proper support, neurodivergent youth can successfully complete their training, develop strong relationships with their employers, and become valuable members of the workforce.

Various forms of assistance and reasonable accommodations can help neurodivergent apprentices who need support succeed in their roles. This ensures they have the same opportunities to grow, achieve career satisfaction, and make meaningful contributions to the workforce as others. However, it is important to recognize that not all neurodivergent youth will require support to thrive in their apprenticeships. Various forms of assistance and reasonable accommodations can be requested and can be made available may encompass:

- Mentorship and Coaching: Providing guidance and advice from experienced professionals.
- **Tailored Training Programs**: Customizing training to match the apprentice's learning style and pace.
- Reasonable Accommodations: Adjusting the work environment to meet individual needs.
- **Emotional and Social Support**: Offering resources for mental health, work-life balance, and fostering a supportive community.
- **Career Counseling**: Helping apprentices identify and pursue career paths that align with their strengths and interests.

The Workplace Initiative *Disability Employment and Inclusion Guide to Success* outlines how hiring people with disabilities provides many benefits, including <u>increased productivity and decreased likelihood of employee turnover</u>. In 2017, Forbes Magazine article "New Research: Diversity + Inclusion = Better Decision Making At Work" noted that a diversified workforce results in <u>more innovative</u> problem solving and increased ability to respond to complex problems.

Building Inclusive Apprenticeship Programs

According to Apprenticeship.gov there are <u>seven components</u> of a RA Program. These embed diversity, quality, and safety, and include:

- **Industry Led** Programs are industry-vetted and approved to ensure alignment with industry standards and that apprentices are trained for highly skilled, high-demand occupations.
- **Paid Job** Apprenticeships are jobs! Apprentices earn progressive wages as their skills and productivity increase.
- **Structured On-the-Job Learning/Mentorship** Programs provide structured on-the-job training to prepare for a successful career, which includes instruction from an experienced mentor.



- **Supplemental Education** Apprentices are provided supplemental classroom education based on the employers' unique training needs to ensure quality and success.
- **Diversity** Programs are designed to reflect the communities in which they operate through strong non-discrimination, anti-harassment, and recruitment practices to ensure access, equity, and inclusion.
- Quality & Safety Apprentices are afforded worker protections while receiving rigorous training to equip them with the skills they need to succeed and the proper training and supervision they need to be safe.
- **Credentials** Apprentices earn a portable, nationally recognized credential within their industry.

Creating a supportive and inclusive apprenticeship landscape for neurodivergent youth requires a multifaceted approach. By connecting with neurodivergent youth, forging strategic partnerships, and leveraging available funding opportunities, pre-apprenticeships and RA Programs can be accessible and beneficial to all.



Connect to Youth

Many neurodiverse
youth and school-based
professionals are
unfamiliar with RAs.

How Does It Work?



Forge Partnerships
RA sponsors should forge
connections with DSPs,
high schools, Vocational
Rehabilitation,
community colleges.



Leverage Funds
There are a variety of
government supports for
RAs, youth, and
neurodiverse youth and
adults.

By taking these steps, RA Programs can help neurodivergent youth develop their skills and build meaningful careers, while also enriching the workforce with diverse talents and innovative problem-solving abilities:

Connect to Youth

Objective:

Find ways to connect with youth to share how RA Programs can benefit both apprentices and employers.

Rationale:

Many youth and school professionals are not familiar with RA as a career option, making it
essential to establish direct connections to inform them about the opportunities in RA
Programs and provide information to the youth they serve.



Inclusive recruitment can be facilitated through career exploration, enabling potential
apprentices, especially youth, to engage actively in employment experiences and careerrelated discussions with community-based organizations, educators, or community colleges.
Through these interactions, they can gain valuable insights and opportunities, learn more
about their interests, and identify what skills they have or may need to develop for their
chosen career pathway.

Forge Partnerships

Objective:

Develop strategic connections and partnerships that involve collaboration with DSPs. DSPs that specialize in employment services are trained to speak to youth about career pathways and can facilitate worksite tours, informational interviews, internships, or job shadowing prior to the apprenticeship interview or full-time employment.

Rationale:

- Employment can be an overwhelming challenge for neurodivergent youth, highlighting the need for partnerships with community-based organizations, educators, and community colleges to ease the process.
- The <u>WorkforceGPS</u> publication <u>Apprenticeship Building America Guide to Partnerships with Community Colleges</u> shares how partnerships with community colleges can offer valuable resources to the training component of the RA Program. Their experience with diverse learners can support the inclusive design of the related training instruction (RTI) and they can provide the instruction. RTI refers to the classroom and/or lab learning experiences of apprentices. RADD Training, an Apprenticeship Ambassador, <u>shares various models for RTI.</u>
- Cultivating relationships with high schools can serve a dual purpose. As required by the
 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, transition services must be included in a student's
 Individualized Education Program (IEP) by the age of 16, though preferably sooner. An IEP is a
 personalized plan detailing special education services for an individual student with a
 disability. It includes options for developing employment and other post-school adult living
 objectives, including work-based learning, such as pre-apprenticeships and RA Programs.
- A 504 Plan, based on Section 504 of the <u>Rehabilitation Act of 1973</u>, is a formal blueprint created by schools to address any learning barriers students with disabilities might face. Both the 504 Plan and IEP can provide a framework that includes RA and the roles of mentors, employers, and DSPs. This framework can be customized to meet the needs of neurodivergent youth, ensuring they receive the support necessary to succeed in their RA Programs. For instance, it can specify how mentors can offer personalized guidance to help apprentices develop specific occupational skills or how job coaching with a DSP can define career-related goals and the steps needed to achieve them. Additionally, it can outline ways for employers to provide reasonable accommodations and facilitate career advancement opportunities, thereby fostering an inclusive workplace.

Leverage Funding Opportunities

Objectives:

There are a variety of government supports for RA Programs as discussed in <u>The Federal Resources</u> <u>Playbook for Registered Apprenticeship</u>. Expenses, such as wages and benefits for apprentices, funding for job coaching, one-time costs for new employees, general equipment, certification



expenses, and supplies can be offset through tax incentives and government funding. RA sponsors and employers have a variety of funding options and incentives available.

The Office of Apprenticeship posts open funding opportunities for apprenticeships, including access for people with disabilities. Some State Apprenticeship Agencies also have their specific state-based posting of apprenticeship opportunities. State governments often provide accessibility grants to businesses and organizations to support RA sponsors. These grants can be used for a variety of purposes, such as enhancing accessibility, offering technical assistance, and providing training. This funding can play a pivotal role in promoting local accessibility and helping businesses create inclusive apprenticeship programs. By developing community partnerships, connections to funding from sources, such as local grants to nonprofits, discretionary grants from federal and state agencies, funding from workforce boards, and other philanthropic grants can often be secured and braided through solid partnerships that can serve a diverse talent pool.

Rationale:

- Partnerships with VR, state agencies that provide services and support to people with disabilities to obtain, maintain and advance in employment, can support students with disabilities through Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS). Pre-ETS includes job exploration counseling, counseling on postsecondary programs, work readiness training, work-based learning experiences and instruction in self-advocacy.
- VR also supports students and youth with disabilities, providing resources such as vocational training, job development, job coaching, and related employment supports.
- Partnerships with VR offer employers resources on affirmative outreach and hiring of people with disabilities, technical assistance on workplace modifications/reasonable accommodations, and tax credits.
- The <u>Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act</u> offers federal funding for employment and training services, helping individuals with disabilities find and retain jobs. Neurodivergent job seekers and employers can discuss potential funding and service options with their local workforce development board or <u>American Job Center</u>.
- RA Programs who partner with community colleges gain apprentice access to:
 - Federal Pell Grants
 - Perkins V funds
 - State-funded college grant and scholarship programs
 - State education appropriations to secondary and postsecondary institutions



Equity & Inclusion: Ensuring Success for Neurodivergent Youth in Registered Apprenticeship Programs

What makes an apprenticeship inclusive? First, it must encompass all the essential elements of a RA Program, including on-the-job learning, paid work, and RTI. Inclusive apprenticeship programs also need to be intentionally designed to support the successful completion for apprentices with disabilities and individuals from diverse backgrounds. Each RA Program will be tailored differently based on the job and apprenticeship standards, but promising practices for inclusive programs include:

- **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)**: Providing a flexible learning environment to ensure all apprentices can succeed.
- Accessible Workplaces: Ensuring workplace technology and reasonable accommodations are
 available to meet the needs of apprentices, enabling them to succeed and progress. This may
 include remote work and the use of assistive technology in the workplace to support
 engagement from neurodivergent employees.
- **Training and Technical Assistance**: Offering training to employers, workplace personnel, mentors, and other trainers to help them create and deliver inclusive training curricula.
- **Partnerships:** Collaboration among RA sponsors, employers, and providers across all facets of the RA Program is essential to promote equity and provide necessary support.

There are numerous approaches to creating successful inclusive apprenticeship programs. RA sponsors and employers can consider implementing the following strategies to create inclusive apprenticeship programs for people with disabilities:

- Start inclusion in recruitment. By starting inclusion in recruitment and maintaining it throughout the employment lifecycle, RA sponsors and employers can create a supportive environment where neurodivergent youth can excel and make meaningful contributions to the workforce. Inclusive recruitment practices ensure neurodivergent youth have equal opportunities to apply for and secure positions. Flexible interview formats, such as in-person, phone, web-based, or working interviews, help achieve this. Working interviews, where employers evaluate job skills in a real work setting, enable both parties to practically assess fit and performance. The Job Accommodation Network (JAN) also notes important interview accommodations, such as allowing a DSP to attend the interview, providing questions in advance, and limiting the number of interviewers to promote equal access to hiring opportunities.
- Implement accessible hiring practices. By implementing accessible hiring practices, employers can better accommodate the unique needs of neurodivergent candidates, reducing barriers that might otherwise prevent them from successfully navigating the recruitment process. Some examples include drafting clear, understandable job descriptions, using inclusive language and images in job postings, applying UDL to application processes, ensuring bias-free job applicant screening, utilizing diverse interview panels, ensuring reasonable accommodations are available and easy to request for job interviews, and providing cultural competency training for hiring managers. RA sponsors and employers may also ensure RA mentors are aware and skilled working with neurodiverse youth.
- Cultivate diverse, equitable, inclusive, and accessible workplaces. Accessibility is essential to inclusion. Inclusive models are distinguished by full access, reasonable accommodations,



and needed supports throughout all phases of the RA Program. The U.S. Department of Labor created the <u>Partnership for Inclusive Apprenticeship</u>, which is focused on driving policies and practices to improve access to career pathways and talent pipelines. An inclusive apprenticeship is an apprenticeship designed to support full access and inclusion for all apprentices, including people with disabilities. Inclusive apprenticeship programs ensure that neurodivergent youth receive the necessary support and reasonable accommodations to succeed. This approach promotes a more inclusive workforce where diverse talents are recognized and nurtured. <u>AskJAN suggests</u> that neurodivergent youth may also need support for other needs, such as sensitivities to light, sound, or temperature that can be addressed in the workplace to boost the retention of neurodivergent youth apprentices.

- Ensure training accessibility. RTI providers can integrate UDL principles, which may include reasonable accommodations and resources that assure all apprentices can participate in training. This can include ensuring training materials are available in written, audio, and video formats to address a wide array of learning preferences, needs, and ways of expressing and receiving information. This approach promotes a more inclusive workforce where diverse talents are recognized and nurtured.
- Support apprentices with attaining the necessary credentials and skills to succeed. Offer an industry-recognized credential—which could be a license, certificate, certification, or degree—that verifies an individual's qualifications or competence when issued by a third party possessing the authority to issue relevant credentials. This validation can boost the confidence of neurodivergent youth and affirm their abilities in the eyes of employers. As part of the successful pathway to achieving a credential, neurodivergent apprentices can be supported with interventions as simple as frequent and consistent manager feedback and positive reinforcement. Employers and RA sponsors can equip their existing employees, managers, and mentors with the skills they need to support neurodivergent apprentices by training their workforce on how to interact, supervise, and collaborate with new, neurodivergent coworkers and others. With these credentials, neurodivergent youth gain qualifications which can lead to promotions, higher salaries, and more significant responsibilities within their chosen fields.

Inclusive apprenticeships foster a culture that creates an environment where everyone can contribute in meaningful ways. By equipping neurodivergent apprentices with the skills and credentials needed to thrive in their apprenticeships, they can secure gainful employment. This not only fosters independence and financial stability but also enriches the workforce by building inclusive workplaces, driving innovation, and promoting lifelong learning.



Resource List for RA Sponsors, Employers and Disability Service Providers

Career Exploration and Recruitment

- AskEARN.org Build the Pipeline: Outreach & Recruitment
- Griffin-Hammis Associates in Collaboration with LEAD Center and U.S. DOL's Office of Disability Employment Policy: <u>Self-Guided Discovery Facilitator's Guide Helping People Discover Their</u> Own Path To Employment
- Career advisor | CareerOneStop
- National Collaborative on Workforce & Disability for Youth | Youth.gov
- Youth.gov Career Exploration and Skill Development
- ACTEonline.org (October 2020) Students with Disabilities Benefit from Career Exploration
- Apprenticeship.Gov Bobby Moran's Apprenticeship Journey
- My Next Move What do you want to do for a living?
- Apprenticeship USA Jumpstart Your Career Through Apprenticeship
- Training Resource Network Visible Resumes
- <u>Certified Employment Support Professional Glossary of Employment Support Professional Titles</u>
- US Bureau of Labor Statistics Computer and Information Technology Occupations
- RADD Training Related Training Instruction (RTI) for Apprentices
- Job Accommodation Network State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies
- Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services A Transition Guide to Postsecondary Education and Employment for Students and Youth with Disabilities
- Apprenticeship USA What are the benefits of apprenticeships for employers?
- Apprenticeship USA "Tear The Paper Ceiling" Campaign
- Apprenticeship USA What is a Registered Apprenticeship Program?

Funding Registered Apprenticeship Programs

- Apprenticeship.Gov Partner Finder
- DOL.gov Funding Inclusive Apprenticeships: Strategies for Braiding, Blending, and Aligning Resources
- Marc Gold & Associates Forms, Samples, Guides, and Plans
- IRS Work Opportunity Tax Credit
- Congress.gov Disabled Access Credit Expansion Act of 2021
- <u>Perkins Collaborative Research Network Perkins V</u>
- Federal Student Aid Federal Pell Grants are usually awarded only to undergraduate students.



- Workforce GPS The Role of Community Colleges in Registered Apprenticeship
- <u>Congressional Research Service The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act and the One-Stop Delivery System</u>
- <u>Social Security Administration Ticket to Work Program</u>

Equity and Inclusion

- AskJAN.org Building a Disability-Inclusive Organization
- <u>Inclusive apprenticeship.org Designing Inclusive Apprenticeships: A Guide for Recruiting and Training Apprentices with Disabilities</u>
- Apprenticeship.gov Advancing Apprenticeship Opportunities for People with Disabilities
- DOL.gov Competitive Integrated Employment and Blending, Braiding, and Sequencing Resources
- AskJAN.org Disability Employment and Inclusion: Your Guide to Success
- AskJAN.org Building Your Inclusive Workplace JAN's Workplace Accommodation Toolkit
- <u>American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities</u>
- Identifor.com Use Person-Centered Planning for People with Disabilities
- Mathematica National Longitudinal Transition Study 2012
- ABLEnow Disability Savings Account | ABLE Account | Eligibility Quiz & News | ABLEnow
- Social Security Administration Ticket to Work Program
- Youth.gov Employment Considerations for Youth With Disabilities
- <u>Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion Build the Pipeline:</u> <u>Outreach & Recruitment</u>
- <u>StrengthScape Role of Diversity and Inclusion in Employee Engagement</u>
- Forbes New Research: Diversity + Inclusion = Better Decision Making at Work
- Workplace Initiative Disability Employment and Inclusion: Your Guide to Success
- <u>USCode.house.gov Chapter 33 Education of Individuals with Disabilities</u>
- National Archives Part 363 The State Supported Employment Services Program
- Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeship <u>Resources from the Office of Disability Employment Policy</u>
- Office of Disability Employment Policy Competitive Integrated Employment (CIE)
- Office of Disability Employment Policy Customized Unemployment
- Office of Disability Employment Policy Employers and the ADA: Myths and Facts
- AskEARN | Neurodiversity in the Workplace
- AskEARN | Workplace Mental Health Toolkit
- National Institutes of Health Person-first and Destigmatizing Language



- American Institutes for Research Improving Career Readiness for Students with Disabilities
- Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeship Designing Inclusive Apprenticeships
- <u>A Guide for Recruiting & Training Apprentices with Disabilities</u>
- Office of Disability Employment Policy Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeship (PIA)
- Job Accommodation Network Building a Disability-Inclusive Organization
- Research Support Services for Employment of Young Adults on the Autism Spectrum

