

Transition to Employment and Independent Living for Individuals with Autism and Aspergers

By Temple Grandin

Successful transition from the structured world of school or college to successful employment requires a lot of hard work. One of the biggest problems I had with trying something new was fear. Long before a student on the ASD spectrum graduates from either high school or college, they need to get work experience while they are still in school. The transition from school to employment should be gradual and not abrupt. I saw one student who graduated successfully from college and he had zero job skills. This is wrong. Teaching job skills should start before the student graduates. Mother was always pushing me to try new things. If she had not pushed me, I would not have developed. Below I will outline the work experiences I had when I was still in school.

13 years old - During the summer I worked two afternoons a week for a seamstress who did freelance sewing. My job was to hand hem dresses and take garments apart. Mother found this job for me and I was really good at the job. I also loved the money I earned.

15 years old - Mother lined up a summer job for me at my aunt's ranch. I was afraid to go but mother gave me two choices. They were come home in two weeks or stay all summer. I ended up staying all summer. Planning for the trip, which included flying from New York to Arizona, started three months before I left. It was essential that I was allowed to plan ahead. Surprises cause panic.

14-18 years old - Horse Barn - In my high school, I worked cleaning stalls and feeding eight horses. This was a job I found for myself. Even though I was a goof ball student who did not study, I worked hard taking care of the horses. I was learning valuable work skills.

16 to 18 years old - Carpentry Work - At my boarding school I did lots of carpentry projects such as fixing up our ugly ski tow house. I put tongue-and-groove siding on it with white trim. One important work skill I learned from my many projects was to do an assigned task. Decorating the ski tow house with cattle pictures would not be appropriate. I had to decorate in a manner that other people would appreciate.

18 years old - I was still a bad student who did not study. I did not see any point in studying until my science teacher gave me a reason for studying. He got me interested in science and I became interested in becoming a scientist. My teacher told me that if I wanted to become a scientist I would have to study. Almost overnight I decided to study and I got good grades in college.

College Years - During my college years while getting my B.A., I continued to visit the ranch and I had two other summer internships. One summer I worked in a research lab with mice and the next summer I worked with autistic children. Mother helped line up both of these jobs.

Master's Degree - After four years of college, I spent five years getting my Masters and I was gradually spending more and more time working. I slowly transitioned from the world of school to the world of full-time work. During this period I had a part-time job as livestock editor for the Arizona Farmer Ranchman and I also worked part-time for a company that built cattle feedlots. After this five year period I was no longer a student. I had my M.S. degree and I was now building up my freelance consulting business, one project at a time. One of the things that made my transition successful was that I slowly transitioned from full-time school to slowly weaning myself away from the structured world of school.

Ph.D. Program - After five years of full-time consulting, I went back to school to get my Ph.D. when there was an economic recession in the 1980's. I spent nine years getting my Ph.D. on a part-time basis and I still worked. I still designed equipment and did seminars on livestock handling, while I was working on my Ph.D.

Sell Your Work - One of the things I figured out is that I had to sell my work and not my personality. I avoided job interviews and I showed prospective clients a portfolio of my drawings and photos of completed livestock handling facilities. Many people thought I was weird but they respected me when they saw my design drawings. Many people made the mistake of putting too much stuff in their portfolio. It is best to put relatively few examples of the very best work. In my book, *Developing Talents*, I provide a lot more tips for making portfolios.

It Takes Time to Develop a Skill - I am a visual thinker and I used my visual thinking ability in my work designing cattle facilities. Half the cattle in North America are handled in my designs. While I was working on my Master's, I spent three years learning all about cattle handling and different facility designs. I went to every feedlot in Arizona and I worked cattle. It was an obsession but it was an obsession I turned into a career. I had to work hard to develop my designs.

Types of Minds - I have observed that there are three basic types of specialized minds on the autism spectrum.

- Visual Thinker - This is my type. I think in photo realistic pictures like Google for images. Algebra was impossible for me. Unfortunately I was never allowed to try geometry or trig. This was a big mistake. Some individuals who cannot do algebra can do geometry. Visual thinkers are good at the following occupations:

- Artist and Graphic Design
- Industrial Design
- Architecture
- Auto Mechanics
- Drafting
- Photography
- Animal Trainer

- Pattern Thinkers - These are the individuals who are often good at math and music. Reading may be their area of weakness. Pattern thinking is a more abstract form of visual

thinking. They think in patterns instead of pictures. Some good occupations for pattern thinkers are:

Scientific Researcher
Statistics - data mining
Engineering
Music
Mathematics
Computer Programming
Chemistry

- **Word Fact Thinkers** - These are the individuals who know all the facts about their favorite things such as movie stars or baseball players. History is often a favorite subject. They are NOT visual thinkers and they are often poor in art. The following careers would be good choices:

Journalist - Blogger
Librarian
Record Keeping Jobs
Special Education Teacher
Bookkeeping
Speech Therapist

Never Too Late to Start - I have had parents, teachers, and individuals on the spectrum ask me, "How can an individual who is 30 and has never worked get started?" It is never too late to start. They need to start one small job at a time. The first task is learning time management and showing up for work on time. The individual will have to make some changes. When I was hired by the construction company, my new boss scolded me on hygiene. I was very upset but I complied because I wanted to keep the job. As a person on the spectrum, I have never stopped learning. Every day I keep learning.
