

Picking Our Teams

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We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

This is one of the most powerful and important statements in our history. It's an ideal worthy of our commitment. In practice however, we as Americans haven't always abided by the principals set forth by our founding fathers. It doesn't say "white men" or "able bodied men"; it says "all men". Throughout the history of our nation we've seen slavery, Jim Crow, women's suffrage and hate crimes against those in the GLBT community. Although we're grateful that Jim Crow is gone and slavery nearly so, we have yet to achieve true equality for any of these groups. We're still working to ease racial tensions, to close the salary gap for both blacks and women and to secure equal rights for our GLBT brothers and sisters. Hillary Clinton gave us perspective on these issues when she said, "if HIV/AIDS were the leading cause of death of white women between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-four, there would be an outraged outcry in this country."

Imagine what it would be like to be a small part of bringing real change to the daily lives of all those affected by autism or other disabilities. Today there is a giant employment gap for people with disabilities. It is our responsibility to close this gap. Just as it required dedication and commitment to bring women the vote and to end Jim Crow, it will not be easy; however,

what is the cost of doing nothing? Don't you want to say, "I make a difference"?



We recently discussed the employment gap on Tricia Kenney's radio show [Embrace Autism Now](#) (Kenney, 2009). I enjoyed our talk (thanks Tricia!) and I think there were a lot of good points mentioned by Tricia and others. As I've thought about things that were said or not said, I've realized that there's one issue we didn't clearly address. We hinted at it, but we never actually said it. I'm talking about the reason why the AutLabs project differs from traditional approaches to addressing the employment gap. The traditional strategies come from the broader disability community and focus primarily on educating established companies about people with disabilities and how to include them in the workplace. In contrast, the AutLabs approach is to encourage the creation

of new companies that will actively seek out autistic employees.

Background

I'll talk briefly about the traditional approach to the employment gap, how it originated and what it's accomplished.

[Richard Pimentel](#) is the person most significantly responsible for the passing of the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA). Because he lost his hearing to an explosion during the Vietnam War, making him disabled, the Army denied him college tuition.

Shortly afterward he paid his own way to college, where he met his friend Art Honeyman, who lived with severe cerebral palsy. At that time, many states had [ugly laws](#) which made it illegal for disabled persons to appear in public if they were "unsightly" (Ugly Laws).

These laws became popular shortly after the end of the civil war, ironically denying the right of liberty to disabled people just as we abolished our slave trade. And they lasted until the mid 1970s, shortly after the end of Jim Crow. Following his injury in Vietnam and entry into college, Pimentel and Honeyman were arrested and spent a night in jail for violating an ugly law in Portland, Oregon. A restaurant felt it was too much to extend to someone with severe cerebral palsy the courtesy of allowing them to eat like everyone else. They spent the night in jail because they wanted pancakes.

The declaration doesn't say "white men" and it doesn't say "attractive men"; it says "all men".

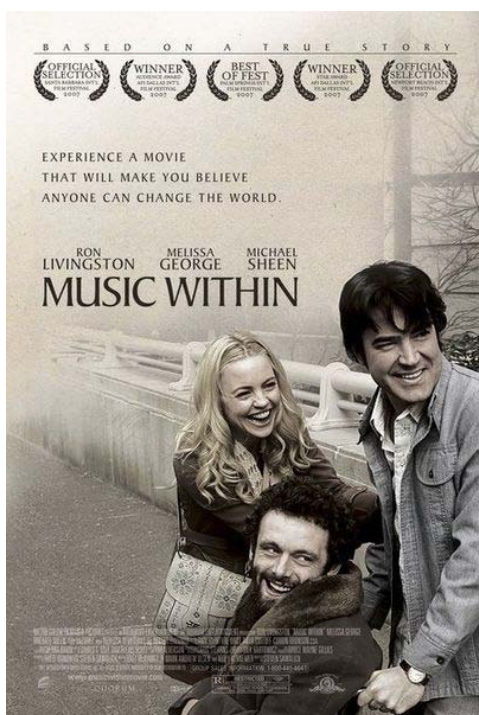
The first amendment to the Bill of Rights asserts our right to freedom of speech. This is not merely a right, it is our responsibility. We have a responsibility to speak out against injustices like the ugly laws, because speaking out is the way to protect everyone's liberty. So Richard Pimentel made a commitment to speak out for the disabled community. He worked as a recruiting agent, specializing in getting jobs for people with disabilities, moved on to work for the government and wrote the first standard to educate employers about people with

disabilities titled *Tilting at Windmills*. In 1990 Congress finally passed the ADA.

Richard Pimentel was a key player in a lot of important changes in our country, such as repealing the ugly laws, wheelchair access in public buildings and accessibility standards for the deaf and blind. This article however is concerned about employment. Have we moved forward? Are more disabled persons employed now than before the ADA?

Pimentel's strategy is to educate employers about persons with disabilities, to show them that disabled people are competent and that the benefits of a diverse office environment outweigh the costs of accommodations. This strategy targets the employer's fears about hiring a disabled person, to shed light on the fear and hopefully dissolve it. We can estimate its success by measuring the effect of the ADA.

Title I of the ADA addressed employment; it came first because it was the ADA's most



important goal. The authors of Title I modeled it after Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, shifting the focus from deciding who gets government aid to instead protecting individual civil rights. Employment is not a privilege, it's a right. Seven years later, despite progress in other areas, the ADA had little impact on employment, with the unemployment rate remaining above 60% (Schall, 1998).

To put this into perspective, Carol Schall published her article in June of 1998, a period of nearly unparalleled prosperity not just in the United States, but around the world! While everyone else enjoyed the champagne and caviar lifestyle afforded by the dot-com era, disabled people remained on the outside looking in. This is hardly the outcome we hoped for when in 1990, President Bush compared the signing of the ADA with tearing down the Berlin Wall:

... and now I sign legislation which takes a sledgehammer to another wall, one which has for too many generations separated Americans with disabilities from the freedom they could glimpse, but not grasp. We rejoice as the barrier falls, proclaiming together ... we will not tolerate discrimination in America.

The Challenge

What should be immediately apparent from the research described in the previous section is that the strategy of the ADA and educating employers has largely failed. When we fail it means we misunderstood the problem, or we haven't removed all of our strategy's barriers to success. We must take a step back, examine what we've tried and why it has failed and commit to a new plan. Here are some possible reasons for the continued unemployment of disabled people.

Do Disabled People Want to Work? Everyone is familiar with the stereotype of the guy who just wants to collect a disability check. Although it seems likely, it's not true. Would you choose to be deliberately homebound and destitute? A Louis Harris and Associates poll in 1994 found that two thirds of Americans with disabilities were not working. In the same poll, 84% of those not employed said they wanted to work. This was a 13% increase from an earlier poll in 1986 (Wehman, 1998). So it appears despite the lack of employment progress, we have an increasing desire to work.

Are Disabled People Aware of Their Rights and Available Job Services? It's logical to think that a person knows these things if they want to work, but real people are often not aware of beneficial information for a variety of reasons. In some cases people give up in despair after their initial efforts to find jobs fail. In other cases information is not widely known or difficult to find even when there have been attempts to make it available. Spend a few minutes on the US Census Bureau's [website](#) looking for the disability unemployment history and you'll quickly understand how challenging it can be to find public information.

In 1994, 42% of disabled persons had not learned about a law passed to help them called the Americans with Disabilities Act (Congressional Record, 1994). This is the most significant event to date regarding the civil rights of disabled persons. Our president compared it to tearing down the Berlin Wall, yet four years later every person who knew about it was shadowed by someone still in the dark. Do you know anyone who didn't know about the Berlin Wall coming down?

During the campaign for the presidential election of 2008, Barack Obama said, "Part of

what we need to do is invite the American people back to participate in their government again. Part of what we need to do is rebuild trust in our government again. And that means being open and transparent and accountable to the American People.” This is all true; however, trust and transparency are not enough. A message doesn’t reach its audience because it’s transparent or trustworthy or even important – it reaches its audience because someone makes a commitment to tell them.

The short answer to this question is no, many disabled persons are not aware and we need to inform them. Will you help?

Are Accommodations for Disabled Workers Too Costly? It’s unfortunate that the ADA is vague when it comes to accommodations for disabled employees. They are defined as “any change ... to the job or environment that permits a qualified employee/applicant ... to perform ... the job without causing undue hardship on the operations of the business”. The term “undue hardship” is further defined to mean “an action that is excessively costly, extensive, substantial, or disruptive”. Despite rumor to the contrary, the ADA doesn’t even protect all persons with disabilities, with exemptions for any disability that might threaten the health, safety or property of the business and its employees, such as kleptomania, pyromania, alcoholism or other substance abuse. In his paper titled “Just How Scary is the ADA?”, David Stamps writes, “The [ADA] can’t seem to shake its reputation as a legal nightmare, despite numerous court rulings that favor employers” (Stamps, 1995). This may be in part because there is no clear definition of the phrase “excessively costly”, leaving employers to wild, fearful speculation about

what percentage of their profits the court considers reasonable.

The reality is that accommodations for disabled workers aren’t particularly costly and technology continues to make them less necessary and more affordable. Paul Wehman said, “unemployment ... has consistently hovered in the 60-70% area for decades despite increased innovations in rehabilitation” (Wehman, 1998).

Government programs that help to pay for supported employment have also grown in recent years. If the government can pay a disabled person to stay home, they can pay to help a disabled person get a job. Here in Texas, the Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services (DARS) can help pay for college if there is reason to believe that a college degree will result in employment. DARS is not limited to college tuition, having the ability to secure funds for any accommodation that will result in employment. Like the ADA however, it’s possible that many people are unaware of these services. DARS consultants have contacted me personally, telling me of the extreme challenges they face placing people with Asperger Syndrome, some of whom already have college degrees. They hope that I can help them find job placements; I hope soon this will be true.

The federal government has also funded the [Job Accommodation Network \(JAN\)](#) to assist companies in making accommodations ([here are suggestions for Asperger Syndrome](#)) and provided tax incentives to smaller companies (Kohl & Zimmerman, 1995). Like DARS and the ADA, many people may also be unaware of these services and benefits.

In short, the answer to this question is no, accommodations are available and affordable.

Are Employers Willing to Hire Disabled

Employees? Of the four questions presented here, this is the hardest to answer. It's also the most likely to be controversial. Despite the volatility of this subject, however, it must be explored if we want to answer the crucial question: why do disabled people still have high unemployment after all these years?

Everyone thinks of themselves as honest, fair people and for the most part it's true. Today's world is in many ways much more just than it has been in the past. Can you imagine a person with cerebral palsy being jailed because they went out for pancakes and violated an ugly law? Of course you can't, because people just like us spoke out against the ugly laws, changed the hearts of average Americans and got them repealed. We've been so effective that today many people aren't even aware that we ever had ugly laws. This means it's no longer socially acceptable to publicly express prejudice against disabled people, which is mostly a very good thing. At the same time, it makes studying the unemployment problem harder.

When social scientists study unemployment, they tend to use self-report questionnaires to gather information about why employers make hiring decisions. In these questionnaires they ask employers if they support the ADA and as you might expect, the end result is always the same. Every employer says they support the ADA. Why wouldn't they? It's like asking an applicant for a retail job if they think they would enjoy stealing money from the cash-register – they have no incentive to answer accurately if they do behave this way. It's not just social pressure either. Since the ADA now gives us the power to file suit against employers for discrimination, they have an additional incentive to be less than candid.

If we want to know if discrimination is still a barrier to employment for disabled persons, we have to use something other than surveys of employers to tell that story. Carol Schall writes, "The ADA attempts to decrease such discrimination by rule of law. It does not and cannot change the hearts and minds of people in society. The pervasive and erroneous perception that individuals with disabilities are incapable of handling the rigor of work is one of the most insidious barriers to inclusion in the workforce." (Schall, 1998).

Schall tells the story of Public Radio correspondent John Hockenberry and how his supervisors realized that they would not have hired him to report on political campaigns and the Mt. Saint Helens eruption, if they'd known about his wheelchair beforehand (Shapiro, 1994) (Hockenberry, 1995). She concludes, "we routinely underestimate the abilities of individuals with disabilities such that we do not even recognize our behavior as discriminatory." This may be one of the most profound comments I found in my research.

It's important to remember that employers who discriminate are not all bad people; most of them are normal people with normal fears. Although these fears are often unfounded, they are real fears that frequently persist despite cool, rational arguments against them. When a person is claustrophobic, you can give them all the safety information in the world and it doesn't make them any more comfortable stepping onto a crowded elevator. Can we expect an employer's fears to be any different?

The reality is that strong fears are rarely dented by logic. So it's no surprise that business journals have often described the ADA in less than flattering terms. Again Schall writes, "While the literature suggesting the expansion

of diversity training programs has increased, the attitudes of the general business world remain hesitant and fearful. Business executives express concern over the meaning of reasonable accommodations and fearful of frivolous lawsuits even though there is little evidence to support those fears (Macy, 1996). A 1995 Harris poll indicates just the opposite.”

The ADA has not laid employers fears to rest, if anything, it’s added to them. The Harris poll in which employers claim broad support for the ADA merely shows the effect of strong social pressures. It is probably true that most employers agree with the idea of equal employment for disabled people. But does supporting an idea mean you want to carry it out? Just because you want a hamburger doesn’t mean you want to meet the cow.

It’s become a “not in my back yard” issue in which employers genuinely support the idea and would like to see change, but are too uncomfortable to contribute to change directly. Carol Schall says that one corporate lobbyist told her, “Ask me if my company supports the ADA and my response is we support the goals of the act 100 percent. But ask me unofficially if I’d be unhappy if there were some changes made that made the law less vague and less of a hassle, I’d have to say no” (Schall, 1998). By some standards he was kind. In 1999 president of the Ludwig von Mises Institute, Llewellyn Rockwell wrote on their website, “It takes a shameless liar or a blooming idiot—take your pick—to come to the defense of one of the most destructive pieces of legislation passed in the last two decades. I’m talking of the regulatory madness called the Americans with Disabilities Act...” Rockwell went on to promote several misconceptions about the law, [stated as fact with no references](#) (Rockwell, 1999). As an

example, he claims that employers are forced to hire persons with a history of violence, when in reality even kleptomania exempts workers from protection under the act (Schall, 1998).

The ADA also offers no direct benefits or incentives for employers to hire disabled workers. Tax incentives have been subsequently offered, but are little and late. An employer is generally looking for a direct and immediate benefit to hiring a particular employee, and it’s likely that in many cases the free and extra services like JAN aren’t seen as a benefit, but rather as a hassle or worse. The editors of popular business magazines, frightened by the vagueness of the ADA’s language, often run articles with titles like “Double Standard on the Disabled” (Gray, 1996) and “More Disability Madness” (Seligman, 1995). These articles often highlight extreme examples of litigation that the courts typically deny (Schall, 1998). To be sure even a denied claim is likely to be seen by many employers as an unnecessary hassle and a source of anxiety.

Is there any question that an employer pursuing an applicant they want will go to great lengths to hire them? I have advanced skills and a reputation in the software engineering industry. Because of this employers have flown me across the country and paid me extra to relocate, despite the fact that I do not currently have a Bachelor’s degree. Meanwhile consultants with DARS tell me that it’s extremely difficult for them to place other men with my same disability even though they already have the degree. In my own life the lack of a degree has been my most significant barrier to employment, and yet my own disability appears to be a larger barrier than the degree for others on the autistic spectrum. If companies are willing to fly people across the country for

interviews, should a phone call or two to JAN be a problem? For that matter it can't be an education problem either, because an employer willing to fly someone across the country would also be willing to educate themselves on the available services like JAN – a Google search or two is nothing compared to a plane flight.

This problem is resistant to logic because it's not a logical problem – it's an irrational fear. The disability makes employers uncomfortable and the thought of unknown accommodations and the possibility of litigation make them even more uncomfortable. Have we yet given them any strong incentives to overcome their fears? Saying to employers at the bargaining table, "we are just as good", is not a position of strength. Do you want to buy a car that's marketed as "just as good as a BMW", or do you want a BMW?

Conclusion: Although there may be other factors influencing the hiring and employment of people with disabilities, I think this list describes the most important issues. Given the evidence, it seems more than likely to me that the single most significant influence on the employment of disabled people is employer anxiety. What this means is that if we want to make a significant change to the employment of people with disabilities, we must focus on strategies that address the issue of employer anxiety first and general education and awareness second. When employers are comfortable hiring people with disabilities, they'll do the research to educate themselves.

A New Plan

Making something illegal rarely prevents people from doing it. This has been true throughout history from prohibition to immigration to jay-walking. Is employer discrimination any different? In an article for LiveCareer, Maria

Hanson writes about some recruiters' [discrimination practices](#) that are clearly illegal (Hanson, 2009). One recruiter invades the applicants' privacy by having his secretary spy on their car in the parking lot; only neatniks will pass this test. Another simply invites them to lunch and makes surreptitious character judgments based on the way they choose to cut their meat. Although these are clear violations of an individual's civil rights, there is no way to enforce the law against these violations. There is rarely a case in which it's possible to enforce the ADA during the hiring process either.

Carol Schall gives the example of Paul Miller, who graduated at the top of his class from Harvard Law in 1986, expecting the kind of elite, high-paying job that Harvard grads are offered. Yet while he watched his classmates move on to just those kinds of jobs, he did not. One Philadelphia firm explained that despite being impressed with his credentials, they feared clients seeing him in the hallway might "think we we're running some sort of circus freak show"; Miller is a dwarf (Schall, 1998). These are just the kind of discriminatory remarks that social pressures and fear of litigation usually suppress, however, it's perfectly legal to claim the job is filled by another "more qualified" candidate. And if a recruiter will discriminate because you have a peculiar way of eating, then they absolutely will discriminate against *any* person on the autistic spectrum (maybe without even realizing). To play on a line from the movie *Jerry McGuire*, "you lost me at hello". Will we let this be the last word?

Obviously we need a plan beyond the ADA. As I've said, I feel the only real challenge in employment for disabled persons, autistic or otherwise, is employer anxiety. This means that for any employment strategy to work for

disabled persons as a whole, it must first address the discomfort of employers. As President Roosevelt said, “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself”.

There are several different ways to tackle fears. One way is to educate employers about what disabled people can achieve and how to include them in the workplace. This is the strategy we’ve been using for several decades. Isn’t the progress underwhelming? Another strategy is to create direct exposure to the fear, so that employers who’ve had positive experiences with disabled employees will no longer be afraid. This strategy works with some fears, for example many people who are terrified by snakes can overcome their fear after just one positive personal experience with a real snake (Becker & Costello, 1975). This seems like a decent strategy and I’d like to see it explored more, however, a 2002 survey of Australian employers ranked positive previous experience with disabled workers fifth on their list of reasons for a hiring decision, below hygiene and concerns about ability to perform the job (Graffam, Shinkfield, Smith, & Polzin, 2002).

When it comes to fears there aren’t a large number of strategies for curing them. We’ve already covered those, which leaves the strategy of avoiding these fears all-together. To do this we need to change the problem so that employer anxiety is no longer an issue. I know of one way to do this; change the employers; become the employers. This is the AutLabs strategy and although it’s not a new strategy, I feel it’s not received as much attention as it deserves. Can you imagine running our own companies?

In recent years the vocational rehabilitation community has seen a lot of increased interest

in self-employment for disabled people. In 2002, Cary Griffin wrote (my emphasis):

In the past ten years, small business created more jobs in the United States than all the Fortune 500 companies combined. Fully 20 million Americans work in microenterprises of 1 to 5 people, and the self employment rate is growing at over 20 percent annually. In addition, during times of economic recession, more people enter self employment than during boom times. Add to this the fact that the U.S. Department of Commerce estimates that 79% of all small business succeeds, and self employment reveals itself as a logical strategy in combating the overwhelming unemployment rate for individuals with significant disabilities.

This Special Edition of the *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* introduces readers to the concept of **self employment**, and **challenges** the commonly held belief that small business ownership may be achievable for individuals with physical disabilities, but not typically for **individuals with serious psychiatric and developmental disabilities**. The writers herein take a “supported” self employment approach. They recognize that employment of all types requires supports from family members, accountants, sales representatives, and other specialists. The myth of the “independent business owner” is just that. ... the best businesses are interdependent.

Self employment is not easy, but then, neither is wage employment.

Let me say again that discrimination isn't always deliberate. Moreover we aren't immune to discriminating against ourselves. It's easy to look at a task that seems insurmountable, like tackling the unemployment challenge, and think, "I can't do that". When we have disabilities we might even be more likely to fall prey to this kind of self-sabotage, ensuring failure before we begin, but at what cost? When we discriminate against ourselves we lose the opportunity to know what we can achieve. We do this because we carry around stereotypes about ourselves, even the stereotypes we disagree with.

In one experiment researchers gave a number of Asian-American women a math test. They were divided into three groups and asked several questions before the test. One group answered questions related to their gender (co-ed dorms, etc.). One group answered questions about their Asian heritage (languages spoken at home, etc.). As you might NOT expect, the students who were asked questions about their gender scored on average significantly lower on the math test because of the stereotype that women aren't good at math. The students who were asked questions about their ethnicity in contrast scored significantly higher on the math test because of the stereotype that Asian people are very good at math and engineering (Shin, Pittinsky, & Ambaddy, 1999).

It's not only the rest of the world but we ourselves who carry negative stereotypes about disabled people. Fortunately we can overcome these stereotypes by reminding ourselves of other successful people with disabilities, such as US President [Franklin Roosevelt](#), who ran our country from a wheelchair he designed himself (McIntosh, 2008).

We need to advocate to others as well to support our decision to run our own businesses. Alice Doyel is a disabled business woman, who writes (Doyel, 2002);

In discussions with both counselors and vocational rehabilitation customers, it becomes clear that it is often the counselor whose fear of taking a risk stops a potential self-employment outcome. This fear can keep the counselor from entertaining the option of self-employment for almost any customer. Often this is not a fear based on facts, but on generalized uncertainty about self-employment and the ability of people with disabilities to develop and manage businesses. Sometimes counselors have negative perceptions of people with disabilities as business owners even when that customer has already proved him or herself as a successful business owner. This situation occurs both to people who were business owners before they acquired their disabilities, and to people who have successfully run their own businesses while having disabilities. In these circumstances it is clear that the counselors see only the risks and not the opportunities in the business.

We need to commit ourselves to test our own limits, to push the envelope, to look at challenges we think are beyond our abilities and say, "yes we can".

Unemployment is high for persons with disabilities (over 60%). It's even higher (90% according to the [Autism Society of America](#)) for people on the autistic spectrum (Yavorcik, 2009). Presumably unemployment is lower than average for certain other kinds of disabilities

such as severe back injuries. The majority of people on the autistic spectrum fall within the labels of Asperger Syndrome and PDD-NOS (Newschaffer, Croen, & Daniels, 2007). This means that we often require few if any actual accommodations to work. It seems the word “autism” may strike a particularly uneasy chord with employers. In other words, if an employer is uncomfortable about hiring a dwarf, it may be nothing compared to their anxieties about hiring someone with any form of autism. Is this problem worldwide, or is this a regional issue? It turns out that an Autism Europe survey shows unemployment of only 62% for people with autism (Vivanti, 2007). It seems jobs for people with autism are a greater challenge in America.

Why would employers be less likely to hire an employee who needs fewer accommodations? The answer is that mainstream media has given them every reason to fear the word “autism”. We’ve been saddled by Hollywood with an unfortunate stereotype. Most people upon hearing the word “autism” have one clear and immediate vision: [Rain Man](#), definitely (Rain Man).

I recently rented the film to better understand how people view us, and I was not as moved as the critics. Of course there are a very small handful of people worldwide who genuinely resemble the character of Raymond Babbitt, but it’s a problem when they’re considered (as they are by many) representative of all people with autism. Worse yet in the film, being often unable to hold a coherent conversation is described as “high functioning”, a label he would never receive in reality, and one that further cements the myth that Rain Man is a best-case scenario for people with autism. People often tell me “you don’t seem autistic”, because they expect autistic people to be

virtually unable to carry a conversation like Raymond Babbitt.

John Kirton, proud father of six autistic children says, “When my two ‘classic’ children were diagnosed, I asked the Dr about their intelligence level. He said they were smart, just Autistic. Not knowing at the time I was like many people who hear the word Autism and think mental retardation. I didn’t know any better. I do now.” Even those of us who are non-verbal are often just as smart as everyone else, as is the case with prolific blogger [Amanda Baggs](#) (Baggs). A new film [Adam](#) is just out in theaters, featuring a character with Asperger Syndrome and a much more appropriate archetype. We can only hope that it will receive as much critical acclaim and that it will help to change the stereotype of autism (Adam: Movie Trailer, 2009).

Often despite good intentions, programs designed to help disabled people at large also continue to affirm bad stereotypes. During her radio show, Tricia mentioned a project called “[We Include](#)” spearheaded by the well-known activist and first-lady of California, Maria Shriver (We Include). A video on their website shows a number of California residents with disabilities and the people who hired them, making positive comments about their hiring decisions. Unfortunately this video reinforces many of the stereotypes of persons with disabilities. It shows employees with traditionally menial jobs and although I’m sure the people themselves are grateful for these jobs, they reinforce the stereotype that people with disabilities are only good enough for menial labor.

In one scene a mail clerk delivers some papers to Governor Schwarzenegger and receives a hug. It’s a good scene because it tugs at the heart strings and hopefully engages the viewer.

At the same time it's a very bad scene. Do you think that the Governor's office is a daily hug-a-thon? When they meet to discuss the state's plan for economic recovery, do you think the meetings begin or end with a group hug? So what message does it send when their video shows the Governor hugging a disabled employee? I think it helps to reinforce the stereotype that people with developmental disabilities are all intellectually stunted and need to be coddled. The scene instantly invokes the stereotype of the Rain Man, a person who might be given a job in the mail room, but who would never be given the kind of advanced software engineering jobs that have been the mainstay of my professional life.

The video does also make positive statements about noticing the employee's special skills and rewarding them with promotions and greater responsibilities. I want to make it clear that I think it's a good project and I applaud their efforts. All I'm saying is they should work to improve their media, with an eye to create a message not of pity but of empowerment.

This problem of poor stereotyping merely firms up what we already know: employers don't want us. Will it end there? As I already mentioned, the AutLabs strategy is to remove employer anxieties from the equation by becoming the employers. This is actually only the beginning strategy, because the end goal is to change the hearts of employers, to make future companies fully integrated. That may sound like a tall order, but precisely this plan has already worked in the past. In the late 1800s, Major League Baseball barred black players from the game. So blacks did something about it, they created [Negro League Baseball](#).

For many years negro leagues remained amongst the largest and most successful

businesses owned by blacks of that era. Sometimes black and white teams played against each other, although never officially or in the news. Finally in 1945 the Brooklyn Dodgers signed a black player named [Jackie Robinson](#). Within four short years Major League Baseball absorbed nearly the entirety of the negro leagues, effectively integrating the sport of baseball.

To be fair, the negro leagues are not a perfect analogy, but then would it be an analogy if it were perfect? We're not talking about sports and no one is suggesting similar integration with the Special Olympics. That's not why I mention the negro leagues. These black-owned businesses give us an ideal to strive for. They were an unwanted minority in baseball at the time, and being told "you can't do that", they responded "yes we can". They did it on their own and eventually it got them into the Major Leagues. Was it easy? No. It was challenging and at times demoralizing, and for their commitment and determination they were rewarded with the American dream.

When faced with a seemingly intractable problem, the way to solve it is to look for what is called "positive deviance". If you're looking for a cure for a particular disease, populations who appear immune represent that positive deviance. By studying those who are immune, it's often possible to produce a cure. In our case positive deviance means finding people on the autistic spectrum who are already working and successful. I can think of no better example right now than the Danish company [Specialisterne](#) (Better, faster... and no office politics: the company with the autistic specialists, 2009).

Thorkil Sonne's involvement in the autistic community began when his son received an

autism diagnosis. He went through all the emotions parents normally go through, the fear, the denial. Then he accepted it, got involved and became vice-chairman of a housing facility for people with Asperger Syndrome. There he met a young man with a talent for computers. Sonne says, "He had retired on a state pension, but I thought that was so unfair as he had valuable IT skills that I could see would be useful..." In 2004 he left his job, remortgaged his house and founded Specialisterne, to find jobs for people with autism as software testers.

How has it worked out for Sonne and his employees? You tell me: after 5 years in business, with a staff of 60 autistic employees, they have international clients like Microsoft and annual revenues of £2 million. Sonne made a commitment to serve his clients and to improve the lives of people with autism.

Sonne developed a business plan with a strategy that avoids the usual disability focus and instead focuses on strength and ability. Although life is sometimes more difficult for us, autism also confers particular strengths in areas like long-term memory, concentration and attention to detail. Any positive employment strategy should focus on individual strengths. Sonne says, "I read up about the condition - but there were too many books describing what people can't do. Yet my staff is able to go and work at the premises of our customers. I'm so proud. I didn't think that would be possible when I started the company five years ago."

An employee named Soeren says, "It was a living hell. I kept going to job interviews but coming second and wondering why I wasn't chosen. It was very stressful. I began to question whether I would work again." Fortunately for him, Sonne had a solution. He says, "People come to me who've had

difficulties in the labor market and got depressed. I see them grow in self-esteem. It's the most motivating part of my work and a magical moment for me, as the father of a boy with autism" (Dreaper, 2009). Sonne is a true leader. Shouldn't we all follow his compassionate example?

I have three children myself, and all three of them show signs that concern me about their future. With any luck, when they're my age, employment won't be one of those concerns. Sonne's example is not merely inspiring; it's proof positive that this employment strategy works. It works in Europe, why not here? Haven't we waited long enough?

Specialisterne isn't the only company adopting this strategy; there are already several other companies like [Left is Right](#), [AspiT](#) and [Symmetry Electronics](#) in California. The [AutLabs](#) company is adopting the same strategy, and you can help by joining our mailing list and our [wiki](#) and most importantly [telling others](#). Tell your friends and family, tell your autism support groups, tell the readers of [your blog](#) and tell your friends on [twitter](#).

These are the reasons why the AutLabs project is growing so quickly and receiving so much attention already, because people just like you are spreading this message of hope and success. We need to keep the momentum, so that this project doesn't end up like the ADA, which was still unknown to half the disabled community several years after it became law. By making a commitment to tell the people you know, you're ensuring the project's success. With everything else failing, we have a responsibility to support and promote the employment strategy that's working, to create meaningful employment for everyone. Will you commit to be a part of this change?

About Us

The Autelligent Laboratories (AutLabs) company will be a software company, primarily because software engineering is where my experience lies. Today we are in the process of forming relationships with other autism and disability organizations and identifying our business needs and challenges. We are developing an open source business plan that can be used by other companies with minor revision. We hope this will be an effective blueprint for many similar businesses. If you are a business person or know someone who is, you can [help develop our business plan](#) on our wiki. Also be sure to read and contribute to our [core values](#) and you can follow me on [twitter](#).

Moving Forward

In this article I've outlined the employment challenges facing not just autistic workers, but disabled people in general. I've framed the problem with historical context to show what's worked and what hasn't. There's a lot here to be angry about. At the same time there's a lot here to be excited about, to give us hope and resolve.

When I was a kid, I played baseball. I think part of the reason I lost my interest in sports is the way I felt when we picked teams. We're all standing around in a group and the team captains have been chosen. One by one the two take turns picking guys out of the lineup. You keep hoping that one of them will call your name, but one by one you know, in no uncertain terms, that you're just not that popular. Finally you're the last one standing there all by yourself, knowing that not only would your captain prefer you be on the other team, but that he'd honestly prefer you not play at all. If you're lucky, at least he can avoid

calling you names when he begrudgingly accepts you on his team.

It seems adult life isn't much different; we're still the last pick. Life doesn't have to be like this for us. We're not at their mercy; no one is forcing us to play on their team. We can build our own teams. Self-employment is an increasingly attractive option for disabled persons and blossoms during times of economic hardship like we're experiencing now. Now is the time to commit, get involved and make a difference. Not only are we capable, we already are building our own teams. Are you joining in?

In 2008 we elected Barack Obama the first black president of the United States. This is hailed as one of the most significant events in our country's history. Our powerful strides for racial equality made this possible, a clear example of the dream of Rev. Martin Luther King. Black urban teenagers started talking about job goals like becoming attorneys and politicians, goals they didn't consider before. Blacks job opportunities continue to grow closer to those of whites, yet even though we are a larger minority, and even though we've already had a disabled president (Roosevelt), we continue to see no real progress on the employment issues of disabled people. We have an opportunity now and a responsibility to change this situation, to end this rut of discrimination, to create meaningful employment, liberty and justice for all people. I'll leave you with the words of our President, Barack Obama;

Out of many, we are one; that while we breathe, we hope; and where we are met with cynicism and doubt, those who tell us that we can't, we will respond with that timeless creed that sums up the spirit of a people in three simple words; yes we can.

Additional Resources

- The official AutLabs website <http://www.autlabs.com> and wiki <http://autlabs.wikispaces.com>
- The AutLabs book project <http://autlabs.wikispaces.com/Book>
- Jobs 4 Autism website <http://www.jobs4autism.com>
- Income Links – helping disabled persons start small businesses <http://www.incomelinks.biz/>
- Job Accommodation Network – locate affordable accommodations <http://www.jan.wvu.edu/>
- The official ADA website <http://www.ada.gov/>
- Employee Pack from the UK Autism Society
<http://www.autism.org.uk/content/1/c4/59/64/Employee%20Pack%20-%20looking%20for%20a%20job.pdf>
- Easter Seals adult services for people with Autism
http://www.easterseals.com/site/PageServer?pagename=ntlc8_autism_service_adult
- Is Asperger’s Syndrome/HFA Necessarily a Disability? By Simon Baron Cohen
<http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/7138/lobby/disability.htm>
- Left Is Right <http://www.leftisright.se/index.php?lang=english>
- AspIT <http://politiken.dk/newsinenglish/article635048.ece>
- Symmetry Electronics <http://www.aspiweb.net/company-seeks-out-autistic-employees/>

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