

Employment and Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder: An Updated Look at Strategies for Success

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KEY MESSAGES

Many people with FASD have difficulties finding and keeping meaningful employment due to body and brain-based differences that can impact their daily functioning. Importantly, employment success for people with FASD can be supported through leveraging individual strengths, skills, abilities, and providing opportunities for accommodations in the workplace.

Issue:

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) has been recognized as one of the most common developmental disabilities in Canada and the US with prevalence estimates ranging from 2 to 5% [1, 2]. FASD is a diagnostic term used to describe the impacts on the brain and the body of individuals who were prenatally exposed to alcohol. FASD is unique in comparison with other disabilities as it is multifaceted, it is associated with complex brain and body-based challenges, and there are lifelong difficulties that impact daily living for people with FASD, including the ability to find and keep meaningful employment. Employment can be hard for people with FASD due to factors including cognitive and learning difficulties, social and communication deficits, and sensory sensitivities, which pose challenges in meeting workplace demands, interacting with coworkers and customers, and navigating the workplace environment [3, 4, 5]. Additionally, few workplaces have the necessary understanding or accommodations in place to support individuals with FASD, thereby creating barriers for individuals with FASD to find and keep meaningful employment [5, 6].

The purpose of this paper is to provide an updated review of the existing literature on employment and FASD and to provide recommendations for researchers and policy makers to support employment goals and needs for people with FASD.

Background:

Despite previous researchers calling for more literature about the implications of FASD on employment, very few studies exist in this area. Underemployment is a major concern for many people with FASD and compounding challenges such as transportation difficulties, limited social

skills, lack of previous work experiences, and a potential lack of family support in maintaining employment, contribute to further barriers experienced by people with FASD [3, 4].

Challenges related to obtaining and maintaining meaningful employment include cognitive, physical, emotional, and behavioural difficulties, existing social stigma, and a lack of FASD understanding in the community [5]. Additionally, challenges experienced during schooling may carry into the workplace including trouble concentrating, difficulty staying focused, difficulty managing money, impulsivity, and memory problems [6].

In a project conducted by Makela et al., (2019), researchers explored the employment experiences of people with FASD and the needs of community employment agencies, and translated this information into policy to better support people with FASD in obtaining and maintaining employment [7]. Developing a guide for assisting employment professionals working with adults with FASD, the researchers aimed to create opportunities for networking and resource sharing, and to improve employment success for individuals with FASD [7]. Notably, 66% of the people with FASD in this study chose not to disclose their diagnosis at work due to existing stigma, fear of discrimination, and safety concerns related to sharing this person information [7]. This hesitation in reporting an FASD diagnosis to employers can create further barriers around knowledge and understanding of accommodation needs, lack of skills and training, and negative attitudes and stereotypes of people with FASD [6, 8].

Leveraging Strengths

Although people with FASD experience challenges, they also have many strengths, skills, and abilities that can be leveraged to support employment success. In one previous study, researchers reported that participants with FASD had a difficult time finding meaningful employment and most individuals reported losing a job in the past. However, other research tells us that people with FASD are able to find employment in a wide range of settings and receive payment for their work which can result in improved well-being and feelings of achievement [5, 8]. Meaningful employment represents acceptance and integration into the community and can help promote positive identity, self-esteem, and self-worth for people with FASD [9, 10]. Some common strengths of people with FASD, such as creativity and curiosity, can provide opportunities for people with FASD to complete tasks innovatively or use different ways of thinking to overcome challenges in the workplace [6, 11]. For all people, not only those with FASD, finding a good job fit has positive impacts on self-esteem, independence, social connection, job satisfaction, and advocacy which can lead to further employment success [5, 12]. Job satisfaction has been associated with higher general well-being, better living situation, independence, improved social and communication skills, and higher self-esteem among people with FASD [13].

Strategies for Support

Supportive relationships that are based on an understanding of individual needs, combined with workplace accommodations, have been shown to foster employment success for adults with severe and persistent mental health challenges; similar strategies could be applied to people with FASD [10]. Safeguards, such as building social networks and connections within the

workplace, may also reduce vulnerability and promote the success of people with FASD [11]. For example, by including coworkers as support persons during the workday, people with FASD can receive assistance in explaining tasks, using lists, following routines, and filling out paperwork while simultaneously providing opportunities to reduce stigma in their coworkers [10]. Additionally, workplace resources created by employers and provided to employees can include opportunities for training, learning, and feedback on the complexities of FASD which are beneficial for employers, employees, and people with disabilities and can promote understanding [14, 15].

The *Supported Employment Model* has been reported to enhance employment outcomes for individuals with developmental disabilities and mental health challenges, and could also be relevant as a model to support people with FASD [16, 17]. This model is a stepwise approach that focuses on finding and maintaining employment by placing individuals into positions that match their goals and abilities and provide ongoing support for employment success [10, 14, 18]. This model aligns with scaffolding strategies aimed to increase competency through flexible expectations, continued support, building social skills, and building a social network [19]. Supported employment prioritizes a good fit between individual strengths and work environment and provides opportunities that build self-esteem and competency. Through a regular routine, flexible schedule, and mentorship-based positions, people with FASD can receive ongoing supports and resources from the employer [11].

In a collection of stories from people with FASD, the mother of 23-year old Sasha explains that “constant coaching, adapting, and modifying expectations for [people with FASD]...can be successful in a safe, structured, organized, and under-stimulated environment that recognizes and builds on [people with FASD] capabilities” [20].

Recommendations:

Employment service providers should...

- Be informed about FASD to be able to best support and assist people with FASD find meaningful employment.
- Understand the hesitancy experienced by some individuals around disclosing their diagnosis in the workplace and use non-judgmental and compassionate approaches to ensure that a safe space is provided to share their diagnosis [7].
- Utilize materials and resources specifically designed for people with FASD.
- Listen to and work collaboratively with family members, caregivers, and support systems in developing employment plans for people with FASD.
- Gain knowledge about the strengths and challenges of prospective employees with FASD [3, 12].
- Aim to leverage individual strengths and abilities by ensuring that they are providing a good job fit for people with FASD [9, 10].
- Provide resources and training opportunities to promote understanding about FASD, the existing barriers to employments that exist for people with FASD, and the complexities

of FASD to employers and provide standardized training that can be made available to all employees [3, 14, 15].

- Help employers to see the benefits of hiring someone with FASD, which can have positive effects to strengthen their team morale and encouraging more teamwork [14]

Employers should...

- Be encouraged and supported to hire and support persons with FASD in the workplace [6].
- Provide early job skills training that are accessible for all incoming employees [14, 15].
- Aim to minimize the challenges experienced with people with FASD by providing workplace accommodations that meet individual needs [3, 10, 11].
- Provide training opportunities to all employees on how to best support individuals with FASD [14, 15].
- Promote positive social networks within the workplace by creating a supportive environment for all employees [11, 12].
- Set feasible, realistic goals and expectations that are tailored to each individual's strengths and abilities.
- Ensure that employees with FASD have clear and attainable job duties by providing one or two tasks at a time [4].
- Understand how to evaluate success with people with FASD based on the achievement of feasible goals and expectations and that the supports used by employees with FASD should not be removed when they are doing well at work [4, 7].
- Be mindful of the importance of routine, structure, and consistency when scheduling, such as assigning the same shifts for persons with FASD [4].
- Learn about and consider implementing the supported employment model at their workplace [10, 11, 13, 16, 17, 18].
- Implement a mentorship program within the workplace on a needs basis that can provide opportunities for positive reinforcement and reminders to stay on task [10].

Employees should...

- Be required to participate in training regarding working with individuals with different learning styles and individuals with different intellectual and developmental disabilities, specifically FASD, to facilitate understanding about neurodiversity [14, 15].

Caregivers should...

- Encourage their loved ones with FASD to connect with employment professionals to ensure that they are receiving support throughout the preparation, obtaining, and maintenance stages of their employment experiences [4, 7].
- Encourage people with FASD to pursue job opportunities that best fit with their skills, abilities, and interests and make the job searching process person-centered. This could

include working with other people, work related to a specific trade or hobby, or work related to different environments such as working outside [4, 5, 12].

- Plan or role-play for situations that may come up in employment settings to help build on interpersonal skills for people with FASD [4].
- Support people with FASD to overcome logistical challenges related to employment such as creating routines at home and finding solutions to transportation difficulties [3, 4].
- Suggest different technologies to help with schedules or reminders to help with organization and time management [4].

Researchers should...

- Conduct more studies on employment success in FASD, with intentional research goals that advance the field of meaningful employment for individuals with FASD.
- Engage with people with FASD, caregivers, family members, and support systems to capture and share the lived experiences of navigating employment for people with FASD.
- Consider exploring other employment models that promote the success of people with FASD

Conclusion:

There is limited research on the intersection of FASD and employment. Although some of the existing evidence highlights difficulties for individuals with FASD in finding and keeping meaningful employment, many individuals can experience success in different work settings with appropriate supports and accommodations. By providing opportunities for accommodations and shared understandings at the workplace, employers can take an inclusive and strengths-based approach that facilitates positive social networking in the workplace, builds awareness of FASD through training and resources, and provides ongoing support to promote the overall success of all employees. Additionally, by identifying and leveraging the individual strengths, skills, and abilities of people with FASD, employers can work with employees to create resources and supported employment models that meet individual needs and create a space for people with FASD to contribute and belong.

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