The Validation Process: A useful tool to visualize abilities and enhance the possibilities of paid employment for people with ASD

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Abstract. To access and maintain paid employment is of importance for all people in our society. Today a large number of people are more or less excluded from the open labour market. One of these disadvantaged groups is people with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). This paper presents the project KVAS – Assessment and Validation Asperger Syndrome, that took place in the municipality of Botkyrka in Sweden during the years 2007–2010. The Empowerment network in the Autism and Asperger Association in Sweden initiated the project aiming to develop ways to visualize the abilities of individuals with Asperger Syndrome to increase their chances to permanent paid employment. The outcome of the project *The Validation Process* is introduced together with the *Barometer* and *My Profile*, self-assessment tools that were developed in the project to assist people with ASD in assessing their own resources and support needs to increase self-advocacy. *The Validation Process* consists of 4 modules that concern work in different ways. The model was originally developed for group sessions in combination with individual work, but can also be used individually. It can be used in the Supported Employment process for work preparation, vocational profiling or as job support.

Keywords: Adults with autism, ASD, vocational rehabilitation, empowerment, supported self-advocacy, self-assessment, employment

1. Background

People with ASD face many challenges in their struggle to get a job and to earn a living, although many of them have both unique and valuable qualifications. Difficulties to identify these valuable qualifications as well as individual needs of adaptations in the workplace are great barriers to overcome (Milton, 2006). The Empowerment Project (http://www.autism.se) ran 2001–2004 within The Autism and Asperger Association in Sweden. The aim of the project was to give adults with ASD a stronger voice both within the Swedish Autism and Asperger Association and in society as a whole. The Empowerment Project arranged meeting groups across the country, forums on the Internet, camps and conferences. They published the magazine *Empowerment,* and had meetings with politicians. They published books about coping with ASD and about rights and

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legislation (Norrö & Swing Åhström, 2004 a&b). In 2004 an Empowerment council was formed whose role was to give advice to the board of the Swedish Autism and Asperger Association.

One of the most important questions discussed within the Empowerment network and council was work. Most of the members in the Empowerment network had difficulties in accessing and maintaining paid employment. How to get a job, to keep it and to get support became important issues frequently discussed during conferences, in meeting groups and in forums on the Internet. One person in the Empowerment Project, Gunnel Norrö, was particularly engaged. She often said that she had made a career of getting fired. She was diagnosed with Asperger syndrome when she was in her fifties. She used to say that when receiving her diagnosis it became clear to her that she had not understood a lot of unwritten rules and social codes in her different workplaces. She had worked as a bus-driver, priest, social worker, in hospitals and so on without understanding that she missed a lot of important things that were going on around her. The result was that she constantly got fired. Gunnel spent a lot of time and energy in addressing this issue within the Autism and Asperger Association. Two of the questions she raised were:

"Why are there training courses and information about autism for staff in the workplaces where people with ASD work, but no training courses or information about workplaces for people with ASD?"

"Why are there no training courses for people with ASD, where they get the opportunity to learn important things about work and prepare coping strategies to handle difficult situations *before* entering a workplace?"

These were very relevant questions since a lot of people with ASD have difficulties understanding social codes, coping with sensory input and other things at work. The issue was discussed for a long time. It was addressed in the magazine *Empowerment*, members of the Empowerment network were interviewed and there were a lot of suggestions about what the members wanted to learn, or had learned by experience. The difficulties of living with ASD are individual and there is no solution that fits all. The aim of the training must be about understanding your individual conditions, your own profile. It is important to identify and understand both your strengths and difficulties to find appropriate solutions.

The Autism and Asperger Association contacted Botkyrka municipality hoping to catch their interest in a project combining the knowledge and experience of the Empowerment network with Botkyrka's knowledge about validation.

1.1. The project KVAS

The Swedish Inheritance Fund Commission and the municipality of Botkyrka financed the project. It was a co-operation between the Municipality of Botkyrka, the Autism and Asperger Association and the Swedish Public Employment Agency. The project team consisted of members from the municipality and from the Autism and Asperger Association, all with experience from working with vocational rehabilitation and/or people with ASD. It was important to keep an empowerment perspective and find ways to involve the clients in the process from the beginning.

2. Method – Validation of competencies

We decided to use a method called Validation, which had been used in the municipality of Botkyrka for several years, and to adapt it to the needs of people with an ASD. Value of work VOW (2007) describes Validation as a procedure using varying methods and tools to assess, recognise and make visible the knowledge and skills acquired in the workplace by people with little formal education. It is a wide range of knowledge, know-how, skills and competences that people develop throughout their lives, generally through informal or non-formal learning – for example, through work, education, and leisure activities. We wanted to highlight the clients strengths in relation to the general competencies that are described in the final report from the Delegation of Validation (Valideringsdelegationen, 2008, p. 110–111). Competencies that are needed in almost every workplace such as social and communication skills, are often a big problem, and may prevent the clients to fully use their actual professional skills. We believe that making these competencies visible and working out strategies to handle potential difficulties will increase self-awareness and self-confidence as well as motivation, and in the long run make it easier for the client to find a suitable job.

2.1. Description of the model

During the first year we outlined the contents of the model. We made it a 12 weeks programme, according to the custom vocational training programmes provided by the National Swedish Employment agency.

The programme followed a 4-step process, described in the Handbook Methods and Tools (Value of Work VOW, 2007).The four steps are:

1. **Information** – The potential clients are informed about the whole process in order to make an informed decision about participation. This step usually consists of 1–3 meetings.
2. **Portfolio Self-assessment** – This step consists of group sessions, self-assessments, job-seeking activities and individual support. It continues for 7 weeks.
3. **Verification/Confirmation process** – the clients verify and confirm their vocational skills in a workplace during a period of 4 weeks.
4. **Recognition/Evaluation** – The clients receive a certificate of competencies, assessed by a professional in the workplace, according to a set of general standards. The group reunites and discuss experiences from the workplace and they also evaluate the goals that were set up in the beginning of the process. Finally the clients get recommendations to work, education or other work-related activities.

Two pilot groups tested the model during the second year of the project. There were 6–8 clients with ASD in each group. They had 2–3 group sessions a week led by two Employment Counsellors. The clients also received individual support once week. We continued to develop the model according to the experiences of the Employment Counsellors and the clients in the pilot groups. During the programme the clients evaluated the process and gave valuable feedback to both the Employment Counsellors and the authors.

3. Result: The Validation Process

The result of the project was a model *The Validation Process* consisting of two handbooks. A *Self-assessment Handbook* for the clients consisting of useful information about different aspects of work, self-assessments, work related exercises and job-seeking activities. The *Support Handbook* for Employment Counsellors includes guidelines and advice on how to support the individual during *The Validation Process*.

3.1. Self-assessment Handbook

The *Self-assessment Handbook* consists of 4 modules divided in 18 submodules. Gunnel Norrö introduces each sub module and the introduction is followed by work related information as a basis for discussions. The theory is mixed with exercises and self-assessments.

In the 1st module, *Asperger Syndrome and Work*, the clients are introduced to the process and to the objectives of the programme. The clients begin to assess their individual strengths and highlight different aspects of living with Asperger Syndrome. We discuss the impact of stress and the needs of energy in daily life. We discuss work from the perspective of both the employer and the employee. We talk about advantages and disadvantages of disclosing a disability to the employer and informing the colleagues.

In the 2nd module, *Social interaction,* we discuss invisible, unwritten, non-verbal working rules, such as routines concerning lunch/coffee breaks and dress codes. We also discuss social rules like personal space, body language, topics of conversation and personal hygiene. We discuss mutual communication and how to act when you are a part of a team, we discuss ways to avoid or handle misunderstandings and to both give and receive feedback.

In the 3rd module, *Perception and Cognition,* we focus on our senses and our ability to plan and organize our daily life. In the perception module the clients assess how they react to different sensory input and how to handle a high sensitivity to touch, movement, sight or sound. We discuss different ways to relate to time, and we present different assistive devices and strategies to keep track of time and to organize and plan important activities. We give examples of different kinds of working instructions so the clients know what to ask for when they come to a workplace. The client also make a summary of his or hers different competencies.

In the 4th module, *The Workplace,* the clients get useful tips when constructing a CV, writing a cover letter or preparing for a meeting with the employer in a job-interview. This module also contains follow-up questions about experiences from the workplace and the Verification/Confirmation process, related to the different modules. Finally the clients evaluate if the objectives that were established in the beginning have been fulfilled.

3.2. The Barometer

We developed two self-assessment tools to investigate and make visible competencies, strengths and difficulties related to the different areas in the modules. The first tool, the *Barometer*, helps the client to assess abilities, strengths and difficulties in different

Module 2.2 Unwritten social rules

These social rules are hard/easy for me to handle
Write the number that matches your experience in front of each phrase.
10 = Extremely hard
 0 = Very easy

Scale	Phrase
10	To look someone in the eyes
9	Maintain appropriate eye contact
	To smile when you meet someone
8	Determine whether someone´s joking or not
	Understand other people´s jokes
7	Determine whether you can interrupt someone to ask a question
6	Determine if the person I´m talking to is interested
	Determine if a person is busy
5	Eating lunch or drinking coffee together with other people
4	Participating in events like "after work" or "office parties"
	Leaving acceptable distance to other people in different situations
3	Knowing which colleagues to say hello to when I come to work in the morning
2	Knowing which colleagues to say goodbye to when I go home
	Knowing what topics of conversations that is ok and what is not
1	Understand other people´s body language
0	Use and adjust my own body language to different situations
	Other:

Fig. 1. Example of a barometer assessing unwritten, social rules.

situations. The Barometer has a scale from 0 to 10 in the colours green, yellow and red. It is a tool to describe how you feel, to clarify your strengths and make visible how different activities or situations affect you. We chose to use the colours green, yellow and red like the traffic lights that almost all of us can relate to. The numbers make it possible to grade the emotion or ability and to describe nuances.

- Red and high numbers from 8 to 10 means STOP! I do not know this at all! This activity or situation is very difficult! I am extremely stressed! I have absolutely no energy left!
- Yellow and numbers from 4 to 7 means WAIT. I am beginning to feel anxious, this activity/situation makes me feel nervous and unsure of myself. I am running out of energy.
- Green and numbers from 0 to 3 means GO. I am ok, this is easy, I am cool, I feel safe and things are under control. This activity/situation helps me to fill up my energy level.

There are several barometers (Fig. 1) assessing different areas in the modules 1, 2 and 3.

3.3. My Profile

In each module the results of the Barometers are put together in *My Profile*, the second self-assessment tool. The clients compile strengths and difficulties to get an

overview, prepare strategies to handle difficult or stressful situations and describe support needs. *My Profile* has four major areas:

● *Strengths*: Many clients with ASD have a very low self-esteem and do not think they are good at anything at all. They are surprised when they list everything in the green area of the barometers and see that they in fact have a lot of strengths.

● *Difficulties*: When the clients recognise a problem or a difficulty and write it down, it is often easier to start dealing with it.

● *Strategies*: Important but difficult. The clients look at the list of difficulties and try to use their strengths to find, prepare and write down ways to deal with crucial problems. The job coach and the members of the group can be of great help.

● *Support – information to the workplace*: Here the strategies can be of good use in describing support needs. What kind of working conditions do the clients need, to be able to do a good job? Is there anything an employer or colleagues need to know to be able to provide good working conditions? Preparing this information can make it easier for the clients to present themselves in a job-interview and to achieve a good job-match.

4. Discussion

After the project we had two more groups of clients following the programme. All in all, four groups with 23 clients participated in the programme. Six clients got a job after the programme and two started studies. Fourteen clients needed Supported Employment or other vocational training after the programme and one person dropped out. Both clients and Employment Counsellors appreciated the group sessions. Many of the clients had never discussed this kind of questions with others in the same situation. The programme itself is not always enough to get employment but it is of good use in combination with other support services.

The model was originally developed for group sessions in combination with individual work, but the material can of course be used individually. It can be used for work preparation, vocational profiling or as job support. Many of the subjects in the *Self-assessment Handbook* can be useful for other job seekers that have difficulties entering the open labour market. The handbooks can be used in the stages 2, 3, and 5 of the Supported Employment process described in the *European Union of Supported Employment Toolkit* (2010).

The modules enable discussions about different aspects of work. You can pick relevant parts depending on the clients' needs. You can also adapt it to the needs of individual clients or to different situations.

In the Vocational Profiling stage, all modules in *The Validation Process* can be of use in different ways. The barometers can make it easier to describe feelings and to visualise abilities. In the Job Finding stage, it is necessary for the client to be aware of strengths and weaknesses when it comes to matching his or hers skills with the needs of the employer. *My Profile* is helpful when compiling strengths, difficulties, strategies and support needs. It provides an overview and a basis for a job application. It also increases the possibilities of a good job-match. In the stage On and Off the Job Support the modules 2 and 3 can be useful to the job seeker to develop an understanding of social rules, to handle feedback or to plan and organise tasks and get good working instructions.

The Validation Process and the handbooks are so far only available in Swedish for support staff when participating in a 2-days training course. We are investigating the possibilities to translate the handbooks in English and we are also investigating the possibilities to make the *Self-assessment Handbook* easier to handle and administrate.

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