**TITLE: READY2WORK: DEVELOPMENT OF A USER-INFORMED EMPLOYMENT WEBSITE FOR JOB SEEKERS WITH AUTISM**

**AUTHORS: Phan, Jean; Whittingham, Lisa; Bishop, Courtney; Kenyeres, Nickolas; Jichici, Brynn; Wan, Qi; Roberts, Wendy; Di Rezze, Briano; Walker, Neil; Seymour, Janette; Burnham Riosa, Priscilla**

**Objective:** Employment success has been identified as a top priority for people with autism in Canada, both locally and nationally. Despite evidence indicating that people with autism are motivated to obtain employment, unemployment and underemployment rates remain among the highest in the country. Considerable research has focused on personal and social characteristics that contribute to meaningful employment for people with autism; however, an empirical exploration of the complementary skills and tools that job seekers with autism need to engage in the job-seeking process is lacking.

With current COVID-19 restrictions, access to in-person job-seeking resources for people with autism is limited. While online resources to support the job search are appealing, little is known about what people with autism need to effectively engage in job-seeking, networking, and marketing their skills to potential employers. The purpose of this research is to 1) understand what job seekers with autism, caregivers, and employment professionals perceive to be important for job seekers with autism to enter the workforce successfully (Phase 1) and to use this end-user feedback to develop an online employment platform (Phases 2 and 3).

**Method:**In Phase 1, we conducted five focus groups with a total of 29 participants (i.e., 7 autistic self-advocates, 6 caregivers of people with autism, 16 professionals from relevant vocational and employment organizations) about the employment needs of job seekers with autism that could be addressed through an online platform. We conducted a thematic analysis of the focus group data. The identified themes are currently being used to develop (Phase 2) and refine (Phase 3) an online platform that will be assessed using additional survey, interview, and website analytics data from participants who will be interacting with it.

**Results:** The participants from the Phase 1 focus groups described various structural (e.g., unavailability of suitable positions) and social barriers (e.g., negative attitudes toward people with autism) that job seekers with autism face. Participants provided several recommendations for helpful website content, including career exploration and assessment, employment accommodations, advocacy and disability rights in the workplace, networking, and job skills training. Participants highlighted the value of including different resources for family members and support persons (e.g., how to support a job seeker in their employment search), job-seekers (e.g., how to dress for an interview), and employers looking to hire job seekers with autism (e.g., understanding job accommodations). Regarding the platform interface, participants indicated a preference for clear and interactive multi-media options to present content (e.g., pictures, videos, straightforward text) in addition to an interactive and dynamic section for networking (e.g., discussion board). Website development, factoring in the findings from our focus groups, is currently underway.

**Discussion/Conclusions:**This innovative research approach to developing an online employment resource focuses on engaging end-users and key stakeholders throughout the process. The results of this study will add to the limited knowledge about the work readiness skills and resources that are tailored to the idiosyncratic needs of job seekers with autism.

**Correspondence:**

Jean Phan, Brock University, [jp17ka@brocku.ca](mailto:jp17ka@brocku.ca)

Lisa Whittingham, Brock University, [lwhittingham@brocku.ca](mailto:lwhittingham@brocku.ca)

Courtney Bishop, Brock University, [cbishop@brocku.ca](mailto:cbishop@brocku.ca)

Nickolas Kenyeres, HelpScout Canada, [nkenyeres@gmail.com](mailto:nkenyeres@gmail.com)

Brynn Jichici, Brock University, [bjichici@brocku.ca](mailto:bjichici@brocku.ca)

Qi Wan, Brock University, [cw18ro@brocku.ca](mailto:cw18ro@brocku.ca)

Wendy Robert, Integrated Services for Autism and Neurodevelopmental Disorders (ISAND), [wendy.roberts@isand.ca](mailto:wendy.roberts@isand.ca)

Briana Di Rezze, McMaster University, [direzzbm@mcmaster.ca](mailto:direzzbm@mcmaster.ca)

Neil Walker, York ASD Partnership, yorkasd@kerrysplace.org

Janette Seymour, York ASD Partnership, jseymour2475@rogers.com

Priscilla Burnham Riosa, Brock University, [pburnhamriosa@brocku.ca](mailto:pburnhamriosa@brocku.ca)