

**Thesis Project Portfolio**

**Expanding VIABLE Employment for Adults with Autism: A Systems Approach to Increase  
Nonprofit Sales**

(Technical Report)

**Adapting Workplace Environments to Accommodate Autistic Adults**

(STS Research Paper)

An Undergraduate Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the School of Engineering and Applied Science

University of Virginia - Charlottesville, Virginia

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Spring, 2024

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## Executive Summary

For most adults with autism or other neurodevelopmental disorders, employment is a terrifying roadblock. Whether it's making a resume, going through the interview process, seeking promotions, or even making friends at the office, autistic adults have notable and substantial difficulties. Both my technical project and my STS research project this year have been focused on this topic and what can be done to improve this group's experiences in the workforce. My technical project involved working with a nonprofit to increase opportunities for the employment of autistic individuals, and my STS thesis discussed what could be done on a broader scale to improve their workplace experiences. In both portions, I emphasized the value of neurodiversity, including fairness for all people on the neurological spectrum.

In my technical project, me and my team worked with VIA Centers for Neurodevelopment, which is a nonprofit that works with students and adults with neurodevelopmental disabilities like autism. They run a microbusiness called VIABLE Ventures that employs adults in their program to make spa products such as candles, bath salts, and sachets. The artisans are not only given a paycheck for their work but also learn valuable job skills that could eventually allow them to enter the workforce outside of VIA. Our work involved updating their website through sales forecasting and user experience design. In its former state, the VIABLE Ventures website received very little traffic or sales, and our project scope was to modernize the look and feel and convey their mission clearly, prioritizing items that were forecasted to sell well seasonally. While the immediate objective was to increase profits, it was

all for the sake of employing more adults with autism and putting more people through this job training program.

The STS research portion of my project produced more high-level observations and recommendations related to the employment of adults with autism. I explored the framework of neurodiversity and its benefits on a company culture, specifically in the strengths of people with autism. Compared to neurotypical employees, neuroatypical employees perform better in areas such as work ethic and attention to detail. However, tasks related to these strengths are often not found in high-paying positions. This allowed me to conclude that the current employment system, rewarding communication skills with promotions more than anything, was made by neurotypical people for neurotypical people. To make the workplace culture more equitable, companies should be incentivized to partner with nonprofits like VIA to pair autistic employees with the right roles that can cater to their unique skills. Additionally, stages of the hiring process, especially interviews, should be adapted to give autistic applicants a chance when they lack the charisma necessary to stand out. These alongside other smaller changes to office environments could elevate neurodivergent employees' abilities and accommodate for their disabilities, decreasing unemployment in the process.

Under ethical principles such as those of virtue ethics, society has a moral responsibility to care for those who cannot care for themselves. In this case, companies and regulatory bodies should make changes to give adults with autism a chance at acquiring and maintaining employment. While this may require financial investments, it will be worth it for the unique skills and perspectives these candidates could bring to the table. Doing meaningful work is a base need for every human, beyond just the compensation they receive when doing so. By increasing opportunities for their employment, encouraging partnerships with nonprofits, and

creating incentives to hire autistic employees, real change can take place that has a positive impact on this community.

I would like to thank my technical team, including River Robins, Sophie Kikuchi, Kate Kasko, and Olivia Conner, as well as my advisors Professor Robert Riggs and Professor Sara Riggs for their support in my work this year.