

# AUTISM Advocate

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№ 3

## Making Our Way

Navigating  
the Lifespan

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Autism Society of America



# Adult Employment

## *Digital Imaging Leads to Job for Arizona Man with Autism*

BY SHARY DENES

**W**hen Caren Gomez read an article in the *Autism Advocate* about a digital imaging program in Minnesota that is providing stable work for people with developmental disabilities, she knew it was the answer to her son Nick's quest for a steady, decent-paying job.

Nick, 24, has extensive experience in an office setting. He worked for more than two years with the same company filing medical records, a job he started one month before graduating high school. But he was laid off and had been struggling to find work that fit his skills and offered some permanence.

Although Nick has autism, he is highly functional and social, with an impressive sense of humor. But Caren was finding that filing-only jobs were hard to come by, as most office help also required having to speak on the telephone, which was problematic for Nick.

"Every day he'd sit at the computer and send out resumes, and we'd get on monster.com and careers.com and look for filing jobs, but most wanted front office work too," Caren said. "[Nick] is very verbal, but fast pace is hard for him, and he has anxiety with people he doesn't know."

Nick did land a couple of short-term and temp jobs, but invariably the job would end or he'd be laid off, and each time it was that much harder to start the job search

again. In fact, at one job, where he again was filing medical records for a chiropractic practice, his supervisors and co-workers were so pleased with his work that he was given a raise 30 days after he started and a party for his 90-day anniversary. Three weeks later he was laid off.

"He was pretty upset," Caren recalled of Nick's termination. "He was getting to a point where he didn't want to work."

Then there was the job filing medical records at a pain and rehabilitation center that was so disorganized that Nick left after two and a half days. "They would throw files all over the counters," Caren said Nick told her. "It made him very nervous that he wasn't doing a good job. He is very organized and structured. Too much change before he knows what he is doing is not a good fit for him."



## Advocate Article Catalyst to Digital Imaging Project in Minnesota School District

An article in the *Autism Advocate* about a digital imaging program in Minnesota that provides meaningful work for developmentally disabled adults has culminated... a year later in a robust transitional program that helps students with special needs gain work experience and build solid resumes.

Since the launch of the digital imaging program in January 2008, Northeast Metro Intermediate School District 916 in St. Paul and Minneapolis has trained 13 students with developmental disabilities, including autism, to turn paper documents into space-saving electronic files.

Northeast Metro 916 provides special education and other programs for area school districts. Its transitional work program helps students, ages 18 to 21, develop work skills and, invariably, gain "more opportunities in life," said Antoinette Johns, the district's director of special education.

In evaluating the merits of bringing digital imaging into the work program, it quickly became clear that the cost of the equipment would be burdensome for one district to absorb alone, but by pooling resources, the price savings would be significant. As such, District 916 partnered with three other school districts, North Beach, Roseville and Stillwater, to buy the scanning equipment, software and computer server needed to launch a digital imaging program.

Kristine Carr, administrative services director, said District 916's share of the cost came to about \$30,000, including licensing rights. "We all share the hardware, so we didn't [each] have to buy servers and software," Carr explained.

### STARTING FROM SCRATCH

Carr said the staff's primary concern was maintaining a chain of custody for the materials and ensuring confidentiality of records. Also needed were clear procedures and quality checks. So they enlisted the help of Aaron Erdman, 20, who has Asperger's syndrome, but is a whiz at computers.

"He is very good with computers, so I asked him if he would help me out. I knew he'd catch on quickly and he'd be able to teach the rest [of the students]," said Cindy Sapinski, work experience coordinator for the transitional program and lead teacher for the digital imaging project.

But the digital imaging program initiated by the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities (MGCDD) seemed like it was just the type of work that would be suitable to Nick's skills and nature. Reported in the first edition of ASA's 2007 *Autism Advocate*, the article describes how the program offers employment to adults with developmental disabilities, including autism, converting paper documents to digital files. Since the program's inception, employees have scanned, indexed and coded millions of pages of documents for public and private customers.

The digital imaging program is one of those proverbial win-wins. Clients save money and gain space by not having to store tons of paper documents. And adults with developmental disabilities secure employment and a steady paycheck doing work that most would find too tedious and repetitious to do day after day.

By the time Caren called Sherie Wallace, the contact in the article, for additional information on the program, Nick had been out of work for almost five months.

### TAPPING A NEED

Wallace said the response to the article was phenomenal. Inquiries about the digital imaging program were coming in from across the country, from parents of children with autism, teachers, social workers and other government entities. "Many people found terrible roadblocks in trying to find work for people with developmental disabilities, so I got a terrific response," she recalled.

Wallace is a principal of The Wallace Group, a public relations and marketing communications firm in Minnesota that is working with the MGDD and is spearheading its efforts to promote employment in document imaging for people with developmental disabilities.

She sent information to everyone who requested it, including two videos—"The Economics of Imaging," which describes the digital imaging process and its benefits, and "The Changing Face of Technology: Document Imaging Meets the Challenge," which highlights five companies that have hired people with developmental disabilities to computerize their paper files. (The videos also are available online at [www.mnddc.org/extra/imaging-video.htm](http://www.mnddc.org/extra/imaging-video.htm) and [www.mnddc.org/extra/imaging/changing\\_face.htm](http://www.mnddc.org/extra/imaging/changing_face.htm).)

## It's this comfort level and desire for repetitive, predictable work that makes people with autism ideal candidates for routine work such as digital imaging.

"The [Autism Advocate] article was so detailed, it inspired many people, but few as much as Caren," Wallace said. "She really believed that this job (digital imaging) was for her son. She was the perfect coach for him."

Caren and her husband Dan, who live in Arizona with Nick, had been struggling with various job placement agencies assigned to help the family find work for Nick. Caren said she was doing most of the legwork to track down jobs for her son, and Nick spent many hours on the computer searching for jobs on his own.

It wasn't until Caren signed Nick on with United Cerebral Palsy's (UCP) job placement division that she finally saw some interest beyond her own in finding a job for Nick. Caren sent the information she received from Wallace about digital imaging to UCP, and the agency soon found a similar program at the Arizona Industries for the Blind (AIB).

Three weeks after his interview, Nick was hired by AIB in its digital imaging department. "For him to get a job with the state, that was our goal," Caren said. His parents wanted Nick to land a job that provided security and longevity "because all this change is very hard." An added bonus: Nick loves his job. "He lives to go to work," Caren said.

Nick also has garnered an impressive level of seniority. AIB started the new department in January 2007, and Nick was hired in August.

Nick has taken on every aspect of the imaging process except quality control. He has scanned documents and entered data, but he primarily works on preparing documents for scanning. This includes unfolding and smoothing pages, taking out staples and repairing holes, and removing sticky notes and putting them on a blank sheet of paper for separate scanning, according to Thora Siegel, AIB operations manager.

Nick works 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday, and makes about \$21,000 a year; after taxes and benefits are deducted, he clears \$568 every two weeks, his mother said.

Among his six colleagues, five employees are visually impaired. Nick is the only person with autism. "Nick is a great asset to our team," Siegel said. "He is very focused. Most of the jobs here are rather repetitive; [the work] is done the same way over and over again. That's very comfortable for Nick. He seems to enjoy his job and the people he works with."

### A GOOD FIT

It's this comfort level and desire for repetitive, predictable work that makes people with autism ideal candidates for routine work such as digital imaging. Sherie Wallace points out that among the qualities that Nick, and others with autism, brings to a job is that he is extremely concerned about doing the work right.

"He will absolutely follow the rules. He is absolutely devoted. He won't take holidays and will hardly ever call in sick," Wallace said. "If you ask an employer if they would hire someone with these qualities, most would say, 'of course!'"

Wallace said the message that needs to get out to employers is that people with autism "may have quirks" and may not fit what most consider the norm, "but they will do the job and they'll do it right."



Nick Gomez busy with document preparation

Caren agreed, saying that although Nick interviews well, often the HR person or head of the department interviewing him would take one look at Nick and decide the work would be too much for him, or that his co-workers would have to spend too much time helping him. "Oh, if only they knew what good employees [people with autism] make," she said.

Wallace concurred. "If businesses can open their minds to people they've never hired before, they would find that they would be the perfect candidate" for repetitive but essential work integral to most companies.

Nick told his mother that he faced two problems when he went on interviews: People would talk too fast and ask too many questions at one time, difficulties not uncommon to people with autism. But Wallace pointed out that if people with developmental disabilities could take a job coach with them to the interview, which Nick was allowed to do at AIB, the coach could slow down the process and help them understand the questions.

Wallace stressed that the traditional method of interviewing is a lost concept on people with developmental disabilities. Rather than lining up the requisite set of questions typical of interviews, employers should gear the interview toward observation.

Wallace related a case in which a young man with autism was interviewing for a computer job. Soon into the interview the department head felt the young man had lost interest, as he did not seem to be paying attention. But instead of ending the interview and dismissing him, the supervisor took the

Erdman was excited about the prospect, and soon memorized the technical manuals. "He wanted to read all of the manuals first, and he then knew exactly what to do," she said. In fact, Erdman noticed that markings with highlighting pens did not show up on the scanned documents, so he adjusted the scanner to resolve the problem.

Students learned the steps for document preparation and scanning, and worked with supervisors to improve procedures when problems arose. In the first four months of the program, nine students working in teams of three scanned nearly 500 documents per hour. That translated into some 22,000 pages—about three years' worth of data, according to Sapinski.

Currently, students are scanning the district's internal accounting files and records, but long-term plans include marketing digital imaging to local businesses.

Students best suited to digital imaging work are identified through an assessment process that evaluates everything from social skills to work tolerance. They are paid at least minimum wage (more for scanning), and work in two- and four-hour shifts, depending on their school schedule, for about three months, although they can stay in the program for up to one year. Students in the digital imaging program who also take part in a five-week summer program that teaches independent living skills work five hours a day, Sapinski said.

## PAYOFF EXCEEDS PROFITS

Carr estimated that bringing digital imaging in-house costs about the same as outsourcing the work, given teacher and student salaries, although there is a cost savings in sharing equipment with the other districts. The real benefit, she said, comes from giving students real-life work experience in a technical field as they transition from school to community employment.

"This is real work that's needed in the community," Antoinette Johns said, adding that digital imaging is a perfect fit for people with developmental disabilities. "The group of people historically hired to do this type of work are college students, but the feedback within a couple of hours is that they are bored. They don't want to do the routine work as it needs to be done, so they soon start to look at other ways they can do the job."

But digital imaging by design requires exact steps be followed each time, and short cuts or deviations are not acceptable. "This is the perfect place for students like we have," Johns said. "Their disability is an asset for the type of work that's needed."

man into the computer room where IT specialists had been stumped by a computer glitch for days. Within a half hour the young man found the problem and announced that he could fix it, which he did in short order. He was hired on the spot.

### KEEPING AN OPEN MIND

Thora Siegel agreed that employers shouldn't be too quick to judge interviewees. "Don't make assumptions," she advised. "People have a tendency within a minute or two to make an assumption, and the rest of the interview is filtered through that assumption." She added, "We're very accommodating here. If someone is hard of hearing, we have no problem repeating questions or talking louder." Similarly, she knows that when Nick laughs inappropriately, it may be because he didn't understand what was being asked of him.

Nick's experience with AIB is a prime example of how taking a chance on someone with a developmental disability works to everyone's benefit. In fact, when Caren called AIB to thank them for hiring Nick, the HR person exclaimed that they were so pleased with Nick she wished she could clone him.

Nick has done so well with his job at AIB, he recently moved out of his parents' home into an apartment. He bought a car with his earnings, and also pays for rent, utilities, cable, car insurance and gasoline. His parents help him with other expenses.

In stressing the importance of a steady, suitable job for people with developmental disabilities, Wallace said, "We all want to work. We all want to be part of the adult world where your skills are culled. And a person with a disability is no different. Businesses are going to lose out if they can't get their minds around this idea."

## About the Author

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On-the-job support increases productivity



## Updated Survey Shows More Favorable Opinion of People with Developmental Disabilities

A 2007 survey of more than 800 Minnesotans found that, overall, the general population views the full integration of people with developmental disabilities into society much more favorably than it did 45 years ago.

Commissioned by the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, the study replicated a survey taken in 1962 that gauged Minnesotans' awareness and attitudes toward developmental disabilities. The intent of the 2007 survey was to measure and compare changes to the earlier findings.

The study defines "developmental disability" as a life-long condition that falls under an "umbrella term that includes mental retardation, cerebral palsy, autism and epilepsy." About 1-2% of the population in Minnesota has "significant or severe disabilities," according to the survey.

## AMONG THE 2007 FINDINGS:

- 60% of those surveyed strongly agreed and 31% somewhat agreed that, “with the right training, people with developmental disabilities could be very productive workers.”
- A combined 97% of respondents said they have “a lot of respect for companies that employ people with developmental disabilities” (85% strongly agreed with the statement; 12% somewhat agreed).
- Respondents indicated overwhelming support for the government and taxpayers to provide a range of services, including education, training, job skills, access to quality health care, protection from abuse, training and counseling for parents, advocacy training and research to learn about the causes of developmental disabilities. Only 6% said they agreed with the statement that “too much money is being spent on people with developmental disabilities.”
- 76% strongly agreed and 19% somewhat agreed that “society should do everything in its power to help those who are most vulnerable.” Respondents soundly rejected the suggestion that little assistance should be given to people with developmental disabilities, leaving “survival to the fittest.”
- 36% strongly agreed and 47% somewhat agreed that people with developmental disabilities can learn to live normal lives. By contrast, in 1962 only 4% and 60%, respectively, thought the same way.
- Overall support for integration in daily activities was positive. The vast majority (a combined 90% or more) agreed that
  - people with developmental disabilities should be able to use public playgrounds and beaches, attend movie theaters, be treated at regular hospitals, be integrated into society as much as possible, be included in public places and social events, and be encouraged to get out and be involved in the community. In 1962, the percentage of respondents who agreed that people with developmental disabilities should be allowed treatment at regular hospitals, use of public facilities, and admission to the movies ranged around 70%.
  - Basic acceptance went even further in 2007. When asked to agree or disagree with this statement: “It’s OK to exclude people with developmental disabilities from many public situations; they cannot be expected to fit in,” 55% disagreed strongly and 23% disagreed somewhat. Similarly, in response to the statement: “If a person with a developmental disability moved into my neighborhood, I’d be concerned,” 79% disagreed strongly and 13% disagreed somewhat.
  - The idea of institutionalization also has become passé. Only 3% of respondents agreed (1% strongly and 2% somewhat) that people with developmental disabilities should be institutionalized, compared to 35% in 1962. In fact, a combined 77% of the 2007 respondents agreed that care should come from the immediate family, versus 20% in 1962, when state institutions were more common.
  - In the area of education, however, the 2007 responses were less clear-cut. When asked whether “everyone would be better off if school-aged children with developmental disabilities were taught in the same classes as other children,” 23% agreed strongly, 29% agreed somewhat, 12% said they neither agreed nor disagreed, 23% disagreed somewhat and 14% disagreed strongly.
- And while the majority of respondents said most people with developmental disabilities can learn to live normal lives, they were less affirmative about other aspects of societal rights. Only 16% agreed strongly and 31% agreed somewhat that people with developmental disabilities “should be allowed to have children, just like everyone else.”
- When it came to drinking, only 5% agreed strongly and 20% agreed somewhat that people with developmental disabilities should be allowed to drink alcohol. A combined 51% disagreed. In 1962, an overwhelming 89% disagreed that people with disabilities should be allowed to drink alcohol. Only a combined 9% agreed.
- As for transportation, only 6% of the current respondents agreed strongly and 26% agreed somewhat that people with developmental disabilities should be allowed to drive a car. A combined 45% disagreed.
- Respondents had fewer concerns about allowing people with developmental disabilities to vote, with a combined 71% supporting the idea; a combined 17% disagreed.

The “1962/2007 Minnesota Survey of Attitudes Regarding Developmental Disabilities,” conducted by MarketResponse International, is available online at [www.mncdd.org/extra/customer-research/GCDD\\_Attitudes1962-2007\\_Final.pdf](http://www.mncdd.org/extra/customer-research/GCDD_Attitudes1962-2007_Final.pdf).