



Forging an Innovative Model to Break Down Barriers to New York City Tech Sector Employment for Individuals with Autism

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August 2024



About The Author

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The tech sector in the New York City region is booming, but persistent workforce gaps need to be addressed. According to the New York City Economic Development Corporation, tech sector jobs grew seven times faster than overall job growth in the city between 2010 and 2021, adding an impressive 114,000 jobs. Despite this growth, New York City struggles to fill these positions due to significant skills gaps. A 2019 report by HR&A found that 70% of employers faced challenges hiring in the sector, despite tech sector wages being 80% higher than the average New York City job.

A primary reason for these hiring challenges is the persistent digital skills divide. A recent survey by Salesforce found that three out of four respondents lacked the necessary digital skills, disproportionately impacting underserved communities. The autism community is often overlooked in workforce opportunities yet remains a “hidden,” but important population that could meet workforce demand (Andrews, 2022) in the tech sector (Palumbo, 2022). In a 2017 Harvard Business Review article, Austin and Pisano state, “The case for neurodiverse hiring is especially compelling given the skills shortages that increasingly afflict technology and other industries.”

Recent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that one in 36 children nationwide were identified with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) (Maenner, Warren, et al, 2023), up from one in 150 in 2000. In particular, New York City has seen a rapid growth in the number of individuals identified with ASD. Autism-related data from the New York State Education Department reveals that as of 2022 nearly 60,000 school-aged children in the New York City area are diagnosed with ASD, a number that continues to grow annually (see Table 1). Remarkably, since 1996, the number of students with autism receiving special education programs and services in New York City has increased by more than 17 times, a staggering 1,646% growth. This growth is largely based on improved screening and assessments, which enable us to better understand the prevalence of ASD. However, these data showing a dramatic increase of individuals diagnosed with ASD highlight the challenges in building adequate support to keep pace.



Table 1. Number of New York State Children and Youth with Autism Receiving Special Education Programs and Services, by Year

Year	Total	Year	Total
1996	3,416	2010	22,284
1997	4,104	2011	24,532
1998	5,142	2012	26,955
1999	5,659	2013	29,738
2000	6,752	2014	32,115
2001	7,918	2015	33,837
2002	9,141	2016	37,435
2003	10,617	2017	41,416
2004	12,162	2018	44,904
2005	13,622	2019	48,948
2006	15,471	2020	51,977
2007	17,599	2021	54,829
2008	19,132	2022	59,655
2009	21,321		

Source: New York State Education Department, "Number of New York State Children and Youth with Disabilities Receiving Special Education Programs and Services" at <https://www.p12.nysed.gov/sedcar/goal2data.htm>.

Autism represents a range of neurological differences that may be accompanied by behaviors, often misunderstood, that create barriers to sustainable employment (Lorenz, Frischling, Cuadros, et al, 2016). An autism diagnosis indicates significant differences in expressive and receptive communication, social skill delays, and the presence of restrictive and repetitive behaviors. Autism affects individuals from all ethnicities, races, cultures, and socio-economic statuses (Maenner, Warren, et al, 2023).

Nearly half of 25-year-olds with autism have never held a paying job, and global estimates suggest up to 85% are un- or underemployed (Austim Speaks, 2021). Economists Leigh and Du (2015) found that by 2025, without proper interventions, society may bear up to \$1 trillion (about \$3,100 per person in the United States) in costs to support individuals with ASD (see also, Buescher, Cidav, Martin Knapp, Mandell, 2014). While these papers are several years old, they are illustrative of the challenge.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 500,000 individuals with autism (roughly the population of Wyoming) will age out of the special education system and services in the next decade (Scutti, 2018). These data clearly indicate a need for expanded education and job opportunities for neurodivergent individuals in New York City and across the United States to unlock doors to economic and social well-being.



The Opportunity: Closing the Digital Skills Divide in the High Demand Tech Sector in NYC for Individuals with Autism

There is a tremendous opportunity to fill key tech positions in New York City through a digital skills training program tailored to individuals with autism, focusing on high-demand tech fields. As Dunne (2023) said, “Harnessing the potential of neurodivergent individuals could help employers build a more future-ready workforce.”

There is a growing body of research illustrating that with the right support, individuals with autism could excel in the tech sector. As researchers Hayward, McVilly and Stokes (2019) found, “People with autism have been identified as having a substantial contribution to make in the technology sector” (48).

And there is significant demand for a highly trained tech workforce. A recent report by HR&A found cybersecurity jobs are among the fastest growing in New York City. For example, cybersecurity positions in New York City offer competitive wages, with entry-level salaries averaging around \$85,000 per year and experienced professionals earning upwards of \$120,000 annually. The New York City Economic Development Corporation—the city’s economic development agency—found that cybersecurity ranked number one for total job postings and that wages for cybersecurity jobs are 50% higher than for the rest of the New York City economy.

There is a tremendous opportunity to fill key tech positions in New York City through a digital skills training program tailored to individuals with autism, focusing on high-demand tech fields.

The key is bridging the current training gaps for individuals with autism. As Robison (2013) said, “many individuals who embrace the concept of neurodiversity believe that people with differences do not need to be cured; they need help and accommodation instead.” The education system must evolve to better accommodate the diverse learning needs of students, particularly those within the neurodivergent community. Traditional education models often fail to recognize the unique learning paces and styles of individuals, leading to suboptimal outcomes. Combs (2024) highlights the segmented nature of both autism and neurotypical education, underscoring the need for a more holistic approach. Holistic education emphasizes the development of the whole person, integrating academic, social, emotional, and physical growth. Key elements of this approach include an integrated curriculum, hands-on experiential learning, personalized learning paths, a strong sense of community, and a focus on creativity and critical thinking (Crnkovic, Aleksic-Maslac, and Jerkovic, 2006).

To better train and connect individuals with autism to sustainable employment in the tech sector we recommend the following five key strategies.

1 Strategy 1. Utilize Individualized, Competency-Based Models of Learning

Individuals often learn at different paces and cadences and educators must better adapt to developing programs around the needs of students. This is especially true for the neurodivergent community. As Combs (2024) states, “In traditional autism education, everything is segmented—and, truthfully, in neurotypical education too...” (72). A holistic approach to learning recognizes that “there are many ways individuals learn, all of which are important” (Combs, 2024; 72).[1]

Adopting an innovative and proven individualized competency-based learning model, could ensure that each participant’s unique needs and strengths are addressed in a holistic manner. This model focuses on mastery of the subject area/skill as opposed to rigid timeframes in traditional post-secondary education programs. Competency-based education is changing the post-secondary learning paradigm to expand opportunities to a greater diversity of communities (Ordonez, 2014).

The competency-based model is becoming more prevalent in education due to its effectiveness in expanding educational opportunities for more diverse communities. For instance, in 2021, the American Association of Colleges of Nursing adopted a competency-based model and enrollment in colleges and universities using the model are growing.

Several models would work well in the New York City digital skills training space. The Teaching the Autism Community Trades (TACT) school in Colorado is a successful example of deploying the competency-based model for neurodivergent individuals.[2] Founded in 2016 by parents inspired by their children with autism spectrum disorder, TACT offers immersive, hands-on vocational training, preparing young people with ASD for skilled trades careers. TACT was recently recognized in *The Canary Code: A Guide to Neurodiversity, Dignity, and Intersectional Belonging at Work* for helping employers recruit neurodivergent talent through job preparation and internships (Praslova 2024; 75). TACT provides immersive, hands-on vocational training and has achieved notable success in preparing students for skilled trades careers, helping neurodiverse individuals earn industry-recognized certificates.

TACT is a fully accredited school offering programs in auto mechanics, carpentry, electrical work, 3D modeling, CAD design, CNC machining, and welding—all leading to industry-recognized certificates. Additionally, TACT offers digital skills programs, including cybersecurity and “Tech for Trades” 3D modeling/CAD training.

By adopting an individualized, competency-based model of learning, we can better meet the needs of neurodivergent individuals and help them achieve success in digital skills training and employment.

2 Strategy 2. Finding the Right Place and Space Matters

Researchers have found that it is critically important to build the right learning environments for all students, particularly neurodivergent students (Saggers, 2019). For example, sensory overload could result in barriers to success for individuals with autism.

Researchers have emphasized the crucial need to create optimal learning environments for all students, with particular attention to neurodivergent students (Saggers, 2019). Sensory overload, for instance, can pose significant obstacles to the success of individuals with autism. Waisman, Alba, and Green (2022) found that autistic students often report that a lack of respite from sensory input creates a substantial barrier to learning, stating "...autistic students report that the lack of respite from sensory input is a barrier to learning that often triggers stress and anxiety and even leads to an inability to continue pursuing higher education." (S1).

This constant sensory bombardment can trigger stress and anxiety, and in severe cases, it can force students to discontinue their pursuit of higher education. These findings highlight the urgent need for educational institutions to design inclusive and accommodating environments that address the unique sensory needs of neurodivergent learners.

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In other words, the right space matters for success. Places like Civic Hall's space at Union Square transcends the conventional classroom setting to maximize success, especially for underserved communities. Civic Hall at Union Square, operated by the leading tech nonprofit Civic Hall Labs, is an 85,000-square-foot, newly built training center, business incubator, and innovation ecosystem. With a mission to catalyze innovation, education, and collaboration, it serves as the nucleus for entrepreneurial growth and educational advancements in the heart of New York City's bustling tech community. Civic Hall offers digital skills programs and partners with other training providers to create a robust network of educational opportunities for individuals, particularly those from underserved communities. Here, they learn alongside emerging tech entrepreneurs, innovation leaders, and leading tech firms. Civic Hall was purposefully designed to integrate cutting-edge technology and collaborative, shared learning environments that optimize educational and training outcomes, in contrast to traditional, sterile educational spaces (Granito and Santana, 2016). Underserved communities frequently lack access to advanced learning environments that are closely linked to industry and job opportunities. Therefore, the significance of place and space is central to a success program.



3 Strategy 3. Forging Employer Relationships to Support the Neurodiverse Community is Key

Key to any successful digital skills training program is collaboration with employers. The first part of a successful digital skills training program for individuals with autism is using the individualized, competency-based model (Levine and Patrick, 2019). The second part is developing deep connections with industry that will ultimately result in sustainable employment. As researchers Hickey et al. (2024) found, “Competitive employment is often difficult for autistic adults to obtain and is rarely maintained over time” (265). While some large tech players have developed programs to hire and support individuals with autism including AT&T and Microsoft, this is still significant work to be done. The effort could be facilitated by the City of New York through convening education institutions, workforce development programs, and industry.

Examples demonstrate that it can be done. TACT, in its Colorado program, has achieved success in placing individuals with autism into jobs, boasting an 83% placement rate in competitive, integrated employment, with participants maintaining employment for at least one year. TACT’s 83% job placement rate for individuals with autism exceeds the national average of 10%. For this program we project more than an 80% placement rate for individuals who enroll in either of the programs. Not only does TACT exceed sector placement rates, but their graduates’ wages are also significantly higher than peer programs—TACT’s wages are 68% higher than other autism workforce programs. At an average wage of \$19.86 per hour, TACT’s graduates’ wages are well-above the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour as well as the New York City minimum wage of \$16 per hour (see <https://www.buildwithtact.org>).

The challenge lies in scaling innovative programs like TACT to broader contexts. To achieve this, sustained efforts in building strong relationships with employers are crucial. This involves educating employers about the benefits of hiring neurodiverse individuals, providing support and resources to facilitate their integration into the workforce, and continuously advocating for inclusive hiring practices.

Scaling such initiatives requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders, including government agencies, educational institutions, workforce development programs, and industry partners. By fostering a collaborative environment, we can create a robust support system that not only meets the employment needs of individuals with autism but also enriches the workforce with diverse talents and perspectives.

4 Strategy 4. Reforming Laws and Regulations That Hinder Sustainable Employment for Individuals with Autism

Government programs meant to serve individuals with autism may become a barrier to long-term sustainable employment. The “disability cliff” is often a barrier for individuals with disabilities, upon securing employment or increasing their earnings, and they risk losing essential public benefits and services.

The State University of New York policy think tank, the Rockefeller Institute of Government recently [released](#) a report, *Navigating the Benefits Cliff: The Role of Benefit Eligibility in the Decision to Work and More for People with Disabilities in New York State*, finding

One under-studied barrier to employment is benefits eligibility rules. Nearly 9.4 million working-age individuals with a disability receive cash payments through the Social Security Administration (SSA). Those cash payments are in part means-tested, which means the higher a person’s income, the lower the benefit to which they are entitled. For a person with a disability, the more they work, the lower those stable cash benefits will be. Eligibility for SSA cash benefits also allows recipients access to health insurance through Medicare or Medicaid, which is often crucial to people with disabilities navigating complex health conditions (3).

As a result, this structure could create a significant disincentive to work or advance in their careers, as the income gained from employment may not fully compensate for the loss of critical supports such as healthcare, housing, and personal assistance. Consequently, individuals with disabilities often face a stark choice between financial independence and maintaining access to the services that enable their daily functioning and well-being, trapping many in a cycle of dependence and limiting their economic opportunities.

New York City should advocate for program amendments that enable individuals with autism, and those with disabilities more broadly, to secure sustainable employment without the risk of losing essential benefits.. Precedent for such government adjustments exists. For instance, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, New York State revised the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) requirements. The state allowed individuals to substitute the 20-hour work requirement with participation in workforce training and education programs. This adjustment acknowledged the need for flexibility in maintaining benefits while encouraging personal and professional development. By advocating for similar changes, New York City can support individuals with autism in achieving long-term employment and financial independence without the detrimental trade-off of losing vital benefits.

Developing employer relationships is essential because often individuals with autism struggle with retaining employment due to a lack of understanding about ASD among employers. As Jaime Heidel (2022) states, "Autistic people are often fired for being autistic." Too often this discrimination is systemic (Praslova 2021). Therefore, a successful process must include addressing the barriers identified by researchers Lorenz, Frischling, Cuadros, and Heinitz (2016) that hinder sustainable employment for autistic individuals, such as social communication challenges, environmental and equipment factors, work routines, application processes, and qualification criteria.

5 Strategy 5: Embrace a Paradigm of Continuous Improvement

Achieving success in meeting workforce demand in the New York City tech sector is the primary objective, and the innovative individualized, competency-based model is fundamental to this goal. To ensure its effectiveness, it is crucial to maintain detailed student records to have a robust set of data. This practice not only supports personalized learning and progress tracking but also facilitates a thorough evaluation of the program’s impact. Moreover, publishing a comprehensive, summative evaluation of our program will contribute significantly to the existing literature. By sharing our findings, we can offer valuable insights to other organizations and institutions developing and expanding training and job placement programs for individuals with autism across the country.

As Bowles (2022) aptly noted, “[T]he systems, traditions, and practices valued so deeply—and essential to change—are also the ones that frequently pose barriers.” This underscores the importance of continually reassessing and refining our approaches to overcome inherent challenges and drive meaningful, sustainable change.

By committing to continuous improvement, we can better serve our students and pave the way for broader systemic advancements in the tech sector’s inclusivity and accessibility.

There is a unique opportunity to bridge the current workforce gap in New York City’s tech sector while advancing diversity and inclusion. The sector is well-positioned to embrace a new wave of talented professionals through innovative training program designed specifically for individuals with autism. By acknowledging and harnessing the distinct strengths and perspectives that these individuals offer, and implementing a comprehensive plan with targeted support, we can create a thriving pipeline of desperately needed skilled workers ready to excel in the fast-paced tech industry.

This initiative goes beyond addressing workforce needs; it is a commitment to cultivating a culture of diversity and inclusion within the tech sector. Proven models, such as the Teaching the Autism Community Trades school in Colorado, highlight the success of individualized, competency-based learning for neurodivergent individuals. By adopting a similar approach in New York City's digital skills training programs, we can better support neurodivergent individuals, equipping them for success in both training and employment.

Investing in the potential of individuals with autism is an investment in a more innovative and equitable future. This model demonstrates how focused efforts can elevate the entire industry, ensuring that opportunities for success are accessible to everyone, and that the tech sector continues to grow and thrive.

There is a unique opportunity to bridge the current workforce gap in New York City's tech sector while advancing diversity and inclusion. The sector is well-positioned to embrace a new wave of talented professionals through innovative training program designed specifically for individuals with autism.

Notes

[1] As Combs (2024) states, key to the holistic approach is an integrated curriculum that connects different subject areas, helping students see the interrelationships between disciplines in the real world. This includes: hands-on, experiential learning; personalized learning, catering to individual strengths, interests, and needs; sense of community and interconnectedness, including environmental education and encourages students to understand and appreciate their role in the broader ecosystem; having teachers act as guides or mentors rather than authoritative figures; and encouraging creativity and critical thinking.

[2] While not explored in this piece, a factor in TACT's success is its low student-to-teacher ratio of 3:1.

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Classroom

- 1) Follow the ()
 - Treat others how you would be treated
 - Think before you speak
 - Help others
 - Use appropriate language and voice
- 2) Show Respect
 - Respect your instructors
 - Respect each other
 - Track the space
 - Communicate with others
 - Keep hands and feet to yourself
 - Leave no trash
- 3) Practice Safety
 - Keeping your hands and feet to yourself
 - Sanitize hands
 - Keep smocks away from your face
 - Practice internet safety
 - Follow all safety protocols

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Special Thanks

This report grew from an earlier funding application with significant input from Danny Combs, Becky Mershon, Doug Binette, and Alec Pace. Thanks to Taylor Reffe for his thoughtful edits. This was a collective effort.



About The Community Impact Policy Institute

The Community Impact Policy Institute is the thinktank and research arm of The Fedcap Group, conducting leading research to provide solutions in breaking down barriers to economic well-being. The Institute, and its partners, have conducted groundbreaking analysis and solutions to many pressing needs including building wage and wealth for disadvantaged communities, effects of minimum wage increases, early childhood education, employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities, socially responsible investing, immigration and its impact on the economy, and more.

The Community Impact Policy Institute also provides technical assistance and training, products and hands on support to government agencies and community-based providers working to change their delivery of services and enhance the community integration of people with individuals with barriers to employment.