

AUTISM WORKS -DEVELOPING A NEURODIVERSE WORKFORCE FOR THE FUTURE



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INTRODUCTION

Ninety percent of adults with ASD are unemployed or underemployed. 53% of autistic young adults never work during their early 20s and only 36% participate in postsecondary education or training between high school and their early 20s. Interactive Media Institute (IMI) and the National Foundation for Autism Research (NFAR) are partnering to deliver innovative vocational readiness training to autistic individuals. Our program, Autism Works (AW), combines technical certification in virtual reality (VR) development and computer programming with soft skills training to help autistic young adults find gainful employment. Autism Works also offers informal STEM engagement workshops. The goal of this project is to help autistic young adults enter the workforce and certify the AW program for widescale dissemination.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Arc Tank 2.0 catapulted IMI's Autism Center of Excellence (ACE) to new heights. Now, we are developing an ecosystem that supports the critical employment needs of autistic individuals. IMI and NFAR present Autism Works, a project-based VR development and computer programming curriculum that culminates in industry-level certification and job placement for autistic transition aged youth.

Private companies and government agencies preach the importance of a neurodiverse workforce to bring people with different backgrounds, thought processes, and trainings together to collaborate and solve some of the most pressing problems of our time. For example, companies like IBM, JP Morgan Chase, EY, SAP and Microsoft all include neurodiversity hiring initiatives. Also, the National Science Foundation emphasizes the necessity of maintaining American competitiveness in STEM disciplines by educating underrepresented groups, one of which is autistic individuals. Thus, Autism Works offers formal technical training and informal workshops in order to improve engagement and participation in STEM.

Autism Works combines technology training, social skills training, and real work experience into an innovative afterschool program format for autistic adolescents and young adults. Autism Works provides this training to autistic individuals in a pilot program, which will then be translated to an online format for anyone in the world to use. Moreover, students will create virtual environments to be tested and disseminated via IMI's ongoing VR-FCA research program as part of this curriculum—a self-sustaining ecosystem. Secondly, Autism Works delivers informal STEM workshops with autistic teenagers and their parents in order to increase awareness, engagement and participation in STEM across all ability levels and encourage students to pursue STEM education.