

**RESEARCH ON**

**THE INTEGRATION AND WORK CAPABILITIES**

**OF AUTISTIC INDIVIDUALS FROM THE**

**PERSPECTIVES OF INSIDERS AND OUTSIDERS**

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## **I. Introduction**

The integration of autistic individuals into the workforce is an increasingly prominent topic, especially as societies worldwide strive for greater inclusivity and diversity. In recent years, numerous autism centers and community initiatives have emerged across Hanoi, Vietnam, creating greater understanding among many people. However, public opinions on the capabilities and integration of autistic individuals continue to vary widely, shaped by individual exposure and experiences with the autistic community.

This research examines these perspectives through two distinct groups: those with firsthand experience supporting autistic individuals ('insiders') and young people with limited direct exposure to autism, who represent the future generation of the workforce ('outsiders'). By investigating these perspectives, this study aims to uncover the influencing factors, societal challenges, and outlooks on the inclusion of autistic individuals within Vietnam's evolving workforce.

## **II. Assessments objectives**

The study is guided by three main objectives:

1. To understand insiders' perspectives on the integration and work capabilities of autistic individuals.
2. To understand outsiders' perspectives on the integration and work capabilities of autistic individuals.
3. To identify factors contributing to differences in viewpoints and potential impact of these factors on the future integration and working opportunities

## **III. Methodology**

### **Data Collection**

This qualitative study employed in-depth interviews to gather nuanced insights. Participants included students from high schools in Hanoi and professionals from two notable centers supporting autistic individuals:

- Imago: A social enterprise that caters to high-income families, offering social clubs, vocational training classes, and life skills courses. Its key mission is to connect autistic individuals with internship opportunities at both international and local businesses. *"Dignity and independence through job training"* is Imago's motto.

- Albert Einstein Center: A support center for autistic individuals from middle-income families, providing life skills training and experiential learning activities, with strong arts-based programs such as music therapy.

## Respondents

A total of 12 interviews were conducted:

- **5 high school students:** 1 from HNUE High School, 1 from Nguyen Tat Thanh High School, and 3 from Hanoi-Amsterdam High School for the Gifted.
- **7 professionals:** 5 from Imago, including the owner and founder, an inclusion specialist, and 3 teachers; and 2 from the Albert Einstein Center, consisting of the owner and founder and one teacher.

## IV. Findings

### 1. Insiders' perspectives on the integration and work capabilities of autistic individuals.

#### Challenges on the social inclusion and work chances of autistic individuals

##### Objective view

Beyond the stigma, there are several objective issues. One primary challenge lies in **businesses' hesitance** to accept autistic individuals as employees. While business owners may support inclusive hiring in principle, they often lack the knowledge and resources to integrate autistic employees effectively. Additionally, many regular employees resist the idea, despite receiving information and training on autistic behaviors. This reluctance is often compounded by a "charity mindset," where coworkers and team leads view autistic individuals more as recipients of charity rather than as equal team members. As a result, they might decide to handle tasks themselves, as it often seems faster and more efficient than training autistic colleagues. The employment inclusion specialist at Imago, observed:

*Even in international hotels, there's still a lack of openness when it comes to hiring autistic individuals. Coworkers, particularly those in hourly positions, often carry more stigma, largely because they have less exposure to autism or come from different parts of the country. This can lead to teasing or other unkind behavior toward autistic employees. Because of these interaction challenges, keeping a job can be tougher than actually landing one.*

Many **families** tend to prioritize protecting their autistic children, often believing that simply attending support centers is sufficient for their development. Letting their children go out into the real world might be tough, because of many terrible stories the students had in the "real" world: secondary school, high school, college,... The owner of Imago put it:

*Families want to protect their child, especially if it is very obvious, because they don't want (them) to be ashamed.*

The Albert Einstein Center, in particular, faces significant challenges in **establishing partnerships**, as many organizations in Vietnam are not yet ready to collaborate on initiatives for autistic individuals. Furthermore, while several centers in Vietnam have started creating job opportunities for autistic individuals, these positions often exist only within the centers themselves. For instance, centers may let students work by selling traditional crafts or artistic products, but the people actually selling the products and interacting with people are the teachers themselves. This limitation restricts their opportunities to connect with others and develop essential social skills. A worker with nine years of experience in disability services noted:

*Many centers nowadays focus on selling handcrafted items like paintings, dried fruit, and hand-made beverages. The products sold by these centers are typically labeled as made by autistic individuals, but buyers don't get direct interactions with the autistic students.*

Imago has established numerous connections with international businesses, successfully placing around three to five of their interns at these organizations. However, even when these connections are made, significant challenges persist. For instance, while international businesses may offer diversity tax cuts and other incentives for hiring autistic individuals, there are still critical issues to address in this **policy**. As the owner of Imago said,

*There are pros and cons: it's one thing to hire someone, but it's another to be fully invested in their growth and development. Unfortunately, this doesn't always translate to students being treated as true members of the company.*

Support for hiring autistic individuals often comes from upper management, while employees at lower levels lack incentives to engage or train them. This gap forces organizations like Imago to address issues within hotels and businesses. Local companies also show minimal incentive to create inclusive opportunities, viewing their involvement more as charity. Consequently, only those with personal connections to the autistic community are likely to provide support, further limiting employment prospects.

### **Subjective view**

Subjectively, autistic people still have to address many innate problems before being qualified for the work space. One of which is **diversity**.

*Another thing is that the jobs available to autistic individuals are pretty limited. They aren't as diverse as those for neurotypical people. Some might do cooking, cleaning, or a few may work in sales or on computers.*

There are also several other issues to consider. **Communication** is often limited, and **training** can be particularly challenging. Imago staff going to an international business hotel with a student stated:

*Last year the student was in the bakery department. There were two teams, one on bread and one on cakes. The team switched often, but my students needed a stable position and being told specifically what to do. Doing new things every day shocked them, especially because lessons (in the center) didn't address many of those things. For instance, cutting banana leaves (...) The student froze up, and the final product wasn't what everyone wanted.*

**Long hours** are also tough, and without **connections** from school or university, it's harder to link up with companies.

## Current integration chances

### Opportunities

**Everything is better now**, most people agree. First, knowledge about autism has increased, thanks to scientific research, leading to greater awareness and more careful methods of support. Second, government policies have expanded, ensuring that everyone has the right to education. Families are also becoming more open, no longer hiding their autistic children and instead wanting them to contribute to society. Lastly, educational programs are now available from an early age, with many vocational centers offering training tailored for autistic individuals. An Imago teacher with 9 years of experience with disabled people commented:

*Compared to 13 years ago, there are many more opportunities for integration. The government now has policies for the inclusion of disabled children. "Everyone has the same rights and should be integrated." Integration in education has improved significantly, and with advancements in science and medicine, society is evolving. One more advantage is that students receive soft skills training from an early age.*

The **unique strengths** of autistic individuals are also being **recognised** more by team leaders, business owners, and society. The teacher agreed.

*Some students are good. People are seeing the chances for autistic interns to outperform normal workers in some areas. For instance, While regular staff may lose interest in repetitive tasks and engage in chatter, autistic individuals tend to be extremely punctual and follow procedures precisely, especially in repetitive tasks.*

Today, there are many **more resources** and **tools** available to support autistic individuals, including hand-held devices, assistive technology, and various applications designed for independent communication. For instance, the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) utilizes pictures to facilitate communication for those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and other communication difficulties. However, despite the availability of these tools, their usage

among autistic individuals remains relatively low. This gap indicates that while resources are improving, more needs to be done to encourage their adoption and effective use.

### Problems

In addition to issues with app usage, prejudice and barriers persist even within families of autistic individuals. The owner of the Albert Einstein Center, drawing on 22 years of experience, observes that challenges remain significant. Compared to Imago, which predominantly interacts with high-income families, her perspective highlights a more complex reality. She notes:

*Many people in Vietnam believe that parents who have children with disabilities are being punished by fate. They think those families deserve it. Even in families with doctors and professors, the child may still be hidden away due to shame. One family sent their child back to the countryside, and even the neighbors were unaware the parents had an autistic child.*

Beyond that, Imago students face the issue of not being able to apply what they learn at school to home life. Parents often don't understand the step-by-step teaching methods used in school, leading to a lack of reinforcement and eventual forgetfulness.

*Students may attend class and learn tasks like cutting, cleaning, and tidying up, but they don't carry out those tasks at home. Parents don't place high demands on them to do these chores, so the students end up not practicing at home, which erodes their skills.*

### Integration chances in ten-year's time

There is a **wide range of opinions** on this issue. Generally, people believe that society's perspective is shifting and that government policies will also evolve. However, opinions vary significantly

#### Societal Integration

Everyone seeks greater integration for autistic individuals, but opinions differ on how to achieve it. Some believe there should be more suitable jobs available that require less communication. This stance is generally **lighter and less drastic**, taken from an Imago teacher:

*In regular education, there will be more support, and businesses will be more accepting, creating job opportunities that are more suitable for autistic individuals. For example, Imago is focusing on roles that do not require extensive communication, as communication is a weakness and limitation for many autistic individuals. It is beneficial to limit communication in jobs and ensure they are appropriate for them.*

A more **extreme view** is that autistic individuals should be able to attend regular schools and work in typical jobs. Businesses create opportunities for them and schools effectively fulfill their integration responsibilities without needing Imago and other centers to facilitate connections.

*A hope based on reality of mine is that schools should provide more opportunities for autistic individuals to remain in mainstream education. If teachers, families, and students understand their perspectives, it would contribute to a more inclusive environment. More one-on-one support at school would help, leading to greater understanding and less stigma. I would love for people to attend regular schools. It would be beneficial if autistic individuals could rely less on specialized centers.*

### **Separate Integration**

Instead of trying to integrate autistic individuals into regular schools, a **separate community** could be created where they can interact and support one another.

*At Imago, some students complete middle and high school, and some go to college. However, the experiences can still be quite challenging. The students themselves are not trained or educated about their peers with differences. I believe that placing them in that environment can be very difficult, leading to experiences that are not good, such as feelings of isolation. Just mentioning bullying triggers a strong reaction from them. Instead of trying to force them into a regular environment, we should create a space where they can be together and embrace their differences.*

### **Law**

Government support for autistic individuals is crucial. As Vietnam's economy grows, increased incentives and funding for special education can lead to more opportunities for autistic individuals in schools and workplaces.

*Assuming Vietnam's economy is growing, more funding for special education means more resources for people with disabilities. It's a matter of economics; the government plays an important role. If it allocates funding and requires companies to have a percentage of disabled employees, the policies and changes will be significant.*

**Law is crucial** for many people; having policies passed in schools and businesses is the next step that should be taken soon.

### **Unity**

More families are coming together to create support networks, resulting in connections between various centers. These networks collaborate to unify approaches and ensure quality as many centers continue to emerge.

*In the past, few centers collaborated with each other, but now there are more networks. The intervention network for children in Vietnam includes experienced specialists and teachers who connect the centers from north to south. Each year, they conduct cross-monitoring, reviewing documents to assess whether the teachers are effective and scoring their performance. This basic support helps with training. Since each center has limited funding, having a network allows them to invite higher-quality experts...*

Currently, many centers aim to provide jobs and models for older children, raising community awareness and facilitating greater integration for autistic individuals. In the next ten years, we expect to see improved center quality and more robust support systems in place. The peak goal is to create a cohesive system that supports individuals from childhood to adulthood, ensuring continuous employment assistance and unity throughout the process. A teacher shared her dream:

*A school for ages 5 to 20, with qualified teachers and sufficient funding. A specialized center for individuals with severe autism, where a unified curriculum teaches students from preschool to highschool, and prepares and finds the students suitable work. If students excel, they could transition to regular schools.*

## **2. Outsiders' perspectives on the integration and work capabilities of autistic individuals.**

### **First thought when hearing the word autism**

Many high schoolers tend to think that autistic individuals are lonely, isolated, have poor communication skills, and are prone to odd actions.

*People that aren't necessarily bad at communicating, but just can't read social cues. Because of that, they have trouble interacting.*

Some students think that autistic people have special abilities. They imagine autistic people having special interests (Like cars for instance, a person that can never stop talking about cars) and that they would have an advantage over normal people over that special interest. This is a huge opportunity according to students.

*I think autistic individuals have certain talents, as if there's a trade-off. They may face challenges in social integration, but they possess special abilities, such as drawing or playing music. If they develop and practice these skills early on, they can perform just as well as anyone else*

### **Learning abilities and challenges**

Most believe autism doesn't affect learning abilities. But young people do recognise that there's a lot of prejudice that blocks autistic people from going to school. As put by a senior at Nguyen Tat Thanh High School:

*They still learn well compared to normal people. The part of the brain that is affected is not the part related to learning*

## **Working abilities**

A lot of skepticism still remains, but there's also a sense of optimism. Among students, three believe that five out of ten autistic individuals can secure jobs, while two think it's below five. A more negative view about chances of autistic individuals is:

*It's hard to believe that autistic individuals can hold jobs. It's hard to believe because their behavior can be quite unusual and atypical. In work environments that require seriousness, attention to detail, and capability, it can be difficult for them to meet all the job expectations.*

The main reasons for his argument are limited communication skills and difficulty concentrating. He suggests that a proposed solution would be to find lighter jobs, such as manual labor, research positions, or roles that require minimal interaction. Additionally, he emphasizes the importance of encouragement and not harboring negative feelings; instead, it's crucial to allow them to think for themselves and make choices. Despite his pessimistic views regarding their chances, his hope remains that autistic individuals should have the opportunity to work and contribute to society.

*Of course, if they have the necessary skills and abilities, they can work and contribute to society. However, office jobs may not be suitable for them. Positions that are more socially or psychologically demanding could be a better fit for autistic individuals, as they can assist those around them who are facing psychological challenges. For example, they could provide counseling to young people or students under pressure in life, guiding them on how to overcome those challenges and take steps forward.*

## **Integration and working chances in ten-year's time**

Generally, students believe that the science of psychology and the treatment of various syndromes will have advanced significantly, benefiting from international knowledge and practices. This will make it easier to integrate these approaches into local contexts, allowing for more effective support and understanding of individuals with diverse needs. However, a student from Nguyen Tat Thanh still raises his concern:

*In my opinion, ten years is a short period for making significant changes that promote social integration for autistic individuals within the community.*

### **3. Factors contributing to differences in viewpoints and potential impact of these factors on the future integration and working opportunities**

To start, the differences in viewpoints show most in:

**Integration and working chances:** Young people still haven't had a deep understanding of these problems, due to the students' limited exposure to the autistic community. Professionals of course have a better understanding.

**Autistic people have special abilities:** believed more by young people because many autism activities like TO HE promote arts products. They have good marketing and presence, so that may contribute to misunderstanding for young people that every autistic person has innate abilities.

**10 years question:** Young individuals tend to hold a more pessimistic view about the future of autistic people, largely shaped by their observations at school and home, where derogatory phrases like "Autistic" are often used without care. In contrast, older individuals, who have witnessed progress over the years in societal perceptions, centers' developments, and government policies are more inclined to trust in the future.

Therefore, we can list the factors as follow:

**Lack of exposure**

**Families' and peers' influence**

**Famous autism arts products**

The potential impacts of these factors are many. Despite only being a small scale research, the most important factor that many staff even point to that leads to lack of deep understanding among young people about autism is **exposure**.

*Honestly, if we promote through theory alone, we can't achieve anything. We need activities connected with autistic individuals and those with disabilities. Young people can learn by visiting places with autistic individuals, participating in volunteer activities to gain a better understanding.*

Therefore, young people in high schools and universities should be encouraged or required to participate in volunteer days at autism centers across Vietnam. This shouldn't be difficult, as there are hundreds of such centers in Hanoi alone. Through these experiences, students will gain insight and understanding. Over time, as this young generation matures into the leaders of society, they will be in a position to advocate for and implement changes in laws, educational policies, government initiatives, and company practices.