

Concept Skills Lab

1 About the project

The Skills Lab project started from the experiences that persons with autism (autism spectrum disorder or ASD) often fail to use their talents and work competences in society.

6 organisations worked together to develop the Skills Lab concept to maximize the work opportunities of adults with autism: Associação Portuguesa de Pais e Amigos do Cidadão Deficiente Mental (APPACDM) de Marinha Grande (PT), Dr. Leo Kannerhuis (NL), Indigo vzw (BE), GOB De Ploeg vzw (BE, promoter), NAS Prospects (UK) and SPK (BE). APPACDM de Marinha Grande is an association of parents and people with a disability such as Trisomy 21, ASD, AD(H)D, mental retardation... The organisation is specialized in education, rehabilitation and social integration of people with a disability. The Dutch Dr. Leo Kannerhuis is a specialized psychiatric centre for children and teenagers and a knowledge centre on autism. Indigo vzw provides diagnostic examinations and therapy for children, teenagers and adults with developmental problems such as ASD, AD(H)D, learning disorder... GOB De Ploeg vzw is promoter of the project. It is an employment, training and guidance centre for people with an employment handicap and the underprivileged. The English partner, NAS Prospects, is a national employment and training service for people with ASD. SPK vzw brings together professionals with practical experience to work out the local policy.

The project extends over a period of two years (2010-2012) and is funded by the Lifelong Learning Programme (Leonardo da Vinci).

2 Why we developed a Skills Lab Concept?

De Ploeg, Indigo, NAS, APPACDM and dr. Leo Kannerhuis experience in their daily activity that a significant group of persons with ASD is excluded from the labor market. Although the existing offer of organizations providing guidance, training and employment opportunities for this group is fairly extensive (vrij uitgebreid). For instance, organizations offering vocational training, coaching on the work place, mediation between employee and employer, sheltered workplaces... However, for the persons with ASD it is not always clear which offer suits best for him or her. There are several services that support them in this search but even those aren't always tailor-made. This can be explained by the fact that these organizations all have a fixed offer with defined conditions and objectives such as a restricted period of support,...

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Persons with ASD do not always succeed to get started within such a strict framework. Furthermore these conditions are often very vague, for people with ASD it is not clear how they can meet these conditions. So, in a way, the person with ASD is isolated from the existing offer and the therefore also excluded from the access to the labor market. Consequently they get social isolated, have no daily structure... what only increases the gap to the existing offer and the labor market. Skills Lab aims to make a difference and make a bridge between the person with ASD and the existing offer.

3 The aim of the Skills Lab concept

Skills Lab is a place where people with ASD can practice their (labor) skills.

In our approach, we focus on talents and strengths instead of difficulties or diagnose.

Furthermore, it's an integrative approach, which means we consider all the relevant factors and involve them when necessary to make reasonable adjustments, based on the client's specific (ASD-related) needs.

4 The Skills Lab Concept

The project partners have been long aware that people with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are routinely excluded from the labour market unless they receive specialist support to enable them to access it. However, the number of organizations providing these specialist guidance, training and employment opportunities (vocational training, sheltered workplaces, coaching, mediation between employee and employer, voluntary work placements...) is severely limited, relative to the number of jobseekers with ASD.

A significant group of people with ASD therefore remains excluded from the labour market. This is an unacceptable situation which must be addressed, and the most effective way to do this is by providing existing mainstream and pan-disability employment support organisations with the specialist skills and resources they need to support jobseekers with ASD effectively.

Skills Lab provides this bridge. Skills Lab offers a range of resources for people with ASD to develop the skills they need to access the workplace or specialized guidance, training and employment opportunities successfully. Skills Lab provides employers with the awareness and understanding which they need in order to recruit and retain employees with ASD. Within the concept of Skills Lab the jobcoach has an important role as he/she is the interpreter between the person with ASD and the employer.

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Skills Lab takes an integrative approach, which means we consider all the relevant factors and involve them as necessary to make reasonable adjustments, based on the client's specific needs.

Skills Lab has 3 important functions: preparation, development and social inclusion.

1. Preparation

- Autism awareness (info about autism and possible effects of the condition on work and their own situation)
- Self advocacy/empowerment, confidence and motivation
- Familiarisation with the labour market (different forms of work and workplace expectations)
- Training and development of social and communication skills in a safe situation
- Developing a realistic competence profile focusing on the client's abilities.
- Identify strengths and areas for support: match individual skills and preferences to job opportunities, and discuss and advise next steps towards work

2. Development

- Having structured, work-related activities during the day
- Train related skills (work/life balance; mobility and travel; planning; stress management and resilience)
- Developing a positive framework and perspective for the future

3. Social inclusion

- Participation in various peer group events and activities
- Supported jobseeking
- Employer training, awareness and advice

Relevant elements in the Skills Lab

- 1) The Skills Lab starts from the demand of the clients as internal motivation is necessary to enable self awareness and activate changes.
- 2) As one of the main problems of autism is lack of imagination it is important that everything is very concrete. So people with autism learn by experiencing and doing

by themselves. Therefore the Skills Lab should offer the opportunity to experience all work related aspects.

- 3) Skills Lab need to provide the possibility for persons with autism to train and to exercise skills. It is important to do so in a realistic situation so the person with autism can get a realistic idea of the expectations concerning knowledge, behavior and attitudes. For instance a work experience place, company visit, a testimony of an employer... However, for some clients the transition to reality is to big. They need a more adapted situation which give more security. Adapted means autism specific and can vary, depending on the individual needs. For instance a separate work place with limited stimuli, lower expectations, more individual guidance,... We experienced it can be necessary to move in this continuum in the two directions at any time.

It is important that the person with autism reflect on the experiences and link those to his expectations and choices. People with autism often need guidance during this process therefore the role of the jobcoach is crucial.

- 4) Skills Lab is tailor made. Therefore it needs to be flexible in time, offer and intensity because of several reasons a.o. the abilities of the individual and the distance between the individual and the support organisations or labour market, ...

5 Skills Lab as a methodical application of the Life Course Model

In this chapter you can read how we applied the elements of the life course model in the concept of skills lab.

5.1 Lifeline and transitional moments

In Skills Lab, we focus on the transition from unemployed to long term employment. As you could read above, for people with ASD, transition moments are more difficult than for other people. What we experience in our daily practice is that many people with ASD don't succeed to find and/or to keep a job on the labour market. This can partially be explained from the limitations connected to autism but also because the labour market is not ready yet to deal with employees who need a specific kind of support.

5.2 People with ASD and the experienced quality of life

People with ASD are also entitled to full participation in our society. School and work are key elements. Work provides an income but the effect of work goes broader. Work brings structure in one's life, it stimulates social contacts, employees have a sense of belonging and make a contribution to society. In Skills Lab we want to contribute to a positive (work) experience for people with ASD. People with ASD have many talents but often they aren't aware of it due to the focus on their limitations. Unlike many other projects or guidance we focus on the strengths and qualities of the person with ASD.

5.3 Influential factors on people with ASD and the quality of life

We make a difference in personal and environmental elements. Abilities and limitations of the person with ASD such as cognitive, communicative and social-emotional skills are personal elements. In Skills Lab we stimulate the person with ASD to discover their own strengths and work on their self image, motivation, ... Environmental elements include family relations, living environment, education and training, employment, leisure activities, health, community, ... As we wrote earlier, the life course model is an integrative approach, which means we consider all the relevant factors and involve them when necessary to make reasonable adjustments, based on the client's specific (ASD-related) needs. For instance, it can be important to take action concerning the living environment or leisure time of the person with ASD.

5.4 Focus on micro and macro environments

In the concept of Skills Lab, two parties are involved, namely the person with ASD and the employer. Persons with ASD need to practice (labour) skills and have a realistic idea of what they can expect of the labour market. Employing persons with ASD demands engagement of the employer and fellow colleagues. They need to understand ASD in general and be aware of the needs of the person with ASD in particular. Employers need to know what to expect of the employee with ASD and need to realize that employing a person with ASD does not necessarily mean there are a lot of adjustments needed. The workplace needs to be assessed as well (autism friendly environment). It is also important to involve relevant others such as parents, care takers...

5.5 Guidance intensity

The life course model differentiates three levels of intensity of care/guidance: self management, care management and case management. The intensity can vary during

the life course. In Skills lab we stimulate the clients from the level of care management towards self management.

5.6 A dynamic model

The life course model is dynamic model and so is the concept of Skills Lab. It is important to look at the next transition moment, namely the transition to work. Furthermore it is also of great importance to look back to previous transition moments for instance how earlier work experience went. In this way experiences of the past can be learning moments for the future. The person with ASD evolves so it is important to form a picture of the strengths and needs of the person and this on regular base.

5.7 Monitoring and coordination from the life-course perspective

Monitoring and coordination from the life-course perspective means an ongoing assessment and support to keep the work. A bridge (a person or an organization) is needed to fill in the gap between the person with ASD and the employer when needed.

6 Practical application of the Skills lab

6.1 Pilot in UK

Pre paration for Employment (PfE) is a 28-week programme structured into three stages, designed specifically to improve employment opportunities for people with autism. Each PfE course has an intake of five clients, with a new intake every seven weeks. There is no formal referral process and the course is open to any jobseeker who has, or is actively seeking, a diagnosis of ASD.

The first stage of the programme lasts for six weeks. Clients meet weekly with their Prospects consultant to gain support and advice on areas such as personal management skills, strategies for handling common workplace situations, CV preparation, drafting cover letters, completing job applications and filmed mock interviews. Alongside weekly mentoring meetings, clients are encouraged to attend a series of workshops focussing on workplace skills. The workshops cover disability awareness, communication skills at work, social skills at work, anxiety management at work, planning for employment (organising time, budgeting and travel planning) and interview skills. Time is also allocated each week for clients to explore work experience options.

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The second stage of the programme consists of an eight-week supported work experience placement for each client in a role of their choice, guided by advice from their consultant. Once a suitable placement has been arranged, Prospects meets with the employer to complete health and safety and work placement agreement forms. Throughout the placement, all clients receive regular visits from their Prospects employment consultant - frequency and duration will depend on individual support needs.

At the end of the placement, employers are required to complete a feedback questionnaire and a midway review takes place where the client and consultant decide whether the client is ready to progress to stage three, job finding. The client's readiness for work is always more apparent after completing the work experience placement, and if the individual is not yet ready and able to work it would be in their interest to be signposted to an alternative course – either another Prospects opportunity such as the voluntary work programme Brighter Horizons, or to an external course.

Stage three comprises fourteen weeks of supported job finding. Clients meet with a Prospects consultant to identify the types of jobs the client is seeking and to receive support with their job search. One of the course objectives is to grow and encourage individual independence, so clients are expected to do some active preparation before each meeting. These initially take place weekly but become fortnightly as clients' confidence and independence grows.

Once a job has been secured, Prospects is available to provide training to the new employer and ongoing workplace support for the new employee. Each client's progress is tracked on a monthly basis for two years after they have completed the course in order to monitor job and other positive outcomes. This helps to encourage job retention and helps employers gain a better understanding of the barriers to employment faced by people with ASD.

At the end of the programme, all clients undertake a final review and receive a written report assessing their progress over the course. Clients that have not secured employment by the end of the course receive an action plan with signposting to other relevant opportunities. Clients continuing their job search can request interview support from Prospects.

6.2 Pilot in Portugal

The Portuguese team was from the very beginning enthusiastic about the idea as they thought it could be an innovative way to work with people with autism spectrum disorder. Considering the good results of "Avanti Project" they thought that "Skills Lab" could turn out

to be very interesting to continue the work concerning clients with autism, this time in a very practical way.

The main goal of the Skills Lab is to increase the employment opportunities of people with ASD, to improve the work competences of people with ASD based on the life course model (to empower people with ASD) and to change attitudes both of employers and of potentials employees with ASD.

During the first workshop the program was presented to both the clients and their parents (see Annex 1 – Program of the Project “Skills Lab”). The program consists of 12 theoretical workshops, 8 weeks of work experience, guidance and ongoing support to the clients during the entire project and individual support by means of individual sessions.

The aim of the theoretical sessions was developing the following skills:

- General skills such as: communication and social interaction
- Work related skills: to be on time, to know which tasks to perform in order to have some autonomy; stay focused doing the work without many interruptions; to know when to have a break and for how long; to be able to cope with changes in daily routine; to have “someone” (previously identified) to ask for support; to respect colleagues and boss; to be flexible towards other’s opinion.

Besides these theoretical sessions in group, each participant had, once a week, an individual session. The people of the technical team gave personal attention considering the abilities, needs and expectations of each client. Within these individual sessions, the professional and the client discussed following topics: social interaction (what to do, how to behave in social situations, how to interpret body language...), basic social rules, how to control some obsessive behaviours, identifying main interests and competences in order to find places of work, learn to be more tolerant towards the others, training of some tasks that the client will perform in the place of work and learn to take initiative.

The Portuguese team started in November with the search for work places for each of the six clients so they could have a realistic work experience. During this process they also paid attention whether the clients needed an autism friendly environment but that wasn’t necessary. Nevertheless, the six clients got clear instructions about the following items: time (day and beginning of end of a working day), where to go when they had a break and duration of the break, activities during the break (listening to music, jumping...), tasks and duration, ... For this an individual structured timetable for each client adapted to the specific

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context of their working place was very helpful. During this programme there was a good cooperation between everyone involved in order to make the necessary arrangements and to solve problems as soon as they appeared, whenever necessary.

The pilot group consisted of five male participants and one female, age between 16 and 22 years, all of them diagnosed with ASD. It was a heterogeneous group and, although they attended, altogether, the theoretical sessions, each one of these clients has his own characteristics and different needs and expectations. During the individual sessions which each client the team gave personal attentions to the individual needs of each client. The individual support also considered the results from the questionnaire “VrijBaanVragenlijst” (“Freeway to a job”) that each client filled in. This questionnaire helped to identify the most problematic areas of the clients, areas which constitute obstacles to their empowerment and the possibility to take more control over their social and vocational integration. In this way, each client could follow his/her own path, according to their competences, desires and needs.

As Skills Lab is tailor made the clients the Portuguese team used different questionnaires to identify the needs of the clients in order to adapt Skills Lab to these needs.

- Initial Questionnaire to Clients and Parents (see annex 4 and annex 5, link to Skillsbox, assesment) to know the real expectations towards the project.
- “VrijBaan questionnaire” (Freeway to a job) (link to Skillsbox, assessment) to questioning the level of empowerment of individuals.
- Questionnaire to Clients and Parents (link to Skillsbox) to know their opinion about the theoretical sessions of the programm: positive and negative aspects, what must be improved.

At the end of the programme the technical team of APPACDM De Marina Grande concluded that the experience the clients had during the Skills Lab project was very important. Skills Lab changed their lives. The clients have ongoing support and can be integrated in a training centre, get a job or work as a volunteer. For two clients were diagnosed with autism during the programme although they came to the centre for respectively 6 and 1 year.

6.3 Pilot in Belgium

The program consists of two stages. The first stage lasts for seven weeks. Clients come to Skills Lab several hours a week to participate in several workshops in group. The themes of

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these workshops include: getting to know each other, dreams and interests, what is work?, ASD and work, applying for a job/ job interviews, social and communicative skills, stress management and time management. In the session 'social and communicative skills' f.e. the participants learned how to introduce themselves to colleagues.

Different methodologies and materials are used such as written exercises, brainstorm in group, group discussion, video fragments, home work exercises, interviews with employers, a board game, a photo search in the city of Mechelen and work in the Skills Lab Library (= a library organized by the clients, where they can further train their skills). Three coaches provide these workshops, based on their specific knowledge and expertise.

After this stage, the coaches evaluate the strengths and needs of the client and make an individual support plan for stage 2, based on the observations in stage 1 and discussions with clients and their relevant professional and personal network.

In stage 2 (duration of 6 months), participants receive individual counseling and guidance, depending on their specific needs and strengths. This can include: internships to experience a work environment/ discover skills and interests in a certain kind of job, help in applying for a job/ mediation with employers, job coaching in the workplace, contacts with other organizations/professionals for support in different domains (training, work, free time activities), support of the clients (personal) network, ... At the end, the client is referred to the right succeeding support, or supported in the work place when he has found a job.

The Skills Lab takes place in an ASD-specific environment: f.e. a quiet location with little stimuli, labeled work materials, overview of workshops on the wall, a time out room, a garden to go outside if necessary... The same for the used materials: a written overview of the workshop is discussed at the beginning of each workshop, open questions in the exercises are limited... Furthermore, there is room for individually tailored adaptations: f.e. preparation of exercises at home, walking around if necessary...

6.4 Pilot in the Netherlands

At first, we started together with Jobstap. For the project it was important to take some time to get commitment for the project and to share the aims. Both organizations have their own

way of working and their own funding. And each funding has his own rules that did not fit for the project. Appointments between the two organizations were made.

Although affords were made by both organisations to recruit the participants, we only found two participants for that could join in the program. In the evaluation the partners concluded that it takes more time for the patients of Dr. Leo Kannerhuis to get used to the image of working in a workplace outside the institute they are used to. As we know, transition is a very difficult part and it needs more time of preparation. One of the possible causes can be that the treatment takes a long period. Early starting with contact with a job coach, visiting jobs etc. can help to make the steps more logical for the patient. Making clear and “normal” that getting in to a job can help. The patient will get used to the image of being a employee instead of a patient.

We concluded that it takes more time to build the bridge between the training-situation in the safety of Dr. Leo Kannerhuis and the fit in to a work-experience-placement with the coaching of a job-coach. The two patients were successfully put in to a job as a work-experience-placements. Instead off the pilot program with Jobstap we started the empowerment training. In this model the Leo Kannerhuis is still working on a individual basis with Jobstap. There will be a follow up based on the lessons we learned.

Skills Lab “ The empowerment training “

The aim of the Skills Lab, using the Empowerment-training, is to empower people with autism to become more active and improve their self steering capacity in finding and sustaining a job. The ‘Vrijbaan Empowerment Method’ is a new ‘empowering approach’ for people with limited labour capacities or disabled people during their return to the labour market. In this pilot we will use it, with some adjustment, for people with autism. Through measurement of individual empowerment, the need for personality training is assessed. Consequently, on an individual level, a special training programme is composed aiming at empowering the participants. First we started with The Vrijbaan Empowerment Questionnaire: this is a tool to assess someone’s individual empowerment profile. The questionnaire contains 60 statements and respondents are asked to express the extent of their agreement or disagreement with each statement.

The programme consisted of 15 training sessions on Thursday from 18.45-21.00 hours. 6 participants, all male, age 20-53 years; selection took place by referrer and criteria of Dr. Leo

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Kannerhuis. There are two trainers (training and employment counsellors who have followed a specific trainers course).

More information about the project: www.SkillsLab4ASD.eu