

Manual:

Start your own Skills Lab in 8 steps



This manual is a guideline for professionals who want to set up a Skills Lab.

Skills Lab emphasises the necessity of increasing employment opportunities of people with ASD by helping them to develop the skills that they need to find, secure and succeed in employment. We focus mainly on their strengths, support needs and areas for development.

It contains eight fundamental steps, based on the experience of the partners who developed a Skills Lab in different contexts. Step by step, the concept of the Skills Lab will become more concrete and tailored to the context the professional is working in and the needs of his/her clients with ASD.

Want to support or start your own Skills Lab? Just follow these 8 simple steps.

1. Define what is missing

This means identifying the barriers and cause of the gap between unemployment and work. It is helpful to keep a broad view and to explore different reasons for this.

The following questions can be used to start this reflection.

1. Client competences
 - A. What are the needs of the client?
 - B. Which work related skills need to be developed?
2. Labour market
 - A. What does the labour market offer?
 - B. Is it paid or voluntary work?
 - C. What is appropriate/ realistic for the client?

3. Existing support services
 - A. Which organizations provide support for people with ASD in their search for work?
 - B. Is the client aware of these services?
 - C. Are these services Autism friendly?
 - D. Is there a lack of support in certain areas?
4. Own organization
 - A. Does your service match with client need?
 - B. What are the weaknesses?
5. Employers
 - A. Are the employers Autism aware?
 - B. What are the needs of the employers?
 - C. What kind of support do they expect when employing a person with ASD?

OUTCOME: A clear understanding of the barriers to employment for individuals with an ASD. Once the barriers are identified, the next step will be deciding where you want to create a Skills Lab which is tailored for your specific context.

2. Define the aim of your Skills

When setting up your own Skills Lab, be mindful that the aim needs to conform to the concept of Skills Lab. Skills Lab will act as a bridge function between unemployed people with ASD and the existing support, training and employment opportunities.

It is important to make sure that your aims SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timed).

- **Specific:** In this phase you decide *how* you will create “the bridge” and what the aim of your Skills Lab is. It is possible that you see a need for several Skills Labs, however, the most effective way is to focus on one. The following questions can help you to make a decision:
 - How do you want to fill the gap?
 - What do you want to achieve

- **Measurable:**



- Quantitative: It must be possible to measure the difference “before” the intervention and “after” the intervention
- Qualitative: Soft outcomes (e.g. possible improvements in self confidence, work skills such as communication and social interaction)
- **Achievable:**
 - Participation of the client should not be compulsory.
 - ASD is a spectrum disorder, no individual is the same, no context is the same
 - Each client will have different needs, interests and motivations.
- **Realistic:**
 - The Skills Lab should be individually tailored to meet individual needs, considering the existing labor opportunities.
 - Realistic and clear expectations are important (clients, professionals, employers).
- **Timed:**
 - The Skills Lab program needs to be limited in time, with a clear start date and an end date.
 - The program needs to be well structured and evaluated regularly throughout.

OUTCOME: SMART-description of the aim

3. What resources are available?

Before you set up a Skills Lab, you need to explore the available resources.

- **What kind of resources are needed?**
 1. Financial: Personal costs, staff, work resources.
 2. Knowledge: A skills lab should be organised by trained professionals, with a thorough knowledge of ASD, the life course model, methods and instruments and the labour market.
 3. Logistics: sites/rooms (suitable for individual sessions and group sessions) access to computers if necessary, DVD player if necessary.
 4. Employers for work experience placements: When you offer guidance towards employment, it is important to find and secure work experience placements that match with the interests and competences of the client.
- **Where will you find the necessary resources?**
 1. Within your own organization.
 2. Set up a partnership to share knowledge and expertise, logistics, money...
If you want to work with other organisations: there needs to be a good handover

procedure. Individuals with ASD should be able to make a smooth transition from one organisation to the other.

OUTCOME: overview of the necessary and available resources and possible actions to obtain the necessary resources.

4. What methods/instruments will you use?

A Skills Lab needs to be tailored and flexible. It is a combination of group sessions/workshops, individual sessions and work experience placements.

There is already a lot of information available that professionals can use. On the website we made an overview of the different instruments used in the 4 pilots. We want to emphasise that the list is not finite, but it is a good start if you are looking for materials.

For each instrument you find a description and an example. See Skillsbox [Assesment](#), [Training](#) or [Coaching on the job](#)

5. How will you create and autism friendly environment / make reasonable adjustments?

People with ASD need as much clarity and predictability as possible as the environment can often seem chaotic and unstructured for them. Reasonable adjustments should be made for the clients with ASD, in your organization and also in any external organizations/companies that the client may visit.

- Some general principles in creating an autism friendly environment are:
 1. Use clear communication – e.g. instructions, contracts or requests
 2. Clarify time and plans – e.g. using timetables, schedules...
 3. Provide structure
 4. Give advance warning of any change
 5. Give regular and honest feedback – e.g. inappropriate behavior

- Besides these general principles, we made extra adjustments in the Skills lab:
 1. Written information
 2. Reduce the amount of stimuli
 3. Small group for group work (6 maximum)
 4. Possibility to have 1:1 sessions

5. Clear expectations and boundaries set at the beginning of the program.
6. Clear written rules and agreements set at the beginning of the program.
7. Individual adaptations based on each clients needs

OUTCOME: an autism friendly environment

6. How will you recruit your participants?

The Skills Lab concept is very flexible, it acts as a bridge between the person with ASD and any existing organisations for support and guidance, training and employment opportunities. The way you interpret Skills Lab, determines the profile of the participants that you will include in your Skills Lab and therefore where and how you will recruit them.

The first step is to assess the need for Skills Lab. Is there a waiting list of clients already waiting to access your service or seeking support from you already? Are there any other organisations specialised in the guidance for people with a disability who may have clients that would benefit from Skills Lab?

During the pilot projects, the partner organisations within the Skills Lab project experienced that there is a great need for a Skills Lab and on some occasions even had to refuse clients.

OUTCOME: a list of your participants

7. Timing

Skills Lab is a flexible and tailor made concept, so this needs to be considered when you are designing the time scale of the programme. It means that the individuals who will manage the Skills Lab need to be flexible in their availability. Adapting to the clients need and to changing situations is very important.

Setting up a Skills Lab is a big investment – especially the first time – but it is worth it!

- When setting up a schedule you need to address the following issues:
 1. Preparation of the program

2. Group sessions
 3. Individual sessions (the time table should include time for this, to use when needed)
 4. Be prepared to make adjustments in the programme along the way if necessary
 5. Write down observations and interpret them throughout
 6. Recruitment of participants
 7. Contacts with relevant others
 8. Team meetings
 9. Finding work placements
 10. During placement: easy availability of help: by telephone, visits
- Timetable of group sessions:
 1. Up to 3 times a week – half a day – over a longer period
 2. It's best to provide a 'reception period' before you start, which gives participants time to relax before starting a session
 3. Provide enough breaks for the participants, so they can process information and have informal contact with the others (this can also be a good observation moment!)

OUTCOME: clear time table with an overview of amount of staff hours needed

8. How will you evaluate your skills lab?

- Formulate evaluation criteria
 - See: Step 2: qualitative and quantitative criteria should be measured
- All the parties should also be involved in this evaluation
 - The priority is the clients. In our Skills Lab, we built in several different evaluations. E.g.
 - Questionnaire (+discussion) at the start of Skills Lab and at the end, to discover improvements/developments.
 - Short review and/or conversation after each workshop
- You can also compose a stakeholders group, with representatives from different organisations who have their own perspective on the Skills Lab: e.g . education, partner organisations, and/or employers.

OUTCOME: a list with evaluation criteria and a plan for the implementation of the evaluation (including all involved parties)

More information about Skills Lab: www.SkillsLabforASD.eu