

**Autism and entrepreneurship: An examination of the effectiveness of self-employment as a model to address the economic isolation experienced by individuals with autism spectrum disorder.**

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# Executive Summary

## Introduction

Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are more socially isolated and economically disadvantaged than their peers with other developmental disorders and much greater than the general population (Roux, Shattuck, Rust, Rava, Anderson, 2015, p. 16). Specific data related to the numbers of employed individuals with ASD in Canada are difficult to find. Turcotte's (2014) study on *Persons with disabilities and employment* from Statistics Canada did not differentiate disabilities when providing employment levels; it did, however, show that individuals with disabilities are often working at levels significantly lower than their peers not living with a disability. In 2011, Canadians with a disability between the ages of 25 and 64 had an employment rate of 49%, as compared to a rate of 79% for the same age grouping of their peers without a disability (Turcotte, 2014, p. 1). Leading ASD organizations place the unemployment rate for people with ASD at above 80% (Autism Speaks Canada, 2016).

Recent studies have shown that 58% of young adults with autism have been employed in the past, as compared to 74% of those with an intellectual disability and 90% of those with an emotional disturbance, speech impairment, or learning disability (Roux, et al, 2015, p. 15). This represents a significant portion of the population which is economically disadvantaged from their communities.

While the known statistics paint a grim reality for the obtainment of some independence, many individuals and organizations across North America are taking a different path in creating a reprieve from economic and social isolation of people living with ASD: they are creating enterprises and self-employment opportunities for people with ASD. In Newfoundland and Labrador there is no program in place to specifically address self-employment development opportunities for people with ASD. This represents a gap in supports that the client, the Autism Society, Newfoundland and Labrador (ASNL) wishes to fill. To fill this gap, this project will seek to understand, through the study of currently available research and the creation of new knowledge, how and if self-employment is a viable option to address this isolation.

## Methodology and Methods

This project relied heavily on qualitative research methods to meet the project objectives and answer the primary research questions and subsequent secondary questions. The ASNL's 2015 needs-assessment provided valuable information about needs for the ASD community in Newfoundland and Labrador. One of the overarching themes that was discovered by the researchers in that study was that the challenges of raising an individual with ASD increased dramatically when the individual transitioned from childhood to adulthood, (Audus, Harris-Walsh, Wells, Murphy, 2016, p. 7). A self-employment business development program has been

one of the avenues discussed by the ASNL as an option for individuals as they move to adulthood (D. Vey, ASNL Project Coordinator, personal communication, December 15, 2016).

The researcher employed a variety of methods and tasks to achieve the research objectives of this project. Key informant interviews and surveys were utilized as data collection tools to study examples of entrepreneurship:

1. Five key informant interviews with existing and potential entrepreneurs were conducted. These case studies help form a picture of the needs of entrepreneurs with ASD. The researcher interviewed five individuals.
2. The researcher interviewed three representatives of organizations in other regions that have created business development programs targeted towards individuals with autism and other neurodevelopmental disabilities.
3. Five individuals completed a survey created to reach a broad audience across Newfoundland and Labrador. The survey was distributed to the ASNL membership.
4. An environmental scan of various business support programs designed for unique populations, across Canada and the United States.

## **Key Findings**

The researcher set out to investigate the opportunities available for people with ASD to develop self-employment opportunities. These opportunities would help individuals, their families, and support network alleviate the economic disadvantage and social isolation often felt by individuals with ASD.

The researcher proposed four options for the ASNL to consider when creating a self-employment development opportunity to add to their current suite of programs. These include; partner and promote already established programs, develop a program stream adjacent to their current pre-employment programs, create a new program entirely, or do not create a new program.

It is the researcher's conclusion that the ASNL should consider the creation of a self-employment development program for people with ASD. This program could take many forms and the researcher recommends further research and partnership development with external organizations on the best options to consider.

## **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are submitted to the ASNL for consideration as possible ways to support their current suite of programs with self-employment opportunities. These recommendations could allow the ASNL to reach interested individuals in all areas of Newfoundland and Labrador, urban and rural, and help them understand the potential that self-employment opportunities may provide. The length of time it would take to enact each recommendation was also considered. Each recommendation is described as either short-term (0-6 months) or long-term (6 months or more):

### ***General Recommendations:***

Several recommendations would be applicable for both urban and rural audiences and are included under a list of general recommendations.

***Recommendation #1:*** Compile a package of resources available for self-employment development supports for individuals, including a list of organizations that provide this type of support. *Short-term recommendation.*

***Recommendation #2:*** Compile a list of profiles of types of business operations that are of interest to individuals. This could provide budding entrepreneurs with the understanding of what would be required in terms of permits and regulations to start particular businesses. *Short-term recommendation.*

***Recommendation #3:*** Hire a self-employment coordinator or add the duties to that of a staff member currently providing employment support. *Long-term recommendation.*

***Recommendation #4:*** Develop a suite of resources and/or programs directed at the families and caregivers of people with ASD that are interested in starting a self-employment opportunity. *Short-term and long-term recommendation.*

### ***Urban Recommendations:***

The client's main office is in St. John's, the largest urban area and capital of the province. Individuals in this area have access to more support and services than their counterparts in rural and remote areas of the province.

***Recommendation #5:*** Develop an in-classroom workshop program for people interested in self-employment opportunities. *Long-term recommendation.*

**Recommendation #6:** Develop an entrepreneurial awareness component to employment programs directed at high-school aged individuals. *Short-term recommendation.*

**Recommendation #7:** Create a self-employment development event to promote the opportunities presented by self-employment. *Short-term recommendation.*

**Recommendation #8:** Engage with other organizations dedicated to providing supports to a range of disabilities to understand commonalities in the struggle for positive employment outcomes. *Short-term recommendation.*

***Rural Recommendations:***

The following list of recommendations will present opportunities to reach many individuals in the rural areas of Newfoundland and Labrador.

**Recommendation #9:** Develop an online training program for rural and remote areas. *Long-term recommendation.*

**Recommendation #10:** Compile a list of organizations providing online self-employment programs. *Short-term recommendation.*

**Recommendation #11:** Develop an online awareness video or series of videos to promote self-employment opportunities. *Short-term and long-term recommendation.*

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# 1.0 Introduction

## 1.1 Defining the Problem

Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are more socially isolated and economically disadvantaged than their peers with other developmental disorders and much greater than the general population (Roux, Shattuck, Rust, Rava, Anderson, 2015, p. 16). Specific data related to the numbers of employed individuals with ASD in Canada are difficult to find. Turcotte's (2014) study on *Persons with disabilities and employment* from Statistics Canada did not differentiate disabilities when providing employment levels; it did, however, show that individuals with disabilities are often working at levels significantly lower than their peers not living with a disability. In 2011, Canadians with a disability between the ages of 25 and 64 had an employment rate of 49%, as compared to a rate of 79% for the same age grouping of their peers without a disability (Turcotte, 2014, p. 1). Leading ASD organizations place the unemployment rate for people with ASD at above 80% (Autism Speaks Canada, 2016).

While the known statistics paint a grim reality for the obtainment of employment, many individuals and organizations across North America are taking a different path in creating employment options for people living with ASD: they are creating enterprises and self-employment opportunities for people with ASD. These individuals are supporting individuals with ASD to create their own enterprises.

One organization having success in supporting individuals with autism create self-employment opportunities is Autism Nova Scotia. In partnership with the Enactus group at St. Mary's University in Halifax, NS, the organization has created a program called Autism Works Entrepreneurship. The pilot project was run in 2015-2016 and connected entrepreneurs with autism with business consultants to help them start and/or grow their businesses. The project supported four businesses in 2015-2016 (Autism Nova Scotia, 2016). Enactus St. Mary's is one of six universities across the country that is running the Autism Works Entrepreneurship program with local community partners (Enactus St. Mary's Website, 2018). Craig Large, a plumber from Nova Scotia is like many people with ASD that are interested in self-employment, in that they want the flexibility and lifestyle benefits that having their own business can afford. Large was supported by the Autism Works Entrepreneurship program run in partnership with Autism Nova Scotia and Enactus St. Mary's. The organization provided him with branding and costing help and provided support in language that was easy for him to understand (Risdon, Chronicle Herald, 2017).

Other individuals, with support from family who recognized the skills of their loved ones and the opportunities they present, are starting small businesses on their own. For example, Brad

Fremmerlid is a young man from Edmonton with ASD who, with the help of his father, started a business assembling furniture (Johnson, 2015). Similarly, Thomas D'Eri created a social enterprise (a car wash) to provide employment opportunities for his brother and others with ASD (D'Eri, 2016).

These enterprises showcase examples where individuals are supported in what can be described as 'self-job creation.' These unique enterprises are designed to support individuals that may not otherwise be able to obtain sustainable employment in traditional workplaces. They can increase inclusion, both economically and socially, in the community by utilizing their own skills, interests and passions, to create their own employment opportunities.

In Newfoundland and Labrador there is no program in place to specifically address self-employment development opportunities for people with ASD. This represents a gap in supports that the client, the Autism Society, Newfoundland and Labrador (ASNL) wishes to fill. Programs in other provinces, such as those discussed above, have yielded success in helping individuals establish their own businesses. An environmental scan of business development programs in Newfoundland and Labrador was conducted in 2016 by the Ready, Willing, and Able program (RWA) to determine the capacity to deliver supports to people with intellectual disabilities and ASD (Dawson, 2016, Appendix 1). It was determined that while there are several programs and organizations that provided support, none provide accommodations or modifications to people with intellectual disabilities and ASD (D. Vey, ASNL Program Coordinator, personal communication, December 15, 2016).

## **1.2 Project Client**

The client for this project is the Autism Society, Newfoundland Labrador (ASNL). The ASNL is a provincial charitable organization dedicated to promoting the development of individual, lifelong, and community-based supports and services for people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), their families, and caregivers (ASNL Website, 2018). The organization is also actively engaged in community outreach and advocacy across the province.

Established in 1984, the ASNL has since grown from a support group for parents in the St. John's region to three regional offices and a provincial headquarters based in the capital city. The organization employs between 25 and 30 individuals throughout the year and supports around 1,000 individuals with ASD yearly. Currently the organization employs three individuals with ASD full-time throughout the year and employs eight individuals seasonally throughout the summer months (S. Crocker, ASNL Executive Director, Personal Communication, July 28, 2016). Run by a voluntary board of directors, the organization is the only registered charity in Newfoundland and Labrador dedicated to promoting and addressing the needs of individuals with ASD.

In 2015, ASNL, in partnership with Memorial University, completed a needs assessment of the ASD community in Newfoundland and Labrador. The report was released in 2016 and argued that while many of the highest functioning individuals with ASD may be able to find work or enroll in post-secondary education, many others could advance further if given the proper supports and coaching (Audus, Harris-Walsh, Wells, Murphy, 2016, p. 7). This needs assessment represents recent and relevant information that can provide background for the project. It defined the ASD community broadly as all of those involved in support of people with ASD, including the education and health sectors, service providers, families and caregivers, and key decision makers.

The ASNL is also part of a network of organizations across Canada focused on developing and delivering a wide variety of services, advocacy support, and programming for those living with ASD. The ASNL is a member of two national bodies; Autism Canada and the Canadian Autism Spectrum Disorders Alliance (CASDA). The organization is involved extensively in information and best practices sharing with partner organizations.

A self-employment business development program has been one of the avenues discussed by the client as an option for individuals as they move to adulthood (D. Vey, ASNL Project Coordinator, personal communication, December 15, 2016) Through the employment programs already active at the ASNL, the client worked with individuals that showed an interest and aptitude in developing their own products and services, such as a visual artist. The current suite of programs does not have a self-employment component and the client was interested in understanding what self-employment program models exist and if they are successful in creating sustainable employment opportunities for people with ASD. The client was also interested in understanding what elements of the different models in use could be utilized for their program participants, and what type of knowledge would need to exist in the organization to enable the client to support individuals with ASD interested in starting their own self-employment opportunity.

### **1.3 Project Objectives and Research Questions**

This project sought to understand the benefits, consequences, and adaptations necessary to support individuals with ASD that would like to start their own small businesses and become self-employed. Self-employment could include a full or part-time enterprise whereby the individual is generating financial gains for themselves through the sale of goods or services. Several examples include; an artist selling prints of their work or a baker selling pastries at a farmer's market. The scope of the enterprise could depend on a variety of factors unique to the individual. The enterprise could be their only source of income, or supplement other forms of income.

The primary research questions being addressed in this study were:

1. *Is a self-employment development program an effective model to help ameliorate the economic and social isolation experienced by individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD)?*
2. *If so, can the ASNL develop a program that is effective and inclusive of those with ASD who are interested in starting their own business?*

Secondary research questions related to the *first* primary question were:

- *What might entrepreneurial activity look like for individuals with ASD?*
- *What challenges do individuals starting their own businesses face?*
- *What are some of the benefits and potential negative consequences of starting a business for someone with ASD?*
- *Could self-generated income affect other financial supports individuals with ASD may receive?*
- *What might define success and failure for an individual with ASD in starting their own business?*

Secondary research questions related to the *second* primary question were:

- *If this type of program is determined to be a good option, what is the best way to enable this type of activity?*
- *How can the client utilize the information gathered to create a program given its current suite of initiatives?*
- *Could self-employment development program adaptations be made to existing programs to make them more inclusive for individuals with ASD?*

## **1.4 Background**

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by lifelong impairments in social relationships, communications, and repetitive, rigid behaviours (American Psychological Association, 2013). Organizations in Canada often rely on statistics from the United States when discussing prevalence of ASD as no national estimates exist in this country. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) in the United States estimate that 1 in 68 children will be diagnosed with ASD; and it is about 4.5 times more common among boys (1 in 42) than among girls (1 in 189) (CDC, 2014, p. 1). This information is based on the most recent data from the CDC from 2012. In 2002, the incidence rate was 1 in 150 (CDC, 2014, p. 1). This represents a significant increase in one decade.

Locally, the numbers are even higher. The ASNL operates on the Avalon Peninsula portion of the island of Newfoundland. A recent study on the incidence rates of ASD on the Avalon Peninsula determined the rate was significantly higher (1 in 46) when compared with other global populations (1 in 68) (Pelly, Vardy, Fernandez, Newhook, Chafe, 2015, p. 276).

Pelly et al., argue that a high incidence rate in the Avalon Peninsula represents the need for further study within this region of the province, on the needs of individuals with ASD and supports they require.

Recent studies have shown that 58% of young adults with autism have been employed in the past, as compared to 74% of those with an intellectual disability and 90% of those with an emotional disturbance, speech impairment, or learning disability (Roux, et al, 2015, p. 15). An intellectual disability is a condition defined by limits in the cognitive and adaptive abilities of an individual that affect their function (Patel, Greydanus, Merrick, and Rubin, 2016); whereas ASD, according to the American Psychological Association is a condition characterized by impairments in social relationships, communications, and repetitive and rigid behaviours (2013).

These statistics represent a significant portion of the population which is economically disadvantaged and socially isolated from their communities. This project will seek to understand, through the study of currently available research and the creation of new knowledge, if and how self-employment is a viable option to address this isolation.

As children with ASD age, there will be a need for programs that allow them to navigate their communities as independent adults. In the last several years, lack of opportunities for adults with ASD after secondary school led the ASNL to focus attention on employment programming. The organization currently has several employment focused programs which include:

1. *Transitions*, a program focused on identifying the strengths and interests of participants and providing them with a year-long exposure to community volunteer involvement and employment learning experiences, such as interview preparation (ASNL Website, 2018);
2. *Employment Works (Worktopia)*, a program funded by the Sinneve Family Foundation and Autism Speaks Canada. As a partner, ASNL delivers a portion of the Worktopia programming directed at providing high school age participants an opportunity to develop social, communication and job skills in community and workplace settings (Worktopia Website, 2018);
3. *STEP (Students Transitioning into Employment Program)*, is a program designed for high school students to participate in career development activities and exploration (ASNL Website, 2018); and,
4. *Ready, Willing, and Able (RWA)*, is a national program run in partnership with the Canadian Association for Community Living (CACL) and Canadian Autism Spectrum Disorders Alliance (CASDA). RWA is designed to increase the labour

force participation of people with intellectual disabilities and ASD (RWA Website, 2018).

Discussions internally with staff in these four employment programs revealed that many participants had various skills and interests in creating *their own* enterprises, but lacked the knowledge, experience, or confidence to move forward with a venture (D. Vey, ASNL program coordinator, Personal communication, June 28, 2016). These conversations led to questions about the effectiveness of self-employment to address the economic disadvantage and social isolation felt by many individuals with ASD. The conversations focused on what models for business development there are currently; what have been the result; and, could a self-employment development program be a possibility to positively address some of the employment issues experienced in the ASD community?

## **1.5 Organization of Report**

This section will briefly detail the different sections of the report. These include the Literature Review, Methodology and Methods, Findings, Discussion and Analysis, Recommendations, and Conclusion.

The literature review lays the foundation for the report by grounding the research questions in the body of knowledge established by experts in the fields of ASD, disability, and entrepreneurship. The specific topic of individuals with ASD and self-employment has rarely been explored, but there is considerable research on the benefits of employment for people with ASD, the goals of self-employment for people with disabilities, and the need for avenues for people with disabilities to alleviate the economic disadvantage and social isolation they often face.

The report has focused on the development of a qualitative analysis to understand the motivations of individuals with ASD and their support network to look at self-employment opportunities. It focused on people who have started organizations or work for organizations dedicated to self-employment development programs. The methods employed included interviews with people with ASD, program developers, and coordinators. A survey was also conducted to get a broader understanding of motivations, challenges, and goals of the individuals interested in starting their own business. Further, an environmental scan of entrepreneurial start-up and self-employment programs for people with ASD was completed to understand what type of models currently exist throughout North America.

The findings section includes narratives from each of the stakeholders interviewed. It also includes an analysis of the survey which was distributed throughout the province. The discussion and analysis section bring out several of the themes which came out of the findings section. The recommendations section includes several options for the ASNL to consider as they look to

possibly create self-employment development programming opportunities for people with ASD. The conclusion section will bring together all the evidence gathered and discuss the appropriateness of self-employment as a viable alternative to traditional employment opportunities for people with ASD.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This project relied on a variety of literary and scholarly sources to speak to the research questions proposed. While there are a limited number of scholarly resources specifically dedicated to entrepreneurship for those on the autism spectrum, there is a considerable amount of scholarly study and data on topics that will be beneficial to the themes of ASD and entrepreneurship; specifically, employment issues related to individuals with ASD. Research related to supports for adults with ASD is under-developed (Nicholas, Hodgetts, Zwaigenbaum, Smith, Shattuck, Parr, Conlon, Germani, Mitchell, Sacrey, and Stothers, 2017). Parsons (2015, p. 397) states that adults with ASD are significantly under-represented in research on educational interventions and support, "...such that little is known about their views and experiences of schooling and how this prepared them for adult life." She conducted a study in which she interviewed 55 adults with ASD. She found that the respondent's least satisfactory life situation was their employment levels. A third of respondents were not currently in any educational institution, employed, or receiving any training; 15 per cent were working full time and received some support, and 25 per cent were working full-time without any support (p. 415).

This project represents an opportunity to increase the amount of knowledge related to self-employment opportunities, and the potential benefits and challenges. The literature review focused on the transition to adulthood for individuals with ASD, the benefits of employment, and an understanding of entrepreneurship and self-employment. Section 2.2 focuses on the struggles that individuals with ASD face as they transition to adulthood and the difficult time they often face finding employment and living independently; Section 2.3 discusses the benefits that individuals often receive when they are employed and how this might relieve the isolation often felt by individuals with ASD; and Section 2.4 seeks to define entrepreneurship and the benefits and struggles people face when becoming self-employed. This section will help answer the secondary questions related to what self-employment may look like for an individual.

### **2.2 Transition to Adulthood**

In 2015, a team of researchers from Drexel University, the AJ Drexel Autism Institute in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, released the National Autism Indicators Report on Transition into

Young Adulthood for people with autism. The research team, led by Program Director, Dr. Paul Shattuck, determined that young adults with ASD have a difficult time transitioning into young adulthood on almost all outcomes, including working, living independently, socializing and participating in the community (Roux et al, 2015, p. 8). The difficulties with transitioning are exasperated by youth stepping off what the research team describe as a “services cliff”, as many programs and supports end after high school. This is an issue experienced by many individuals within the ASD community in many jurisdictions (S. Crocker, ASNL Executive Director, personal communication, July 28, 2016). Employed individuals often use their earning ability, the type of work they do, frequency of employment, and long-term work, as indicators of success (Schall, Wehman, McDonough, 2012, p.194).

Schall, Wehman, McDonough (2012, p.195) argue that vocational capacity, employment, and the opportunity to advance in a career is a major part of success in society. “The transition to adulthood is both an exciting and challenging time for youth with ASD and their families. Although this period is critical for all individuals, for people with autism the development of appropriate supports during the transition process is crucial.” They further state that it is important to identify the appropriate strategies and supports for the individual that will assist the individual in being successful and achieving their desired outcomes.

The transition from childhood to adulthood is often difficult for individuals with ASD, as well as their families and caregivers. Parents of youth with an ASD diagnosis need information about employment prospects and often turn to medical providers for anticipatory guidance regarding the transition to adulthood (Roux, Shattuck, Cooper, Anderson, Wagner, and Narendorf, 2013). Graetz (2010, p. 44) described this period as a particularly anxious time for parents and caregivers as the individual with ASD made the transition from school to the community and became more dependent upon the services of outside agencies. As more individuals are diagnosed with ASD, and as this population ages, interventions that promote independent responding and subsequently lessen the need for support from others are urgently needed (Hume, Loftin, and Lantz, 2009).

Roux et al., (2013, Wei, Wagner, Hudson, Yu, Shattuck, 2015, p. 937) found that young adults with ASD had consistently poorer outcomes relative to other disability groups. They argued this suggests that this population is experiencing difficulty in successfully transitioning to employment in the first years after high school, and this likely results in an increased financial burden for continued dependent support.

Howling (2013, p. 898) was surprised by the low rates of employment outcomes for individuals with ASD in comparison with other groups of individuals with disabilities in the United States; her research stated that around 80% of the individuals in groups with speech and language impairments, learning difficulties, had achieved some form of employment since leaving high school, which is significantly higher than individuals with ASD. Holwerda, van der Klink, de Boer,

Groothoff, Brouwer (2013, p. 2754) stated that, "...individuals with ASD experience impairments in social and communicative skills that limit their work functioning, leading to underutilization of skills and a limited range of work experiences." They agreed with the prevailing research that individuals with ASD are unemployed and underemployed more often and worked far fewer hours than most of the other disability groups.

There are a broad range of individual supports that individuals with ASD need as they work to obtain and maintain competitive employment (Wehman, Brooke, Brooke, Ham, Schall, McDonough, Lau, Seward, Avellone, 2016). These include but are not limited to; discovery and career development, career search, job interview preparation, disability disclosure, transportation planning and training, customizing jobs, job tasks, and workplace environments, instructional support, designing compensatory strategies, and co-worker education (Wehman et al. 2016). These types of support would be important for individuals with ASD as they could potentially work toward self-employment opportunities.

### **2.3 General Benefits of Employment**

A review of the literature points to a consensus amongst researchers that employment can create an improved living situation for those with autism. Employment enables those with disabilities to become self-sufficient and creates an opportunity to improve one's quality of life (Hendricks, 2009, p. 131). The client, ASNL, currently has four employment programs, each with differing criteria including age and employment readiness. Through these and other program offerings, staff have also begun to identify individuals with interest in creating self-employment opportunities for themselves.

Roux et al, (2013, p. 931) describe employment as a socially normative activity that often occupies much of our adult lives and is a key component of passage into adulthood; in addition to positive economic outcomes, it is also linked to social well-being, positive health outcomes, and is a factor in quality of life. Chen, Leader, Sung, and Leahy (2015, p. 16) state that being employed involves integrating into a social network, contributing to society, making choices and decisions, being part of a society. This speaks to the ability for employment to be a source of relief from economic and social isolation. "Successful employment increases an individual's social status and financial independence and maintains a person's physical and psychological health, thereby improving his/her quality of life," (Chen et al., 2015, p. 16). While it is a widely held belief that individuals with ASD are not affected by loneliness and can be anti-social, Mazurek (2014, p. 229) studied the associations between loneliness and well-being amongst the ASD population. The primary finding was that loneliness was significantly correlated with increased depression and anxiety, and decreased life satisfaction and self-esteem. It is possible that an important outcome of employment would be more social interaction and less loneliness for an individual.

Employment opportunities have positive effects on the cognitive abilities of individuals with ASD which can lead to improvements in their lives both financially and socially. The opportunities to use their skills in the complex environments created by being employed have positive effects on an individual's executive functioning. Garcia-Villamizar and Hughes (2007) conducted a study of supported employment opportunities of individuals with ASD and the effects of these programs on individual cognition. They concluded that individuals in supported employment programs "showed significantly greater improvement in several non-vocational outcomes," (Garcia-Villamizar & Hughes, 2007, p. 147). This increase in an individual's cognitive function allows them to grow skills which they can then transfer to other areas of their lives outside of the workplace where they were molded.

## **2.4 Entrepreneurship**

A review of relevant literature revealed a wealth of debate on the definition of entrepreneur. Perron (2003) conducted a review of hundreds of definitions used by practitioners on the internet. There was no agreement on a standard definition of entrepreneurship and hundreds of individuals and organizations have a variety of definitions. Several scholars do attempt to provide a succinct definition for entrepreneurship and qualify their description by saying the concept is a broad and complicated one. Kirby (2004) said that the term entrepreneur is often connected to small business and the concepts of owner-management and self-employment (p. 174). "The term is much broader than these concepts would suggest. Not all owner-managers are entrepreneurs, nor are all small businesses entrepreneurial and not all large businesses are un-enterprising." Uzunidis, Boutillier, and Leperche (2014) define entrepreneurship as having two facets – innovation and self-employment. They describe entrepreneurship as a means to innovate and execute new combinations in the means of production to move the economy forward; and as a way for people to start a business to address unemployment (p.1).

Markantoni, Strijker, and Koster (2014) argue that while there are economic benefits to starting a small enterprise, this motive is often secondary to other opportunities people are looking for when creating small side businesses. They were studying the motives for starting small side activities or small home-based businesses for farmers and non-farmers in the Netherlands. They state that when starting a home-based business, "...the aim is principally to generate a main source of income for the household or to supplement the main income to some degree." They go on to list a variety of other motives and opportunities that people tend to look for when starting a small business, these include; personal satisfaction, a flexible lifestyle, the effective use of personal time, achieving a desired quality of life, and the need for a level of independence (p. 727). They argue that if the business is the primary income source, the economic benefit is primarily the main goal, but if there are other motivations, the economic goals – while beneficial – are often secondary (Markantoni, Strijker, and Koster, 2014). This speaks to those with ASD

that are interested in self-employment, as both the economic and non-economic goals are often of importance to the individual and their support networks.

Headd (2003) argues failure and success in entrepreneurial activity is subjective, and the definition of such terms is often belied by the definition of closure. He tries to redefine success by distinguishing between closure and failure. Headd said, “Focusing on closure has significance because we seek to challenge the widely held but often unsubstantiated belief that new firm closure rates are high and that a closure is a negative outcome” (p. 51). He stated that only one-third of businesses in the United States close because of lack of success by the owners. Headd stated that the factors leading to success often included size and indicators such as having employees, a good amount of starting capital, and an educated owner; the factors leading to failure or closure often included owners being young and a lack of start-up capital (p. 59). This understanding of success and failure is important for any individual starting a business, including those with ASD. As Headd states, an educated well-informed business owner is generally a factor which can help the self-employed individual find success. Start-up support from business development experts is very important to ensuring sustainable self-employment opportunities.

According to Bowan, Morara, and Mureithi (2009) starting and operating a small business includes the possibility of success as well as failure. They state that the main challenges faced often include competition, insecurity, lack of working capital, and improper financing. The size of the business is also often a challenge as one simple management mistake could hurt the business as there is often no opportunity to learn from past mistakes (Bowan, Morara, and Mureithi, 2009). Farsi and Toghraee (2014) list a variety of challenges for small businesses, such as managerial and human resources, research and development, technologies, national policy and regulatory environment, and lack of market research. Luke, Verreynne, and Kearins (2015) state that there are both financial and non-financial opportunities and benefits to becoming an entrepreneur. From a non-financial perspective, these benefits include increased independence, autonomy, employment, and increased standards of living. From a financial perspective there is possibility for increased remuneration, profits, and return on investment (ROI). These types of non-financial benefits have been identified by individuals with ASD as part of the motivation for their interest in creating self-employment opportunities for themselves.

St-Jean and Audet (2009) state that there is a positive role for mentorship from third parties in the development of small businesses. In a study of learning through mentoring, the benefits to entrepreneurs identified included an increase in management knowledge and skills, improved vision for the business venture, identifying new opportunities, a greater sense of self-efficacy, validation of one’s entrepreneurial self-image, and a lowered sense of solitude (p. 119). McKevitt and Marshall (2015) said that mentors often provide both direct and indirect support to the entrepreneur, and this reduces uncertainty for the new business start-up owner and helps increase the entity’s legitimacy (p. 263). Audet and Coutert (2012) argue that business coaching

and mentorship have a vital role to play in the business start-up process, and those entrepreneurs that remain isolated risk lacking the tools and support necessary to create and sustain a successful business (p. 515). The business mentor provides an important role for an individual looking at self-employment to support their business development needs. In dealing with individuals with ASD that have an interest in self-employment the organizations that support them in their diagnosis often do not have the skills in business development, and so they must work with third parties that work with the development of small businesses.

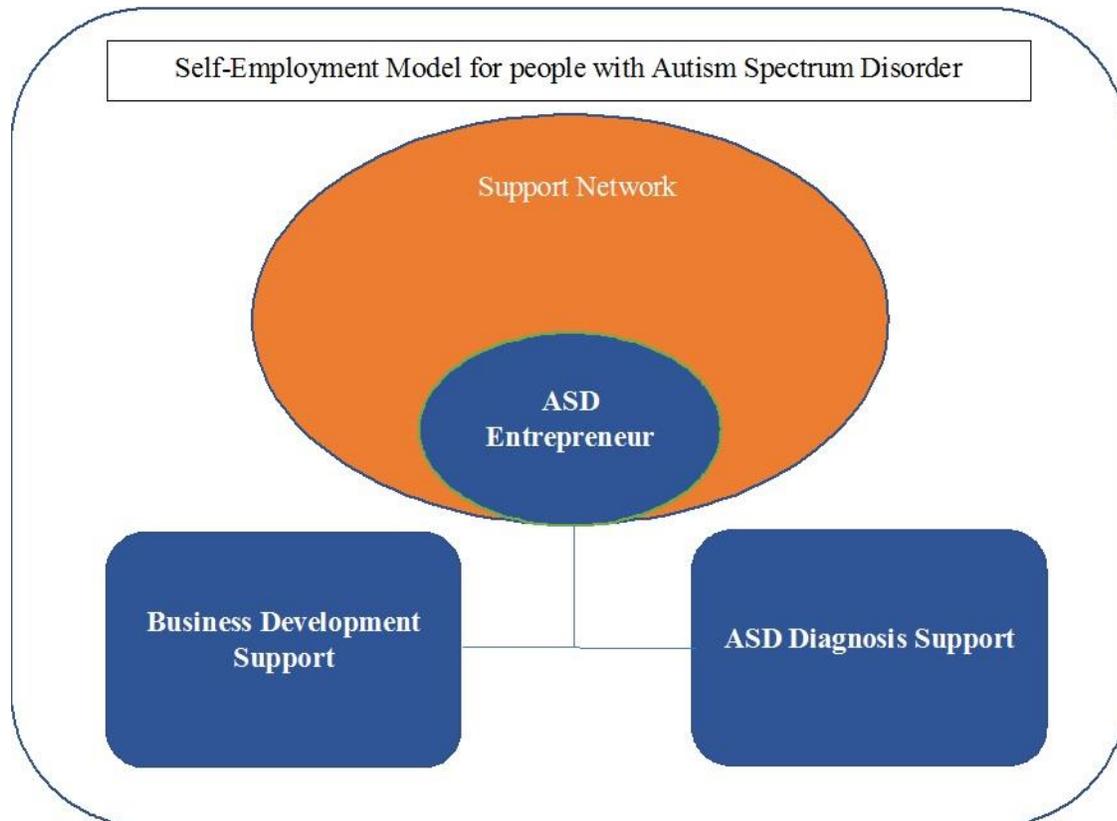
## **2.5 Conceptual Framework**

This project seeks to determine if a self-employment program is an adequate vehicle to create greater opportunities for economic inclusion of those with ASD. A self-employed individual is defined as someone, “earning income directly from one’s own business, trade, or profession rather than as a specified salary or wages from an employer,” (Merriam-Webster Website, 2017). The Canadian Revenue Agency (CRA) determines an individual is self-employed if they are engaged to carry out business in their own account (CRA, 2016 p. 6). Uzunidis, Boutillier, and Leperche (2014) define entrepreneurship in one way as a means for people to start a business to address unemployment (p.1).

The conceptual framework for this project centers on an exploration of self-employment opportunities for people with ASD by learning from both people that have started their own self-employment opportunity and those that are engaged with and helping others focus on self-employment. The research data came from a literature review, interviews, survey and environmental scan, and has been used to make a series of recommendations to the clients which will seek to address the challenges, benefits, and opportunities for those interested in self-employment opportunities. A qualitative analysis of the data was utilized throughout the project to answer the primary research questions posed; is self-employment a viable option for people with ASD, and if so, can the client create a program that is effective and inclusive for people with ASD?

The figure below (Figure 1.) represents a possible self-employment model for people with ASD. At the center is the business owner with ASD surrounded by their support network – family, friends, caregivers, support workers, etc. Connected to the entrepreneur and working in tandem are the business development supports and the people that support the person with their ASD diagnosis. This model is a result of preliminary research of already established programs. The information was bolstered through interviews with Autism Nova Scotia and Enactus Calgary, and individuals with ASD that are interested becoming self-employed and those that have achieved self-employment success in the past.

**Figure 1: Self-employment Model for People with Autism Spectrum Disorder**



The challenges faced by individuals with ASD are immense and multi-faceted. Devlin and Pothier (2006) argue that while most North Americans enjoy a high-standard of living and quality of life as compared to worldwide measurements, those with disabilities do not always share in the good life or are not adequately included; they consistently face recurring coercion, marginalization, and social exclusion (p. 1).

In discussion with the project client it was determined most individuals they deal with that would be interested in a self-employment program would be people working for themselves in small businesses focused on their interests and skills, such as bakers or artisans (D. Vey, ASNL Program Coordinator, personal communication, December 15, 2016). Employment, including self-employment, offers an opportunity to create a stronger society by giving individuals with ASD an opportunity to be on an equal level with their peers not living with a disability.

## **3.0 Methodology and Methods**

This project relied heavily on qualitative research methods to meet the project objectives and answer the primary research questions and subsequent secondary questions. The following section details the methodology and methods used in this project. The methods employed included: a literature search, surveys, interviews with individuals with ASD, interviews with organizations focusing on self-employment, and an environmental scan. Each was used to determine the validity of self-employment programs for people with ASD and make recommendations for the possible creation of a self-employment program for people with ASD.

### **3.1 Methodology**

The methodology for this project includes a thematic analysis derived from a qualitative study of data presented in interviews, a survey, and an environmental scan. The intention was to explore the current interest amongst the ASD community – individuals affected by ASD, their families and caregivers, and service providers – for self-employment development options for individuals and compare various self-employment programs for people with ASD throughout North America. The information gathered is designed to provide the client with valuable information and a set of recommendations on self-employment development opportunities for people with ASD.

The client completed a needs-assessment in 2015 which provided valuable information about needs for the ASD community in Newfoundland and Labrador. One of the overarching themes that was discovered by the researchers in that study was that the challenges of raising an individual with ASD increased dramatically when the individual transitioned from childhood to adulthood. (Audus, Harris-Walsh, Wells, Murphy, 2016, p. 7).

### **3.2 Methods**

The research questions were answered by an examination of relevant literature on ASD, entrepreneurship and employment, a study of business development programs, and a profiling of current and potential entrepreneurs who have ASD and their supporters. The methods employed included:

- Key Informant Interviews with individuals with ASD: profiling current and potential autism entrepreneurs in Newfoundland and Labrador, across Canada, and the United States. A total of five individuals were interviewed.
- Key Informant Interviews with program coordinators: profiling self-employment development programs across Canada, and the United States. A total of three individuals were interviewed.

- Survey: designed to gather insight from individuals with ASD and their support networks on their interest and motivations in pursuing self-employment opportunities. Five individuals completed the survey.
- Environmental Scan: detailing, inventorying, and evaluating entrepreneurship programs and models provincially, regionally, nationally, and internationally that are designed for individuals with ASD and other exceptionalities. Seventeen organizations were investigated and profiled in the environmental scan.

### **3.2.1 LITERATURE REVIEW**

The researcher used a variety of key terms for the literature review, including; autism and employment, autism and entrepreneurship, employment and disability, etc. The researcher has access to a variety of databases with subscriptions to thousands of academic journals and educational resources (Memorial University Libraries, 2018, UVic Libraries, 2018). As a registered student of the University of Victoria and an alumnus of Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador (MUN) the researcher has access to the library system of both educational institutions

Several academic sources were used in the literature review for this project proposal. Those focused on ASD included (amongst others): Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders, Autism – The International Journal of Research and Practice, Autonomy – the Critical Journal of Interdisciplinary Autism Studies, Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities. Those focused on developmental disabilities include (amongst others); Journal of Intellectual Disability Research, Journal of Developmental Disabilities, Journal of Disability Policy Studies, Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation, Journal of Intellectual and Development Disability. Those focused on entrepreneurship included (amongst others): Journal of Innovation and Entrepreneurship, Technology Innovation Management Review, American Journal of Entrepreneurship, International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior and Research, Rehabilitation Counselling Bulletin.

### **3.2.2 KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS**

Key informant interviews were utilized as data collection tools to study examples of entrepreneurship occurring locally, provincially, nationally, and internationally.

1. Five key informant interviews with existing and potential entrepreneurs were conducted. These interviews helped form a picture of the needs of entrepreneurs with ASD. The researcher interviewed these individuals by telephone. These key informant interviews included those that have shown interest in starting enterprises and becoming self-employed, and those that have started their own enterprise. Program staff of the

client organization identified several individuals in its programming offerings that have expressed an interest in starting their own business.

2. The researcher interviewed three individuals representing three organizations in other regions that have created business development programs targeted towards individuals with autism and other neurodevelopmental disabilities. These three individuals included a representative of a self-employment development organization in the United States; a program coordinator for a self-employment program; and a student coordinator for a self-employment program. Each of the individuals was interviewed to learn more about the program models, the organization's motivation in starting these programs, the success and failures, and benefits and challenges each organization has faced in developing the programs.

### **3.2.3 SURVEY**

Five people responded to the survey which was created to reach a broad audience across Newfoundland and Labrador. The ASNL is situated in three regional offices outside of the St. John's area. The survey was designed to reach a larger audience and create further data towards attitudes and experiences of people with autism and their families and caregivers as they went through the process of creating a business and those potentially interested in starting a business. The survey was distributed to the membership of the ASNL. The researcher worked with the client to identify the appropriate demographic of individuals the survey should be distributed to. This included individuals with ASD enrolled in employment and pre-employment programs, and the families of individuals with ASD. This approach was chosen because it provided a dedicated audience that the client had regular communication with through notices, bulletins, and programming. While the client does have a large membership, it does not include all individuals with ASD in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, and there could be many people with interest in self-employment opportunities that could have been missed during survey distribution.

### **3.2.4 ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN**

The project also included an environmental scan of various business support programs designed for individuals with various disabilities across Canada and the United States. An environmental scan is, "the acquisition and use of information about events, trends and relationships in an organization's external environment, the knowledge of which would assist management in planning the organization's future course of action" (Choo, 2001, Aguilar, 1967, Choo and Auster, 1993). A total of ten organizations which run self-employment programs for people with ASD were reviewed, along with another seven organizations which provide self-employment programs for all groups of interested individuals.

This scan included an analysis of programs in several jurisdictions and will be used to create an inventory. It includes information related to the size and scope of each, contact information and objectives. The intention of the environmental scan was to further investigate various self-employment development programs and supports available to individuals.

### **3.3 Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis is a method described by Braun, Clarke and Terry (2015, p. 95), "...for identifying, analyzing and interpreting patterned meanings or 'themes' in qualitative data." This project utilized a thematic analysis of the qualitative data gathered through interviews, surveys, an extensive literature review, and an environmental scan (Choo, 2001) of business programs and supports. The analysis will search for themes and patterns in the data which will be utilized to speak to the main research question, and subsequent secondary questions.

### **3.4 Project Limitations and Delimitations**

The researcher identified some limitations and delimitations to this project. To begin, there was potential for the researcher's work to be influenced by the participant observer effect. While a researcher is undertaking data collection he needs to account for how his biases can influence the observation, analysis and interpretation of the data (Kawulich, 2005). Those biases could affect the interpretation and analysis of the data. As a former employee of the ASNL, the researcher had been an advocate for increased programs and services for individuals with ASD. While this is potentially a limitation, the researcher's experience working with the client provided him with valuable knowledge and expertise in the ASD community. The researcher attempted to maintain an academic distance with this project. While not directly involved with client operations at the organization while employed there, the researcher's regular work did have influence and impact on the work being conducted by programming staff.

The researcher had hoped to obtain between 20 and 25 survey responses. Five responses were collected from partners and caregivers and individuals with ASD. This limited the usefulness of the survey in providing more context to develop comprehensive recommendations. The information gathered from the surveys was useful, but a greater number of survey responses would have provided more insight.

The researcher spoke to one of the staff members at the ASNL that had assisted with connecting him to individuals with ASD and dispersing the survey. Treshana Gosse is the Regional Assistant Manager for the ASNL's Eastern Regional Office located in Clarendville, NL. Gosse has worked for the ASNL for seven years and is also the mother of a young child with ASD. She offered her insight on the lack of uptake on the surveys and attributed it to several reasons, including the high number of requests that families sometimes get in terms of surveys, questionnaires, and studies; and sometimes people fail to see the direct benefits to their child or

themselves and they simply do not take part. (T. Gosse, ASNL Regional Assistant Manager, personal communication, Jan 26, 2018).

## 4.0 Findings

### 4.1 Introduction

The following section will detail the results of each individual stakeholder interview, the employment program stakeholder interviews, the survey responses, and the results of the environmental scan. The interviews and surveys followed the structure provided by the interview questions. The environmental scan focused on organizations that are involved in self-employment development opportunities for people with ASD and also included updated information gathered through a previous RWA scan conducted by Eleanor Dawson (2016) in St. John's, NL in 2016 (D. Vey, ASNL Program Coordinator, personal communication, December 15, 2016). This scan was completed in 2016 for a report commissioned by RWA in partnership with the YMCA of Newfoundland and Labrador. The report completed by Dawson (2016) included a review of entrepreneurial and self-employment programs that exist in the province and was commissioned by RWA and the YMCA of Newfoundland and Labrador (YMCA NL, 2016)

### 4.2 Individual Stakeholder Interviews

The following section details five interviews conducted with individuals with ASD. Each individual was identified as either someone that is interested in self-employment opportunities or someone that has created an opportunity themselves. The interviews focused on their motivations, job experience, and goals. The purpose was to understand the motivations of everyone, their knowledge of how to start a small enterprise and to gauge possible interest in a self-employment program. The names of the individuals were changed to protect their identity.

*Adam* has held several jobs, the most recent of which for almost five years. Employed first in the bakery department at a local grocery store and then as kitchen support and baker for a local café, he enjoys creating baked goods.

*Bernard* has worked short-term administrative jobs for a few companies in his hometown in southern Newfoundland in the past. With training in this field and a skill set that matches his interests, Bernard noted in our interview he had the idea of starting up his own business and becoming self-employed. The idea is a business of one person, himself; whereby he offers a service to perform necessary administrative work for companies that may not have the resources to hire someone to complete those tasks.

**Cyril** has been employed for several years in a custodial capacity with an organization in St. John's. This has been his first job and he is thriving; he has taken on a leadership role. He said he has dreamed of becoming his own boss and working for himself someday. He would like to create a sensory friendly café. This will benefit people with sensory processing issues, which many people with an ASD diagnosis struggle with.

**Donald** has gained a little employment experience in his young life. He has worked in a coffee shop and has worked for an organization as part of a work placement. Each of these positions has given him several hours of work experience a week, but he expressed during the interview he believes some day he would be interested in exploring the idea of starting a small business in his hometown in eastern Newfoundland.

**Elise** is an adult living with an ASD diagnosis and has spent her career working in the IT field as an independent consultant. When working on bigger projects she often hired people to work with her to complete the contracts. She noted during the interview that she worked better when she hired other individuals with ASD. This was attributed to what she described as, "...a more highly developed internal understanding of technology." She stated these individuals to be more conscientious of their work. There was an innate understanding of their challenges and they were able to work better together. Elise described the decision to create a non-profit organization that hired people with ASD to complete jobs and hopefully someday be able to offer more training opportunities to the individuals. The aim was to hire individuals that otherwise have a hard time finding employment but can still manage to do work independently.

The following section flows from the interview questions posed to each of the five individuals. The interview questions are referred to in the following section and listed in Appendix 2.

#### **4.2.1 INDIVIDUAL STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEW RESPONSES**

*Have you started your own enterprise, or are you interested in starting your own enterprise?  
What is the enterprise?*

1. Adam is interested in starting a business. He would like to do catering and then open a bakery.
2. Bernard noted during the interview he has contemplated starting a business whereby he would work with local companies in his home region to help them with their office work. This would include extra office work the companies would require including data entry, pay roll support, or typing of different correspondence.
3. Cyril has not started his own business but is interested in starting a sensory free café - a place where people and go "chill-out" out and have coffee like a normal cafe but with low music and sound cancelling devises available.

4. Donald has not started his own business, but he described thinking about starting up a grocery store in his hometown. "There really isn't one. So, I thought hey, that's an opportunity."
5. Elise described her experience working in the IT field as mostly working as an independent consultant but sometimes she would hire people to work on bigger projects under her. She said she worked better with people with ASD than neurotypical people and thought that to, "...give up on other types of people, cause the autistic people worked better." So eventually she created a non-profit program that hired people with ASD to do work.

*How long have you been thinking about working for yourself? How many hours a day do you work? Week?*

1. Adam stated he was unsure of the hours it would take to work at his business to make it successful.
2. Bernard told the researcher he has been thinking about starting a company for about a year. Last year he worked briefly with a local company that needed their inventory system updated. The company contacted him after a referral. He said he has been encouraged to advertise himself as someone that can go in and work with different companies to help them with their office work. He said he would like to be able to work eight-hour days, Monday to Friday.
3. Cyril indicated he has been thinking about working for himself for awhile. If he did create a business, he said he would probably work most of the hours while the business was opened until it was established, and he has things settled down.
4. Donald has not started a business yet.
5. Elise has worked as an IT consultant for several years and was running the non-profit program for about five years. She said initially she was usually working with one or two people, and then they made it into a non-profit to help more people.

*Why did you start your own enterprise, or want to start your own enterprise?*

1. Adam would like to start a bakery because he likes seeing people's reaction to his work.
2. Bernard would like to work for himself so that he could work at his own pace. He likes the flexibility of being able to work his own schedule throughout the day.
3. Cyril would like to start his own enterprise to show that he can do more than just what he is doing now. "It's always been a dream of mine to be my own boss and stuff."
4. Donald described interest in starting his own business because he sees it as an interesting thing to do, to be his own boss and to make decisions with the business. "And I could make some money which is good. But it would also be a lot of work which would be cool to do."
5. Elise said she started her program because other people had a really hard time getting any job and she was offering a way for people to be successful and put something in their resume. "I think it was just helpful as a stepping stone for what they could do next."

*Have you had a job(s) before working for someone else? How long were you there?*

1. Adam worked in the bakery department of a grocery store for several years and as a kitchen helper in a local café.
2. Bernard has done extra work for companies that he described as, "...that they had lying around." He had a job several years ago inputting old files into a computer system for a company.
3. Cyril has only had one paid employment experience, his current job as a custodian. He has been in the role for about four years. He has done volunteer work in the past, such as volunteering for programs at the book store where his mother works.
4. Donald has worked in a coffee shop in the past and has worked with a community organization for six months, two hours a day as a custodian.

*Did anyone help you start your enterprise? Is anyone helping you start? Are you still receiving support?*

1. Adam has not started his business yet but is receiving help from an employment counsellor with an organization he receives support from.
2. Bernard is not currently receiving any support to start this enterprise. He is doing some things on his own with encouragement from other people.
3. Cyril has not started the business yet and it is just an idea, he is not focused on it right now.
4. Donald has not started working on developing the business yet and has not been working with anyone to cultivate the idea. He has discussed it with his family and they have suggested that he think about it more before looking at starting the process to open a grocery store.

*What has been the hardest part about working for yourself? What is the hardest part in starting a business?*

1. Adam described the hardest parts of working for himself would be logistical - figuring out the hours of operation, location, etc.
2. Bernard said during the interview the hardest part of starting a business would be finding clients.
3. Cyril said the finances of the business would be the hardest part for him. "I'm not 100% good at money management myself."
4. Donald said the hardest part would be understanding where to set up the business and getting the right amount of cash flow to keep it up and running.
5. Elise described networking is one of the hardest parts about working for yourself. "All of life in the work world involves a certain amount of selling and networking and a lot of us can't do that really at all, or just so little we're bad at it. You could put it in terms of social skills, I don't

really like that word, maybe its just a way of thinking that makes it impossible to care about networking in the way other people do.”

*What have been the best parts about working for yourself?*

1. Adam was unsure of the best parts of working for himself.
2. Bernard defined flexibility as one of the best parts about potentially working for himself. “You'd be able to have your own hours.” Working from home could also potentially be a benefit according to Bernard. “Like you won't have to worry about going out in the cold weather and if you wanted to take a break at any time of day to do something else for an hour you could do that as well.”
3. Cyril said the best part of starting his own business would be the flexibility to making his own hours and be in total control of the operation.
4. Donald said the best part would be able to anything he wanted in the business and having control of the operations.
5. Elise said people with ASD can often get overwhelmed and allowing people to take unplanned breaks is very important. Having your own business offers flexibility.

*What other types of help would you like while you start or operate your small business?*

1. Bernard would like extra support in helping connect him to potential clients - someone to mention it to the different employers to let them know about this new small business starting up.
2. Cyril expressed he would like to have someone, a partner, help with the finances of the business.
4. Donald said he would like further assistance in getting a building set up and finding stuff to sell at the business, like food or other things.
5. Elise stated in the interview it would be helpful to have somebody vouch for the skills and expertise of the individual. “For those people having somebody to vouch for those skills and translating to other people to be part of the network. I never have this myself but what would be awesome if I had like an agent kind of like rockstars have an agent or publishers or whatever who goes around and says Elise's awesome she can do so much, having somebody else say that to potential clients is so much more powerful than me saying that.” She said she believes a lot of autistic people have a similar experience where they can do a lot of things but are not good communicating that. Elsie also said individuals with ASD do not always know how to describe the accommodations they may need in the workplace or on a job.

#### **4.2.6 SUMMARY OF INDIVIDUAL STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEW FINDINGS**

The preceding section detailed the information gathered from the interview process with a selection of individuals that have started or are interested in starting their own business to

become self-employed. A total of five individuals were interviewed, each providing a summary of their employment experiences and motivations for potentially starting their own business. The questions focused on the individual's employment experience, motivations for starting their own enterprise and what type of supports they would like to see in a self-employment program.

Several themes emerged from the interviews including the lack of opportunities to find sustainable employment, and the lack of knowledge and adequate supports available to help the individuals start their own business. Everyone interviewed has faced challenges in their employment experiences in maintaining long-term employment and are interested in learning more about other opportunities that might exist. All the individuals had discussed their business ideas with friends or family. Several of the interview subjects had also discussed the potential for self-employment with career counsellors and have an interest in learning more about how to engage further on these opportunities. Due to challenges with social interaction, several of the individuals expressed a need for support from personnel or case workers to further investigate these opportunities, or once they have established a business to support them in various business functions such as advertising and networking.

### **4.3 Employment program stakeholder interviews**

The following section details three interviews conducted with stakeholders involved in the creation and operation of programs dedicated to self-employment opportunities for people with ASD. Each program has been in operation at least one year and has had success in supporting individuals create self-employment opportunities. The purpose of the interviews was to investigate the successes and failures of a variety of organizations that have developed self-employment programs for a chronically underemployed segment of the population. The researcher spoke to a representative of **Autism Nova Scotia** on their partnership with Enactus St. Mary's on the Autism Works Entrepreneurship program; a representative of **Enactus Calgary** from the University of Calgary on the Autism Works Entrepreneurship program in that city; and a representative for **Picasso Einstein**, a self-employment program for people with ASD and other disabilities based in Florida.

The following section flows from the interview questions posed to each of the three individuals. The interview questions are referred to in the following section and listed in Appendix 3. The names of individuals were changed to protect their identities.

### 4.3.1 EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEW RESPONSES

*Why did your organization start offering this type of support?*

#### ***Autism Nova Scotia***

Grant a representative for Autism Nova Scotia explained during this interview that the Autism Works Entrepreneurship program works in partnership with Enactus St. Mary's (Enactus St. Mary's Website, 2018). He believes that self-employment is a very viable option for job seekers and one which is not always explored. "Why is it that autistic job seekers can't start their own business and why do we have kind of a tendency to think that inclusive employment is the only option when in fact it's not?" Grant stated that if people want to have labour market participation at the same rate as the general population then entrepreneurship needs to be a part of that conversation and one of the options that are supported.

The one size-fits-all approach for neurotypical individuals does not always work for individuals with ASD. Grant acknowledges there are a lot of great programs out there designed to support individuals that want to start a business, and there are government initiatives and organizations designed to incubate businesses. But Autism Nova Scotia in partnership with Enactus St. Mary's decided to focus on creating a program with individualized supports to better support the diverse nature of challenges faced by individuals with ASD. "It's all a variable thing so one of the tricky things is you can't standardize the program in the sense where it's a rinse and repeat kind of thing, where it is the same approach for everybody. And sometimes that's a bit of a challenge to individualize it so that it's relevant and effective for each person," said Grant.

Enactus St. Mary's has been working with Autism Nova Scotia to bring their self-employment framework to other universities across the country in an effort to franchise their model (Enactus St. Mary's Website, 2018).

#### ***Enactus Calgary***

One of the other Enactus groups to focus on self-employment for people with ASD is the Enactus group at the University of Calgary. The program was started there as a response to an identified gap in services for people with ASD that may be interested in starting an enterprise for themselves and becoming self-employed, according to Francis, the Enactus Calgary representative for the Autism Works Entrepreneurship program.

Much like the students at St Mary's University, the students in Calgary have partnered with Ready, Willing & Able on Autism Works Entrepreneurship. The program, "aims to assist entrepreneurs with autism in starting their own businesses." (Enactus Calgary Website, 2018).

The City of Calgary is described as a hub for people with ASD and other disability resources by Francis, “The entrepreneurs we work with have a lot of great ideas but they need that little bit of extra support in order to make those ideas a reality,” said Francis.

### ***Picasso Einstein***

Picasso Einstein started in Florida in 2011 with the mission of supporting individuals with developmental disabilities in obtaining meaningful employment by following their passions and creating self-employment opportunities (Picasso Einstein Website, 2018). The goal of the organization has been to expose individuals with ASD and their families and caregivers to the option of self-employment.

Picasso Einstein was started by a couple with experience working with individuals with developmental disabilities, they quickly understood that these families faced a similar problem - the lack of employment opportunities as the individuals with development disabilities aged. The couple – parents of two children with autism - understood their children were at-risk and would need a variety of supports as they aged. One of the founders also had experience developing social entrepreneurship educational opportunities for at-risk youth. Harold, a representative of Picasso Einstein, said the organization has focused heavily on what he described as the true catalyst of entrepreneurship - the interests and passions of the individual. Instead of trying to teach them specific business-related skills, initially a lot of time was focused on exploiting the skills they already had and converting those interest-based skills into money making opportunities. This eventually led to conversations on networking and marketing, advertising and communication, etc. The past professional experiences of the founders combined with the time spent teaching their own children about these opportunities led to a belief that this was something that many different families could avail of. This led to the creation of Picasso Einstein.

*Can you describe your business program offering?*

### ***Autism Nova Scotia***

Autism Nova Scotia, and Enactus St. Mary’s (through its *Autism Works Entrepreneurship* program), focuses on dual support for individuals interested in self-employment involved in the program. They provide both individualized ASD support and business development support. The disability support cannot provide the business development support because they are two very different fields of expertise, and conversely the business support cannot provide the disability support, according to Grant. He believes this division to be important to provide effective support for people. “Connecting entrepreneurs with the business development support is one thing, but we also make sure that they are getting support and accommodation with strategies put

in place because of their autism. It's kind of an important thing to have in tandem when providing support to entrepreneurs with autism.”

### ***Enactus Calgary***

In Calgary, once a potential participant has been identified, Enactus Calgary and Ready, Willing, & Able meet with the individual, and sometimes the parents or guardians, if they are not their own guardian. The purpose of these initial meetings is to determine the business idea and the type of support the individual may need. Sometimes grand ideas are the initial starting point and the team will work with the individual to create realistic expectations and help solidify the business ideas. They will then identify the supports needed and work with the individual and their support network of parents and/or caregivers and try to set the participant up for self-employment success.

Francis believes it is important for all involved to understand that the group is not available for the long term and the program is designed to provide the self-employed individual with the grounding they need to become successful. “The whole idea is that we're not supposed to be there in the long term, we're supposed to be there setting up a solid foundation which usually takes around 2 months.”

### ***Picasso Einstein***

Picasso Einstein has a variety of program offerings. Initially they started out by offering direct services to individuals with ASD, and individuals with other developmental disabilities as well. According to Harold, all individuals with disabilities deal with the same issues when it comes to employment.

When they began program development they quickly realized that while it was important to focus on the interests and passions as a basis for self-employment, they were often sending the individuals home to an environment that was not supportive of that conversation. “So, in a sense where parents were either more interested in getting a regular job for their kids or the parents had a real difficult time seeing self-employment as a viable option for employment,” said Harold.

*How long has this program been operating? How many enterprises have you helped?*

### ***Autism Nova Scotia***

When pressed about the successes they have achieved - since starting in 2016 - in creating self-employment opportunities for individuals, Grant is cautious to point out that outcomes are very individualized. Each self-employed individual is, “...going to have different outcomes and

different desires against benchmarks they want to hit so ultimately the outcome is to create meaningful employment opportunities, paid employment opportunities where they are actually generating income for themselves.” One important benchmark he believes all businesses should set is to become a viable business with a demand for customers.

They are not into creating make-work opportunities for individuals. He explains his point by giving the example of greeting cards. Traditionally this is a difficult market to break into because it is saturated with competitors. The program steers the individual away from trying to break into difficult-to-break-into markets. One of the outcomes of the program is to help the self-employed entrepreneur find their niche and find that market demand that fits their skill set and their value proposition. From that point, the rest of the outcomes are individualized. “The end goal is something that is meaningful and relevant to that person that is actual an employment first opportunity and not like a make work type of thing or something to keep them busy, this is their actual employment and I think this is an important distinction,” said Grant.

### ***Enactus Calgary***

The Enactus Calgary program has been in operation since January 2017. As of the writing of this report, Enactus Calgary was helping three entrepreneurs establish their small business (Enactus Calgary Website, 2018). For example, they have worked with an artist and decided early in the process that the individual would not be comfortable selling their work from an art gallery due to communication challenges. The team instead decided that creating an online art gallery would be a more suitable avenue for the individual to sell their art. The response has been positive, and they have been working on updating the artist’s website and creating more marketing tools for the individual.

### ***Picasso Einstein***

The program has been operating for seven years and according to Harold, Picasso Einstein has a 30-33% success rate in helping individuals in the program from start to business launch and continued self-employment. One of those individuals that has been successful – and profiled by Picasso Einstein’s campaign the Job Creators Movement - is Leslie, a young woman with ASD who creates hard-crafted Tallits – a traditional garment worn by Jewish men (tallit.com, 2018) – on a loom (Picasso Einstein YouTube channel, 2018).

But Harold said they can do better and they are working to improve their success rates. Initially, a higher success rate could have been achieved if they have reached the families and support networks when they started the programming. He believes some of the families they had worked with at that time did not find success and would have been successful if they had engaged in the more refined program.

*What are the biggest challenges people with ASD face when starting an enterprise?*

### ***Autism Nova Scotia***

According to Grant from Autism Nova Scotia most of the organizations that offer business development supports have generalized offerings for neurotypical individuals, but do not offer individualized supports for the needs of specific individuals. While this may work for a lot of people, this can be a challenge for individuals with ASD.

### ***Enactus Calgary***

Francis with Enactus Calgary acknowledges there are some challenges associated with the program. Enactus Calgary members are all students and their school schedule and work schedule sometimes create periods of time where there is a break in communication. She admits this can be challenging at times for the individual as they are trying to create a self-employment opportunity for themselves.

The other challenge they have observed is with the business education of individuals involved in the program and the public. She notices a perception that there is a lack of flexibility amongst some people in how a business must start and operate. This inflexibility of thought may not be conducive to the needs of individuals living with ASD.

### ***Picasso Einstein***

According to Harold, one of the biggest challenges individuals with ASD face when investigating a self-employment opportunity is the exposure to their own talents. As parents and caregivers are often reminded daily of an individual's disability, the individual themselves have been reminded of their disability daily during their entire lives. The challenge is in getting the individual to believe and buy into the idea that they have abilities and skills that can be leveraged as a value proposition to society. "I think that's a big step forward when you get an individual with ASD to really see themselves as an asset proposition to the business community. Once you help them really realize what those assets are, and they don't always have to learn new skills."

He believes the next biggest challenge is in getting the individual to understand how that asset, interest, skill, hobby, or that value proposition that they possess fits into the grander scheme of the business community. Once that challenge has been met, the next step is in repeating the same process with the parents, caregivers, educators, and support staff – getting them to focus on the abilities of the individual and not the disabilities. "We need to get away from the deficit approach to employment, instead of saying this person has a disability so they need to have this job, no, what we need to say is this person has this ability and should have this job. So, I think

that is a paramount shift that needs to occur in the perspective of both the individual as self-advocate and the support system this person has.”

Harold said there are largely two reasons for disinterest in self-employment:

1. The parents or caregivers are not entrepreneurs themselves or have a difficult time understanding how simple self-employment can be, and have overly complex ideas of entrepreneurship; and,
2. Families and caregivers often have a hard-time forgetting momentarily that their kids have disabilities and had difficulty focusing on their abilities.

Their whole life experience with their children they have been reminded constantly that their child has a disability and so being able to put that to the side is very difficult for parents. “So as much as we could see the spark in the kids, we'd work with parents who had a real hard time really seeing the capacity of their own children, so it was really hard for them to buy into the notion that self-employment was not only viable but also doable for them and their family.”

*What types of support do you provide to individuals interested in starting their own enterprise?*

### ***Autism Nova Scotia***

The Autism Works Entrepreneurship program is very flexible to the shifting needs of the self-employed individual from the two different fronts. They may need supports and strategies for communications, executive functioning differences, or anything that pertains to their neurological differences. On the other side of their individualized support is the business support that focuses on the goal of creating a sustainable enterprise: *Where are we at right now? Where are we trying to go? What are the different barriers in place that are preventing their vision of success?* According to Grant, the success should also ultimately be determined by the self-employed individual themselves – not from their parents or caregivers, not from the support workers, not from the business consultant.

### ***Enactus Calgary***

In addition to the consultation process with interested and budding entrepreneurs, Enactus Calgary have also developed a simple and visual business plan template that individuals and their families and caregivers can utilize as they determine their self-employment readiness. They then utilize the collective skills of their networks within their Enactus Calgary cohort to help with things such as marketing, advertising, web design, etc.

## *Picasso Einstein*

The Picasso Einstein team decided that while there were many direct services for people with ASD, they needed to focus on missing pieces and create a holistic approach to support the potentially self-employed individual. The major missing piece was that parents and caregivers themselves were not being prepared nor educated to properly support self-employment. “Many of the parents don't know what it is to start their own business so how can you support an individual with autism that wants to start their own business, so that is a problem,” said Harold.

One of the primary focuses of the programs are now on parents, caregivers, support professionals, job coaches and educators on how they can support an individual who expresses interest in being self-employed. The programs expose parents to others that have decided to support their children in becoming self-employed. This shows the newly exposed parents and caregivers that there are successes and self-employment can become a viable option for individuals with ASD and other developmental disabilities.

The programs also contain workbooks that help the individuals understand entrepreneurship. Written by the founders of Picasso Einstein and geared towards individuals with ASD and their support networks, the workbooks guide the individuals through the process to becoming self-employed to understand their own skillset and value propositions. Each of the workbooks is around 100-pages in length.

They also have several online classes and seminars. While they were first doing direct services in the classroom, they found that there were a lot of families that were unable to attend these sessions. Many people interested in the programs were from out of state or the country and could not make any of the classes. Harold explained that at that point they decided it was best for their business and the global community to virtualize their classroom. They do not offer in-classroom sessions anymore.

The online classes include a two-hour introductory course; a four-hour course which explores the sustainability aspects of self-employment; and a six week ‘boot camp’ which walks the interested individual step-by-step through the processes to start a business. The boot camp focuses first on sustainability, and encourages those involved to put together a business support team which could include stakeholders from within the family and community, business owners, etc. They also discuss the need for parents and caregivers to take a secondary role because at some point they will die, and the goal is to create a long-term sustainable employment opportunity for the individual. “So, our approach to entrepreneurship is really helping parents not just think about creating a job but more so creating a lifelong career and you can only do so by making sure those supports are in place before you start the business.”

Picasso Einstein's early successes were slightly hampered by the lack of focus put on also educating the support networks of the individuals looking at self-employment. The early weaknesses they noticed was they could not only focus on the individual. According to Harold they noticed this gap early and began to focus on the education of the parents, caregivers, and support network as well.

Harold believes the other important theme of the program is the focus on the importance of sustainability. They encourage individuals and their families and support networks to have open conversations about what the life of the individual will look like when the caregivers have died. This is not meant to be morbid, but intended to be constructive and focused on the impacts this will have on the individuals – including transportation, living accommodations, etc. “So, what was important was to not just talk about sustainability but to give parents a step-by-step process on how to talk about sustainability and how to plan for sustainability.”

Picasso Einstein also focusses on the simplicity of entrepreneurship and self-employment. Harold believes there is a skewed understanding of entrepreneurship not just in the disability community but in the boarder community as well, and this is largely caused by bloated versions of entrepreneurship in Hollywood and on television. “I think we've done a good job in helping our community know that that's not real entrepreneurship that if you learn from history if you go back where we were pre-industrial revolution, entrepreneurship was the bread maker the milk delivery guy, the guy who cuts your lawn, that's the type of entrepreneurship we're talking about.”

*Do you plan to continue this program?*

### ***Autism Nova Scotia***

The partners plan to continue the program according to Grant from Autism Nova Scotia. Several businesses have been created because of their work. “That's what it's all about to see people take an abstract idea and figure how to make it how to make it into an actual tangible business is very rewarding for both the entrepreneur to get that success but also the support team around them.” As of April 2017, the program was supporting ten clients (D'Entremont, Metronews.ca, 2017).

### ***Enactus Calgary***

Despite a few communication and educational issues, Francis from Enactus Calgary believes they are doing excellent work with the individuals they have supported so far. That success has determined that the group will continue to provide the services as they move forward. She also described the relationship between the students and individuals as symbiotic. The students are

passing along their business development knowledge and in-turn they are developing skills while working with a population which have unique challenges.

### *Picasso Einstein*

Harold from Picasso Einstein is passionate about entrepreneurship and the opportunities that self-employment can provide. But he is also clear in communicating with individuals that self-employment is not the answer for everyone. “We by no means think that self-employment is going to take over the world because it hasn’t even in neurotypical communities, to assume that it will in disability communities is silly. What we are trying to do is to make sure that at every opportunity that an individual expresses interest they’re given an opportunity to try.”

Picasso Einstein also ensures that individuals do not look at self-employment as a last resort or something to explore in desperation, but it should be explored as an alternative for traditional employment when an individual begins to look at employment opportunities.

The organization has had success with individuals all over the autism spectrum, including individuals that are the most impacted. They have been able use their models to work with a person whether they have a variety of diagnosis, and they believe strongly that anyone can be self-employed.

#### **4.3.2 EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEW SUMMARY**

The preceding section provided a summation of interviews conducted with three individuals that are running self-employment programs for people with ASD. The interview questions focused on the origins of the programs, the motivations for the creation of the programs, successes and lessons learned, and the program offerings of each. The purpose of the interviews was to gain an understanding of the different program models that are currently in use focusing on self-employment for people with ASD. The three programs included two in Canada (Halifax and Calgary), and one in the United States (Florida). All three individuals interviewed recognized self-employment as a potential means for individuals with ASD to develop their own work experience.

Several themes were identified throughout the interviews, and these include gaps in supports for people for people with ASD to develop self-employment opportunities; a focus on the deficits and not the assets and strengths of the individual; and the need for a self-employment opportunity to be sustainable and independent of constant support from the development organization once established.

Each organization identified a lack of individualized support for people with ASD that were interested in self-employment opportunities. Grant from Autism Nova Scotia stated that almost all business development programs had generalized offerings, and this did not work well for people

with ASD that had a variety of challenges and needs. All organizations advocated for an approach which included different supports for the ASD diagnosis and for business development. The interviews identified challenges including the lack of understanding of business development processes; lack of understanding of what a business looks like; and a focus on the deficits of individuals with ASD and not on their passions, interests, and skills. The lack of interest often portrayed by the support networks could be summed up in two reasons, according to Harold from Picasso Einstein; the support networks lack of understanding or an overly complex idea of entrepreneurship, and the difficulty forgetting about an individual's disability and not focusing on their abilities.

The programs all provided similar services such as templates for business planning, one-on-one consultant support for the individual, and information and training opportunities for the individual's support network – families and caregivers. This was a recognized need as the support network was vital in the start-up, growth, and sustainability success of the businesses. Sustainability was recognized as an important part of the business development approach which must be considered throughout the start-up process and life of the self-employment opportunity. According to Grant from Autism Nova Scotia, if a self-employment opportunity is to be successful in meeting its goal of providing long-term support to address the economic and social needs of the individual, the business itself must be able to survive on its own accord without continued interaction with the business development supports.

#### **4.4 Survey Responses**

With the support of the client, the researcher conducted an online survey to further gauge the support for self-employment programs for people throughout Newfoundland and Labrador. Five individuals completed this survey which sought the input of both individuals with ASD, and parents and caregivers that were interested in self-employment opportunities for individuals they support. The survey was created by the researcher and shared by staff members of the client with individuals with ASD and their support networks. The individuals were identified by the client as possibly having some interest in self-employment. The organization is broken into four regions, St. John's, Eastern, Central, and Western (including Labrador). The survey was shared with staff in each region to distribute to their identified membership. The following section details an analysis of the data retrieved from the series of survey questions. The list of questions is available in Appendix 4.

*Where do you live? Are you an individual with ASD? Are you a parent or caregiver of someone with ASD?*

Of the five respondents, four were parents or caregivers, and one respondent was an individual with ASD. Four of the respondents lived in the eastern region, and one in St. John's, the capital city and province's only metropolitan region. These questions were asked to understand where a

potential need existed for a self-employment program, and who was interested in this type of opportunity.

*Have you started or helped someone start their own small business? Are you interested in starting or helping someone start their own small business?*

While none of the respondents had developed a self-employment opportunity, all were interested in the possibility and in learning more about self-employment. Two of the four individuals that responded to this question said they had begun to find more information to help individuals start a small business. One of those individuals said they had started the process, but the individual quickly became overwhelmed and did not continue. These two questions were asked to gauge individual interest in the creation of self-employment development opportunities.

*Have you or someone you support been employed in the past 12 months? How long was the employment experience? How many jobs have you had or the person you support had in the past 5 years?*

All respondents and the people they support have had employment experience in the past 12 months, including the respondent identified as having ASD. The amount of employment experience during that time has varied by the individual from one year to over two decades, with all individuals holding one job in the past five years. These questions were asked to understand the experiences and employment gaps faced by individuals that are interested in looking at an alternative form of employment – self-employment.

*What type of small business have you started or would be interested in starting?*

This question was posed to understand the types of enterprises that people may be interested in starting. Understanding the type of enterprises people are interested in starting would allow someone developing a self-employment program to gather information on the steps required to start and sustain types of businesses. Four of the five respondents answered this question. One was interested in starting an IT business, one was interested in landscaping, and two people indicated they were interested in any business that would create an employment opportunity for their child.

*If you have already started a small enterprise how many hours a week are you working?*

None of the survey respondents answered this question. The result of a previous question indicated that none of the respondents have started a small enterprise.

*Have there been any challenges or obstacles for someone starting their own small enterprise?*

Four of the five respondents answered this question. Two of the respondents identified lack of information and development support as a challenge or obstacle for someone starting their own small enterprise. One individual spoke to the financial and human resources challenges as an obstacle

*Have there been any benefits for someone starting their own small enterprise?*

Three of the five respondents answered this question. Two individuals skipped the question. While none of the respondents have started a business, one of the respondents stated that while there would be a lot of work involved in starting a business there would be a sense of accomplishment for the self-employed individual.

*Is self-employment something you would ever consider for yourself or someone you support?*

All the individuals that participated in this survey answered yes to this question. Several of the respondents provided comment which included support from several perspectives; including from an individual with ASD that indicated they would like to start their own business and from a parent that agreed they would be interested in helping their child start a business.

*Would you be interested in learning more about self-employment opportunities for yourself or someone you support?*

Four individuals answered this question and one skipped the question. All respondents that answered the question stated that self-employment is something they would consider for themselves or someone they support and would be interested in learning more about self-employment opportunities.

### ***Motivations and Experiences***

The survey also contained a series of five scaled questions focused on the motivations and experiences for those individuals or their parents and caregivers that are interested in learning more about self-employment opportunities. These included:

*1. Financial support is an important motivator for starting a small enterprise. (Scaled Response)*

Three respondents identified financial support as an important motivator for starting a small business. Two agreed and one respondent strongly agreed to this statement.

*2. Social interaction is an important motivator for starting a small enterprise. (Scaled Response)*

Three respondents indicated that social interaction was an important motivator for starting a small business. Of the three, one indicated they strongly agreed with this statement, one agreed, and one individual selected neutral as a response.

*3. The experience of starting and/or running a small enterprise has been a positive experience. (Scaled Response)*

Two of five individuals responded to this question. Both respondents indicated this question as non-applicable to them. None of the respondents indicated they had started a business.

*4. The experience of starting and/or running a small enterprise has been a negative experience (Scaled response)*

Two individuals answered this question with one individual disagreeing with the statement and one providing a neutral response.

*5. I could easily find the information I needed to start a small enterprise. (Scaled response)*

Three of the respondents answered this question. None of the individuals that responded agreed with the statement, with two strongly disagreeing with the statement.

#### **4.4.1 SURVEY SUMMARY**

Five individuals completed the survey. From a variety of backgrounds and locations, each respondent provided further insight into the motivations, goals, and challenges facing self-employment opportunities for people with ASD and their support network. The challenges identified included lack of information related to how to start a business, and financial and human resources concerns. The benefits identified included new employment opportunities for individuals and a sense of accomplishment for those that are successful in creating a self-employment business opportunity.

A series of questions focused on the experiences of finding information on starting an enterprise, and the motivations for starting an enterprise. The financial and social benefits of starting a self-employment opportunity were both considered prime motivators for the respondents. Those that answered this set of questions in the survey indicated that the experience of starting a small business was not negative, but several respondents did say they had trouble finding the appropriate information needed to start.

## 4.5 Environmental Scan

An environmental scan of organizations dedicated to self-employment opportunities for individuals with ASD, and general self-employment programs was completed (see Figure 2 below). The purpose of the scan was to provide further information on the variety of self-employment programs that are currently active throughout Newfoundland and Labrador, as well as the rest of North America. The environmental scan was completed to address the second primary research question; *Can the ASNL develop a program that is effective and inclusive of those with ASD who are interested in starting their own business?*; and one of the secondary questions related to this question; *How can the client utilize the information gathered to create a program given its current suite of initiatives?*

The below figure lists the differing programs, services and tools for individuals looking to start their own business and create a self-employment opportunity for themselves. This information should be valuable to the client in determining the best tools to utilize if they decided a self-employment program was a valuable option for them to create. If the organization was to create its own self-employment program or enhance one of its current employment programs, the summary list below would provide them with examples of the components that would be necessary to the successful creation or enhancement. This includes components such as mentoring, financial development resources such as business plan templates, and ‘road maps.’ These programs are all successful in supporting individuals with ASD and can serve as examples of what programs and services would be required to develop a program that is effective and inclusive of those with ASD that are interested in starting their own business.

The researcher looked at a variety of organizations offering self-employment development programs for people with ASD and other developmental disabilities. Each of these organizations offer a variety of programming opportunities for individuals and their support network. For instance, Celebrate EDU provides online entrepreneurial programs for people with developmental disabilities (Celebrate EDU website, 2018). This includes online workshops and courses. Roses for Autism work with people with ASD and other developmental disabilities and provide entrepreneurial and self-employment education through an eight-week online program (Roses for Autism website, 2018).

The researcher also reviewed several self-employment programs dedicated to all individuals. These include programs that provide financial assistance and training. This includes government departments such as the provincial Department of Tourism, Culture, Industry and Innovation (TCII) which provides start-up guides and financial assistance for new businesses (TCII website, 2018). Innovation, Science, and Economic Development (ISED) is a federal government department which provides start-up assistance and financial support and includes a ‘road map’ which informs potential business owners of the permits and regulations their business idea

requires (ISED website, 2018). The Community Business Development Corporation (CBDC) is a non-profit organization dedicated to providing business development support to individuals (CBDC website, 2018). This organization has regional offices located throughout Newfoundland and Labrador and can help provide business counselling, financial assistance, and technical assistance for individuals.

Each of these organizations – both those working with people with disabilities, and those directed toward neurotypical individuals – provide models for consideration for the client. A variety of the services provided could be considered by the client as they discuss the potential feasibility of a self-employment development program for people with ASD.

**FIGURE 2: SUMMARY OF BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS**

<b>Self-Employment Business Development Programs for people with ASD and other development disabilities</b>
<p><b>Organization:</b> Autism Nova Scotia in partnership with Enactus St. Mary’s – Autism Works Entrepreneurship</p> <p><b>Mission and Objectives:</b>  <i>Autism Nova Scotia:</i> We are a community-based organization that fosters understanding, acceptance, and collaborative approaches for those living with Autism Spectrum Disorders throughout Nova Scotia (Autism Nova Scotia Website, 2018).   <i>Enactus St. Mary’s:</i> In partnership with Autism Nova Scotia, Enactus St. Mary’s Access-Ability’s consulting framework (Autism Works Entrepreneurship) coaches and trains individuals/entrepreneurs with disabilities to improve their business practices or help them find meaningful employment. Access-Ability has a strong community presence and works closely with other awareness and entrepreneurship groups to highlight the abilities of those who are often overlooked by society (Enactus St. Mary’s Website, 2018).             Autism Nova Scotia and Enactus St. Mary’s have been working to franchise the Autism Works Entrepreneurship framework to other Enactus chapters, including: Acadia University, University of New Brunswick, University of Toronto, <u>University of Calgary</u>, University of Alberta, and the University of British Columbia.</p> <p><b>Programs:</b> Business consulting and mentorship for entrepreneurs.</p> <p><b>For More Information:</b> <a href="mailto:info@enactusmu.ca">info@enactusmu.ca</a>, <a href="http://www.enactusmu.ca">www.enactusmu.ca</a></p>
<p><b>Organization:</b> Celebrate EDU</p> <p><b>Mission and Objectives:</b> A non-profit organization on a mission to encourage and empower young adults with developmental disabilities by providing innovative entrepreneurial education that builds on their interests and passions so that they can create happier and more productive lives (Celebrate EDU Website, 2018).</p>

**Programs:** Online entrepreneurship programs for people with developmental disabilities: Information sessions and workshops.

**For More Information:** [www.celebrateedu.org](http://www.celebrateedu.org)

**Organization:** Community Futures British Columbia

**Mission and Objectives:** Community Futures is focused on small business and community economic development in rural British Columbia (Community Futures Website, 2018).

**Programs:** Entrepreneurs with Disabilities Program (EDP): A business loans program that reduces the obstacles that people with disabilities or ongoing health issues may face when looking for financing.

**For More Information:** [www.communityfutures.ca](http://www.communityfutures.ca)

**Organization:** Enactus Calgary - Autism Works Entrepreneurship

**Mission and Objectives:** In partnership with Ready, Willing & Able, Autism Works Entrepreneurship is a program which aims to assist entrepreneurs with autism in starting their own businesses (Enactus Calgary Website, 2018).

**Programs:** Student volunteers act as consultants and mentors by providing guidance on creating viable business plans and strategies for the entrepreneurs.

**For More Information:** [enactusrecruiting@gmail.com](mailto:enactusrecruiting@gmail.com), [www.enactuscalgary.com](http://www.enactuscalgary.com)

**Organization:** Griffin-Hammis Associates

**Mission and Objectives:** A consultancy firm that specializes in developing communities of economic cooperation and self-employment opportunities for people with disabilities (Griffin-Hammis Associates Website, 2018).

**Programs:** Self-employment consultancy services and training programs for people with disabilities.

**For More Information:** [kyates@griffinhammis.com](mailto:kyates@griffinhammis.com), [www.griffinhammis.com](http://www.griffinhammis.com)

**Organization:** Picasso Einstein

**Mission and Objectives:** Picasso Einstein provides educational and consulting services to create meaningful employment for someone with a developmental disability by starting a small sustainable business focused on the strengths and interests of the individual (Picasso Einstein Website, 2018).

**Programs:** Online courses for self-advocates, parents, caregivers, educators, support staff; completing a business plan, developing a self-employment profile, leveraging resources. Workbooks also included for individuals to work at their own pace.

**For More Information:** Pembroke Pines, Florida, 800-554-2263, [start@PicassoEinstein.com](mailto:start@PicassoEinstein.com)  
[www.PicassoEinstein.com](http://www.PicassoEinstein.com), [www.selfemploy.org](http://www.selfemploy.org)

**Organization:** Roses for Autism

**Mission and Objectives:** Our self-employment program educates young adults with autism and other disabilities about entrepreneurship and self-employment as one possible avenue for employment (Roses for Autism Website, 2018).

**Programs:** An eight week introductory program which teaches individuals the basics of starting a business.

**Contact:** [info@rosesforautism.com](mailto:info@rosesforautism.com), [www.rosesforautism.com](http://www.rosesforautism.com)

**Organization:** Synergies Work

**Mission and Objectives:** Synergies Work is a non-profit organization that provides people with disabilities, mentorship, advice and practical training on business, technology and fundraising to help them get from idea to viable business to launch and beyond (Synergies Work Website, 2018).

**Programs:** Entrepreneurship training for people with disabilities.

**For More Information:** [aarti@synergieswork.org](mailto:aarti@synergieswork.org), [www.synergieswork.org](http://www.synergieswork.org)

### **Business Development Programs**

**Organization:** Business Development Bank of Canada (BDC)

**Mission and Objectives:** BDC is the only financial institution devoted directly to entrepreneurs. They help create and develop strong Canadian businesses through financing, advisory services, and capital, with a focus on small and medium-sized enterprises (BDC Website, 2018).

**Programs:** BDC offers a full spectrum of specialized financing including venture capital, equity as well as growth and business transition capital.

**For More Information:** [www.bdc.ca](http://www.bdc.ca)

**Organization:** Community Business Development Corporation (CBDC)

**Mission and Objectives:** CBDC's assist in the creation of small businesses and in the expansion and modernization of existing businesses by providing financial and technical services to entrepreneurs (CBDC Website, 2018).

**Programs:** CBDC's have supports in financial assistance, business counselling, entrepreneurship development and training, and technical assistance for entrepreneurs.

**For More Information:** [www.cbdc.ca](http://www.cbdc.ca)

**Organization:** Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada (ISED) - Government of Canada

**Mission and Objectives:** ISED works with Canadians in all areas of the economy and in all parts of the country to improve conditions for investment, enhance Canada's innovation performance, increase Canada's share of global trade and build a fair, efficient and competitive marketplace (ISED Website, 2018).

**Programs:** ISED has a variety of supports, resources, and assistance available for new small business. The department has a road map which informs potential business owners of the permits and regulations their business idea requires.

**For More Information:** [www.ic.gc.ca](http://www.ic.gc.ca)

**Organization:** Department of Tourism, Culture, Industry and Innovation (TCII) - Government of Newfoundland and Labrador

**Mission and Objectives:** The vision of TCII is of a vibrant, diverse and sustainable economy, with productive, prosperous and culturally-rich communities of and regions, and making Newfoundland and Labrador business and tourism "destination of choice." (TCII Website, 2018).

**Programs:** The department of TCII has a variety of supports, resources, and assistance available for new small business. This includes start-up guides which includes information on the various forms of financial assistance available for new businesses in Newfoundland and Labrador.

**Contact:** [www.tcii.gov.nl.ca](http://www.tcii.gov.nl.ca)

**Organization:** Department of Advanced Education, Skills and Labour (AESL) - Government of Newfoundland and Labrador

**Mission and Objectives:** The department of AESL has a mandate to ensure the province has highly educated graduates and skilled workers for a fast-growing economy. This includes creating a climate which is conducive to economic growth, competitiveness and prosperity (AESL Website, 2018).

**Programs:** The department of AESL has a variety of career, and labour market information for individuals interested in heading back to work. They also have the Self-Employment Assistance program which provides financial and entrepreneurial assistance to eligible individuals to help them create jobs for themselves.

**For More Information:** [www.aesl.gov.nl.ca](http://www.aesl.gov.nl.ca)

**Organization:** Futurpreneur

**Mission and Objectives:** Futurpreneur provides financing, mentoring, and support tools to young aspiring business owners between the ages of 18-39 (Futurpreneur Website, 2018).

**Programs:** They provide access to business mentoring, resources for business plan development, and access to financing of up to \$45,000.00 for new businesses.

**For More Information:** [www.futurpreneur.ca](http://www.futurpreneur.ca)

**Organization:** Metro Business Opportunities (MBO)

**Mission and Objectives:** MBO provides guidance through ongoing business training. They offer self-employment assistance to unemployed individuals, to help them start a business. (MBO Website, 2018).

**Programs:** MBO offers networking opportunities, interactive workshops, business consulting and support.

**For More Information:** [www.mbo.ca](http://www.mbo.ca)

#### 4.5.1 ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN SUMMARY

Ten organizations with supports for people with ASD and other developmental issues were profiled; and seven business development programs in Newfoundland and Labrador were highlighted. The scan provided the researcher with further insight into the services offered by self-employment program models throughout Canada and the United States. The information will also provide the client with contacts for potential partnership opportunities throughout North America.

This scan reviewed a variety of organizations throughout North America. The search outside of Newfoundland and Labrador was limited by what could be found on the internet. Information on organizations in the St. John's area - which have no specific accommodations or considerations for people with ASD – was gathered in 2016 for a report commissioned by RWA in partnership with the YMCA of Newfoundland and Labrador. Completed by Dawson (2016) the report included a review of entrepreneurial and self-employment programs that exist in the province. The researcher updated the information from the previous scan.

The environmental scan was completed to address the second primary research question; *Can the ASNL develop a program that is effective and inclusive of those with ASD who are interested in starting their own business?*; and one of the secondary questions related to this question; *How can the client utilize the information gathered to create a program given its current suite of initiatives?* For instance, organizations such as Metro Business Opportunities, Futurpreneur Canada, and the Community Business Development Corporation (CBDC) all provide services such as mentorship, financial start-up capital, and labour market information. Headd (2003) states that success is usually more forthcoming when a new business has initial start-up financial support and educated owners. Audet and Coutert (2012) argue that business coaching and mentorship have a vital role to play in the business start-up process. Understanding the business development supports and expertise available in their community is important for the client as they consider the recommendations put forth around creating a self-employment development program for people with ASD.

## **4.6 Summary**

The research for this report focused on key stakeholder interviews with individuals with ASD, and organizations that have started and are currently providing self-employment development support for people with ASD. A survey to further gauge experiences and interest in self-employment was also distributed, and an environmental scan of self-employment programs was undertaken. The following section will summarize findings from the research.

Five individuals with ASD were interviewed. Each provided their experiences, motivations, challenges, and goals when it comes to employment and potentially self-employment. Each provided insight as to whether there is interest in the development of a self-employment business development program for people with ASD in Newfoundland and Labrador. The interview subjects identified the lack of opportunities to find sustainable employment as a motivator for looking at the option of self-employment to find work. They discussed the lack of knowledge about business practices and adequate supports available to help them start their own business. The interviews identified several challenges including issues with social interaction. Several of the individuals interviewed identified a need for a support network of individuals with knowledge of business development and the intricacies of their ASD diagnosis.

One representative from two programs in Canada and one in the United States were also interviewed. The purposes of these interviews were to get an in-depth understanding of the creation of these programs, the services they offer, the challenges they have faced, and successes they have achieved. Each organization started their work because they recognized self-employment as a means for individuals with ASD to develop their passions and skills and employ themselves.

The programs all provided some form of business planning and consultancy support throughout the business development process. Two of the programs focus on a dual support approach to self-employment development for people with ASD, meaning support is provided for both the business development aspects and for the individual support needs of the self-employed. Each interview also identified the lack of understanding and familiarity with business development as a challenge. Another challenge frequently discussed was that individuals and their support networks often focused mainly on the individual's needs and not on their skills and interests

A survey completed by five individuals provided further insight into the employment experiences of individuals with ASD, their motivation and interest in starting their own self-employment opportunity and challenges they have faced. The motivations identified focused on opportunities to create new avenues for employment. The challenges included lack of information related to how to develop a business and financial and human resources concerns. All of those that completed the survey expressed interest in learning more about the potential to use self-employment opportunities for individuals with ASD.

The environmental scan was initiated to further investigate self-employment development program models throughout Canada and the United States. Organizations that provide self-employment development support to the neurotypical population in Newfoundland and Labrador were also identified. Ten different organizations were identified that focus on individuals with ASD or other developmental disabilities, and seven organizations that will provide general self-employment support but do not necessarily have special provisions or accommodations for people with ASD. The programs and services provided by groups working with people with various disabilities include workbooks and workshops to introduce individuals and their families and caregivers to business development, consultancy and mentorship opportunities, and business plan development support; the programs and services offered by organizations and government departments for self-employment support include financial assistance, counselling, entrepreneur development training, 'road maps' directing individuals to the appropriate permits and/or licenses they may require for a particular business need.

Based on the success of their partnership in creating self-employment opportunities for people with ASD Autism Nova Scotia and Enactus St. Mary's have been working to franchise the Autism Works Entrepreneurship framework to other Enactus chapters, such as Enactus Calgary which has been active with its own version of the program. The other chapters they have been providing support to include: Acadia University, University of New Brunswick, University of

Toronto, University of Alberta, and the University of British Columbia (Enactus St. Mary's Website, 2018).

## 5.0 Discussion and Analysis

The following section will discuss some of the key themes derived from the information gathered by the researcher through interviews, surveys, environmental scan, and literature review. There are two primary research questions being addressed in this study. These are:

1. *Is a self-employment development program an effective model to help ameliorate the economic and social isolation experienced by individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD)?*
2. *If so, can the ASNL develop a program that is effective and inclusive of those with ASD who are interested in starting their own business?*

The following sections follow along with themes identified by the researcher during the data gathering phase of the project and are related to each of the primary and secondary research questions. The sections focus on what entrepreneurial activity looks like for people with ASD; challenges associated with the activity; benefits of self-employment; and defining success and failure.

### 5.1 Entrepreneurial Activity for people with ASD

The data collected through the interviews and surveys provided insight into some of the unique characteristics of self-employed individuals with ASD. Grant from Autism Nova Scotia said that entrepreneurial activity for people with ASD often involves a dual-support approach to ensure success for the individual. Like the broader entrepreneurial community, self-employed individuals with ASD often require a broad network of supporters to be successful. Included in the network for people with ASD is also support for the individual's disability. This dual support provides both individualized support and business development support. According to Grant, the disability support cannot provide the business development support because they are two very different fields of expertise, and conversely the business support cannot provide the disability support.

Francis from Enactus Calgary provided the example of the dual support approach and the broad network required to ensure success for an artist with ASD that the program has supported. The program representatives and family decided together early in the process that due to communications challenges the individual would not be comfortable selling their work from an art gallery which would require a variety social interactions. The team instead decided that creating an online art gallery would be a more suitable avenue for the individual to sell their art.

The online art gallery would feature the individual's work and functions to allow sales direct from the website.

Grant from Autism Nova Scotia acknowledged that the approach for neurotypical individuals does not always work for individuals with ASD. While he states there are a lot of great programs out there designed to support individuals that want to start a business, his organization and their partner decided to focus on creating a program with individualized programs to better support the diverse nature of challenges faced by individuals with ASD.

## **5.2 Challenges**

Individuals with ASD face many of the same challenges faced by all budding entrepreneurs when looking at developing self-employment opportunities – start-up financing, understanding their markets, etc. They also face challenges created by their autism diagnosis. Individuals with ASD often require further support with the challenges they sometimes face because of their diagnosis. The most often discussed support that someone with ASD could use in the development of a self-employment opportunity would be aids in social interaction and networking. Impaired social development is one of the characteristics of an ASD diagnosis and several individuals interviewed for this project identified this as a barrier to helping them find employment and possibly as a barrier to client generation if they were to start their own business to employ themselves.

The individuals with ASD that were interviewed as part of the project identified several support issues as challenges. Adam said the hardest parts of working for himself would be logistical - figuring out the hours of operation, location, etc.; Bernard believes the hardest part would be finding clients; Cyril said he believes the finances of the business would be the hardest part for him; and Donald said the hardest part would be understanding where to set up the business and getting the right amount of cash flow to keep it up and running. Survey respondents identified access to information related to business development as a challenge to helping someone with ASD develop a self-employment opportunity.

According to Harold from Picasso Einstein, one of the biggest challenges individuals with ASD face when investigating a self-employment opportunity is the exposure to their own talents. The challenge is in getting the individual to believe and buy into the idea that they have abilities and skills that can be leveraged as a value proposition to society. He believes the next biggest challenge is in getting the individual to understand how that asset, interest, skill, hobby, or that value proposition that they possess fits into the grander scheme of the business community.

The lack of knowledge on where to receive information and support for self-employment opportunities was identified by all individuals with ASD that were interviewed. If the individuals are unaware that programs exist, they may not understand this option is available to them, and

they may never pursue the development of a passion or hobby into a viable business venture and self-employment opportunity for themselves. Grant from Autism Nova Scotia said he has noticed that most of the organizations that offer business development supports have generalized offerings. While these programs offer valuable information for individuals interested in starting a business they do not often offer individualized supports for the needs of specific individuals. While this may work for a lot of people, this can be a challenge for individuals with ASD.

One of the other challenges often faced by individuals that are interested in self-employment is in the lack of support or understanding by their families or support network. Harold from Picasso Einstein believes this lack of support often comes from two sources: a lack of understanding of what a business looks like; and the constant focus on the disability of the individual and not on the skills, abilities, and passions. Individuals and families are constantly reminded of their disability and there is often a greater emphasis on the deficits and not on the assets of the individual. Picasso Einstein addresses these issues by placing an emphasis on the parents and caregivers understanding of self-employment opportunities and business development. Francis from Enactus Calgary made a similar statement. She has noticed a perception amongst the public that there is a lack of flexibility amongst some people in how a business must start and operate. This inflexibility of thought may not be conducive to the needs of individuals living with ASD.

Another challenge for people looking at self-employment opportunities is if they receive government benefits - because of their disability – they may worry about losing those benefits if they start a small business to employ themselves. All business development requires a level of risk and individuals may fear losing their regular benefits. Dawson (2016) explored this issue when scanning self-employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities in St. John's, NL. She stated that an individual can often avail of certain government subsidies while focusing on obtaining employment, but once they become employed they could lose some support benefits such as drug cards, bus passes, childcare, etc. This could result in a person becoming only slightly better off financially than before they were employed. The same issue is likely to occur for an individual receiving benefits that become self-employed. Each individual and their support network would need to do a cost benefit analysis of the effect of each benefit received and if that could be affected by employment income.

### **5.3 Benefits**

There are various benefits to starting a business for someone with ASD. Outside of the economic consequences of creating a successful business there is also the opportunity for increased social interaction which has the benefit of creating growth in other areas of the individual's life. As Hendricks (2009) noted, employment enables those with disabilities to become self-sufficient and creates a forum to improve one's quality of life.

Uzunidis, Boutillier, Leperche (2014) defined entrepreneurship as a way for people to start a business to address unemployment. Luke, Verreynne, and Kearins (2015) state that there are both financial and non-financial benefits to becoming an entrepreneur including increased independence, autonomy, employment, and financial gain. The individuals with ASD that were interviewed and surveyed expressed similar desires to achieve the same benefits espoused by the researchers, including Bernard who echoed the sentiment felt by other individuals interviewed said that the opportunity to work for himself would provide him the flexibility to work this own hours and to complete projects at this own pace.

Markantoni, Strijker, and Koster (2014) argue that while there are economic benefits to starting a small enterprise, this motive is often secondary to other opportunities people are looking for when creating small side businesses. They list a variety of benefits including, personal satisfaction, a flexible lifestyle, the effective use of personal time, achieving a desired quality of life, and the need for a level of independence (p. 727). One of the survey respondents identified the sense of accomplishment from the creation of a self-employment opportunity as one of the benefits for individuals with ASD and their support network.

## **5.4 Defining success and failure**

### *Individual success*

Success and failure is a very individualized grade for everyone with ASD. It is determined by the goals set forth by the individual, with the help of their support networks and the organizations or people supporting them. The financial goal of each venture is a unique level set by each business operator.

Grant from Autism Nova Scotia, noted during the interview that outcomes are very individualized, and each self-employed individual is going to have different outcomes and different desires against benchmarks they want to hit. He said the ultimate outcome is to create meaningful employment opportunities, and paid employment opportunities where the individual is generating income for themselves. The organizations interviewed all agreed that the venture being proposed must be a sustainable business operation that creates profit to be considered successful. If not a viable business opportunity, the benefits of employment will be lost because the business is not sustainable. All the organizations interviewed work with the individuals and their families and support network to determine how they determine successes and failures. They also focus on allowing the individual to have the most input on what determines success and failure.

### *Organization success*

Organizations have an opportunity to determine their own level of success when it comes to developing a self-employment program. This could be the number of businesses that are created, the number of people employed, or in the total revenue earned. The organization must determine what the goals are and the criteria they need to meet them. For an organization creating a program they must balance the human and financial costs that go into the development of a program and the execution of the program, against all of the other organizational priorities. For instance, if an organization invests to create a self-employment program that only creates one business in a year, could that money have been spent better elsewhere.

The organizations interviewed for this project all discussed their satisfaction with their outcomes so far and all plan to continue the work to provide individuals with the support to create self-employment opportunities. Autism Nova Scotia has been successful in helping four people with ASD in their first year of operating the Autism Works Entrepreneurship Program, and have helped start a total of 10 new businesses. When interviewed, Francis from Enactus Calgary stated they were almost done working with their first individual to start their own-self-employment opportunity. Picasso Einstein's has a success rate of approximately 30%-33% in helping individuals in the program from start to business launch and continued self-employment. according to Harold, a representative of the organization. He believes it could be higher if early on they had realized the importance of the business education of the support network. Initially support was focused solely on the individual, but quickly it was realized that the success and failure of a self-employment opportunity is greatly affected by the involvement of the individuals support network. According to Harold, this is very important for the long-term sustainability and success of the enterprise. "We got to include the support system and educate and prepare them on how to support this long term so there's continuity."

## **5.5 Summary**

The research indicates that employment opportunities are valuable tools in helping with the everyday growth and development of individuals with ASD. There are examples of successes from across the country, and a variety of organizations that have recently created models to help individuals create their own small businesses. These organizations are concerned with ensuring the businesses are sustainable and provide the needed support for the individual to be successful in their goal.

Each of the individuals with ASD that were interviewed identified gaps in support, lack of knowledge in how to develop a program, but all also indicated a willingness to work on their own and the attraction to the flexibility self-employment provides.

Organizations exist throughout North America that are focusing their efforts on creating opportunities for individuals with ASD to be successful in their pursuit of self-employment opportunities. Each of these organizations provides examples for the ASNL if they are interested in further pursuing offering some sort of self-employment development support for individuals with ASD. There are also several organizations in St. John's and throughout Newfoundland and Labrador that could provide general business development support for any individual. There is a wealth of knowledge throughout the world on business development and self-employment, and now there are organizations that are successful in combining those skills with a knowledge of the intricacies of an ASD diagnosis.

## **6.0 Recommendations**

The following section will detail the researcher's recommendations for consideration by the Autism Society, Newfoundland Labrador (ASNL). These recommendations are based on the evidence gathered through interviews, surveys, environmental scan, and a qualitative analysis of a variety of self-employment and entrepreneurship programs across North America.

### **6.1 Introduction**

The researcher set out to investigate the opportunities available for people with ASD to develop self-employment opportunities. These opportunities would help the individual and their families, and support network, alleviate the economic and social isolation often felt by individuals with ASD. It is the researcher's conclusion that the ASNL should consider the creation of a self-employment development opportunity for people with ASD. This program could take many forms and the researcher recommends further research and partnership development with external organizations on the best options to consider.

### **6.2 Options to Consider**

The researcher identified four options for the ASNL to consider when creating a self-employment development opportunity to add to their current suite of programs. These include; partner and promote already established programs, develop a program stream adjacent to their current pre-employment programs, create a new program entirely, or do not create a new program.

#### **6.2.1 PROMOTE ALREADY ESTABLISHED PROGRAMS FOR SELF-EMPLOYMENT**

There are already established organizations dedicated to creating programs to support individuals and their support network that are interested in self-employment opportunities. Picasso Einstein is one of these organizations. Picasso Einstein assists self-advocates, parents, professionals and

educators, to create, establish and initiate small business ventures with the main purpose of providing meaningful employment for the person with a disability (Picasso Einstein Website, 2018). Their programs include online workshops and workbooks for individuals with ASD, their families, and caregivers. Anyone from around the world can avail of the program.

Newfoundland and Labrador has a small population spread over a large land mass. Given the geographic make-up and sparse population, this programming opportunity would be a viable alternative for individuals in smaller locations that may not have access to the business development programs housed at organizations in larger urban centres. Partnering with another organization to highlight their programs would be the most cost-effective option for the ASNL, and not require any significant investment in human resources. Picasso Einstein also works with other organizations to focus efforts on developing capacity to assist individuals interested in self-employment (Picasso Einstein Website, 2018). If the ASNL were to partner with an organization such as Picasso Einstein and promote their programs, the organization-to-organization knowledge sharing could create understanding amongst staff on the benefits of self-employment. This information sharing among organizations would provide the client's staff with the basic knowledge to assist individuals to find the appropriate business support needed.

### **6.2.2 DEVELOP AN ADJACENT PROGRAM STREAM FOR SELF-EMPLOYMENT**

The ASNL has already established partnerships with a variety of external organizations focused on employment readiness programs for people with ASD including Transitions, Worktopia, STEP, and Ready, Willing, & Able (RWA). Several organizations have already worked with RWA and other partners to create self-employment development opportunities specifically for people with ASD. In Calgary, AB, they are working with Enactus Calgary, a student led entrepreneurship group at the University of Calgary. In Halifax, NS the Enactus group at St. Mary's University is also running the Autism Works Entrepreneurship program in partnership with Autism Nova Scotia. These groups are seeing successful outcomes from their consultancy programs and are working with local organizations to connect to people with ASD. In Calgary the Enactus group is working with the Society for the Treatment of Autism in Calgary (STA).

Through the RWA program, both organizations have connected with local entrepreneurs and supported them in the development of long-term sustainable enterprises. From artists to plumbers, each organization has been successful in helping individuals with ASD, their families, and support networks in creating meaningful employment opportunities by utilizing the self-employment model. The ASNL has an established relationship with RWA and offers free support through this national program for resume building, interview training, connecting individuals with the RWA job seekers database (ASNL Website, 2018). Enactus Memorial is the student-led entrepreneurship group at Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador and is in St. John's, NL near the ASNL headquarters. They are part of a global network of student led

entrepreneurship organizations at post-secondary institutions (Enactus Memorial Website, 2018). They work closely with non-profit organizations throughout Newfoundland and Labrador on various projects.

As ASNL has an already established working relationship with RWA and continue to support the program offerings, and are near an active Enactus chapter, it is possible to create a similar program in St. John's as has been created and successful in places such as Halifax and Calgary. This partnership approach would be an extension of the already established RWA program run by the ASNL and would allow the staff to tap into the expertise of student consultants with known and established business acumen.

### **6.2.3 DEVELOP A NEW SELF-EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM**

Programs currently exist which provide self-employment entrepreneurship support throughout Newfoundland and Labrador. In 2016, RWA carried out an environmental scan of business development programs in the province to determine the capacity to deliver supports to people with intellectual disabilities and ASD (Dawson, 2016). While there are several programs and organizations that provided support, it was determined that none provided accommodations or modifications to people with intellectual disabilities and ASD (D. Vey, ASNL Program Coordinator, personal communication, December 15, 2016). For example, one of those organizations, Metro Business Opportunities (MBO) provides guidance through on-going business training and self-employment assistance to unemployed individuals; they offer networking opportunities, interactive workshops, business consulting and support. (Metro Business Opportunities Website, 2018). Any aspiring entrepreneur can avail of the services provided, but they do not currently have accommodations for individuals with developmental disabilities.

Opportunities for partnerships should exist to develop self-employment programs with local entrepreneurship-based organizations. These groups, such as MBO, would have a good understanding of local economic and labour market conditions and be able to assist potential self-employed entrepreneurs with making the appropriate decisions for their employment opportunities. The ASNL would need to provide the ASD diagnosis support to the individual in tandem with the business support.

### **6.2.4 DO NOT DEVELOP A SELF-EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM**

The fourth option to consider is to not develop any self-employment program. After further investigation by the client it may be determined that there is little interest in this type of activity in the ASNL's region of support, or that the timing is not right to add another program due to financial or human resources costs. It may be determined that while self-employment is a viable alternative in some locations it may not be the best option due to factors outside the investigative

scope of this project and the researcher. The organization should look at what it would consider its success factors and if it would be willing to invest resources into a program that may not see a lot of return in terms of total overall people employed through the program. They must consider if the resources invested in this program could be invested elsewhere to have a greater impact.

### **6.3 Recommendations**

Organizations across the country are proving that self-employment is a viable option for individuals with ASD. Success stories are emerging across Canada and the United States which show self-employment business development for people with ASD is possible, when done in tandem with strong support for the diagnosis, and support and understanding from the individual's family and caregivers.

The client should consider developing a new self-employment program as another means to help and support interested individuals with ASD start their own businesses to alleviate the economic disadvantage and social isolation often felt by people with development disabilities. The following recommendations are submitted to the client for consideration as possible ways to support their current suite of programs with self-employment opportunities.

The recommendations in the following section provide a variety of options and things for the client to consider when deciding if it is appropriate for them to create a self-employment development program for people with ASD. Some focus on low cost options with little risk for the organization and some focus on longer term plans if it is decided that self-employment is a viable opportunity to create a more substantial program.

These recommendations would allow the client to reach interested individuals in all areas of Newfoundland and Labrador, urban and rural, and help them understand the potential that self-employment opportunities may provide. The recommendations are broken down into two main categories, urban and rural, and further into short-term and long-term options. The urban rural divide for recommendations was considered because of the client's presence in both urban and rural areas of Newfoundland and Labrador and both geographic considerations provide challenges and opportunities for the client to develop a unique program offering. The client has its main provincial office in St. John's, the province's main urban area, and in three additional offices covering rural and remote areas of Newfoundland and Labrador.

#### ***General Recommendations:***

Several recommendations would be applicable for both urban and rural audiences and are included under a list of general recommendations. These recommendations can be enacted in the short-term.

**Recommendation #1:** Compile a package of resources available for self-employment development supports for individuals, including a list of organizations that provide this type of support.

- This can include regional contact information for the government departments and non-profit organizations that provide support. It would be important to include the contact information for organizations that provide online programming.
- This would also include information related to considerations such as tax implications for business development, and rules and regulations required for people starting various forms of businesses (sole-proprietorships, partnerships, corporations, etc.).
- This package could be compiled internally by a staff member given an assignment. A substantial amount of information necessary for the package exists in this report and Appendix 1. Cost considerations would include printing versus a virtual package. Costs could be minimal if the package was only available online as opposed to printed and distributed across the province. A package available online would have the opportunity to reach a broader audience.
- This recommendation could be fulfilled in the short-term.

**Recommendation #2:** Compile a list of profiles of types of business operations that are of interest to individuals. This could provide individuals with the understanding of what would be required in terms of permits and regulations to start particular businesses.

- Market research on the types of businesses popular and in demand for development could be compiled with the support of organizations such as the CBDC's or the Business Development Bank of Canada. These organizations would have market data, and this could help individuals' considerations when looking at business development opportunities.
- As with Recommendation #1, this information could be compiled internally as opposed to hiring a consultant. Developing relationships with business support organizations would be important as they could provide the data for these profiles and help with the costs associated with gathering and compiling the information.
- This recommendation could be fulfilled in the short-term.

**Recommendation #3:** Hire a self-employment coordinator or add the duties to that of a staff member currently providing employment support.

- The work being proposed in the recommendations would require a staff member dedicated to developing the program and resources.
- Both human resources scenarios – new staff member or additional duties for current staff member - would require an increase in payroll expenses. The latest publicly available audited financial statements for the client detail a payroll

expense increase from 2016 to 2017 of \$92,287.00 (ASNL Audited Financial Statements, 2017). A new staff member would increase the payroll significantly compared to possible extra compensation for an already established position with increased duties.

- While the general recommendations were described as short-term opportunities, this human resource specific recommendation could be classified as long-term as the client – a charitable organization – would need to conduct a cost-benefit analysis of the extra human resources expense versus potential self-employment program outcomes.

***Recommendation #4:*** Develop a suite of resources and/or programs directed at the families and caregivers of people with ASD that are interested in starting a self-employment opportunity.

- The support network of the individual with ASD is essential to the success of employment outcomes for the individual. The individual with ASD is often supported by their family and caregiver in a variety of capacities – housing, transportation, etc. Resources dedicated to informing the support network of what a business looks like and the work required to make it successful would be important to the development of sustainable enterprises for the individual. Workshops for the support network would also be important to further educate the support network.
- The resources and materials could be made available online for distribution to a wider audience across the province. An in-person workshop could be developed for presentation in the urban areas of the province where offices exist.
- Financial considerations would include development of the resources and the staff time required for an in-person workshop.
- The resources could be developed in the short-term. The workshop would be a long-term goal of the organization.

### ***Urban Recommendations:***

The client's main office is in St. John's, the largest urban area and capital of the province. Individuals in this area have access to more support and services than their counterparts in rural and remote areas of the province. This presents unique programming opportunities for individuals with ASD in the metro area.

***Recommendation #5:*** Develop an in-classroom workshop program for people interested in self-employment opportunities.

- Options exist to develop a potential partnership with Enactus Memorial and expand on the current project offerings of the RWA program. ASNL's role would

be to continue to provide the social development and ASD diagnosis support and would work with a partner to provide the business development support.

- A variety of government departments and community organizations exist in the St. John's metro area that would be able to support the development of a program unique to the ASD population.
- Human resources considerations would be extensive for this Recommendation. As presented in Recommendation #3, the client would need to determine if capacity to deliver this program already exists within the organization or a separate position would need to be created.
- This Recommendation should be a long-term goal of the ASNL.

***Recommendation #6:*** Develop an entrepreneurial awareness component to employment programs directed at high-school aged individuals.

- An entrepreneurial component added to current programs that exist for high-school aged individuals (STEP) with ASD could help the individual and support network begin to develop a self-employment opportunity before the individual graduates' high school. Studies have shown that the transition period between high school and employment is often tough for people with ASD. Focusing on all options before the end of high school could help the individual and support network fill the gaps for employment after high school before they take.
- This Recommendation could be developed at relatively low cost. It would add work to a staff members plate, but the costs could be alleviated by partnering with another organization to deliver the class or seminar.

***Recommendation #7:*** Create a self-employment development event to promote the opportunities presented by self-employment.

- This could be done in partnership with other organizations that support people with developmental disabilities and business development organizations throughout the St. John's metro area. It could include booths from the various organizations that provide business start-up support.
- This event could be created with minimal human resources expenditure and facilitated internally. The client ASNL has a staff of between 20-30 and a record of organizing and executing large events.
- This event would take some planning time – 1 to 2 months – and executed quickly. This is something that could occur in the short-term and combined with the launch of Recommendations #1, #2, #9, and #11.

***Recommendation #8:*** Engage with other organizations dedicated to providing supports to a range of disabilities to understand commonalities in the struggle for positive employment outcomes.

- Other organizations may also look at self-employment as an opportunity to employ people with a variety of developmental disabilities that may struggle with programs developed for neurotypical populations. This may help save costs in the long-term by sharing information and human resources.
- This Recommendation could be enacted in the short-term. Current staff, including those whose positions are related to employment could be utilized to build these relationships with external organizations. These staff include, Manager of Programs and Services, Manager of Community Engagement, Transitions Coordinator, Employment Works Coordinator, Employment Works Facilitator, Career Services Coordinator, and the Regional Assistant Managers (to provide support in rural areas).

***Rural Recommendations:***

Newfoundland and Labrador is one of the largest provinces by land mass in Canada. The ASNL is the only registered charity providing direct support to people with ASD diagnoses. With four offices covering large geographic areas it can be difficult to reach all individuals in rural and remote areas that may be interested in self-employment opportunities. The variety of programming offered in the rural areas differs from what is available in the urban area of St. John's. The following list of recommendations will present opportunities to reach many individuals in the rural areas of Newfoundland and Labrador.

***Recommendation #9:*** Develop an online training program for rural and remote audiences.

- Online self-employment development programs currently exist. The client could develop a similar program for individuals interested in self-employment development opportunities or partner with an already established organization to share their offerings.
- This Recommendation would be developed in the long-term.
- Human resources considerations would include the contracting of services to ensure the development of the technological requirements to enable an online program on the organizations website. This web development would be extensive and require considerable financial investment. The program development costs could be coupled with the expenses related to Recommendation #5. Both programs could be developed in tandem and ensure there is consistency amongst all platforms.

**Recommendation #10:** Compile a list of organizations providing online development programs.

- Picasso Einstein, an organization based in Florida, addressed geographic challenges when first creating their programs by making all their classes online based so that any person around the world can access their expertise. Roses for Autism provide an eight-week online self-employment training program. The client could develop a partnership with an already established organization to direct individuals to these self-employment development programs
- This could be accomplished by placing a link to the resources on the client's website and would not require a significant amount of financial or human resources for the organization.
- This information could be included as part of the proposed packages from Recommendation #1 and #2. The financial costs for the compilation of this information would be absorbed by the previous recommendations as the information could be gathered at the same time.
- This Recommendation could be fulfilled in the short term.

**Recommendation #11:** Develop an online awareness video or series of videos to promote self-employment opportunities.

- The client has streamed online discussions in the past on subjects of relevance to the ASD community such as during Autism Awareness Month in 2016 (ASNL YouTube channel, 2018). The client could host an online discussion with a variety of individuals with differing perspectives on the self-employment development process including program administrators and individuals that are self-employed, including those with ASD and neurotypical individuals.
- As evidenced by previous videos produced by the ASNL, the organization has the internal capability to create an awareness series. This could include live streamed discussions or more thoroughly produced videos, or a combination of both.
- If produced in-house, the financial and human resources costs would be absorbed by the duties of current employees. Contracting a marketing company could also be considered to develop one video on self-employment opportunities. This would increase the financial costs of the video series. It could be themed to highlight all employment options, including self-employment opportunities.
- Internal videos could be created in the short-term. The development of a video with a marketing company could be a long-term consideration.

## **7.0 Conclusion**

As an individual with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) ages and engages in a search to contribute to their communities and lives, they and their parents, caregivers, and educators –

their support network - often struggle to find meaningful opportunities for engagement, specifically in employment. Individuals with ASD often face levels of economic disadvantage and social isolation higher than their peers in the disability community, and much higher than neurotypical individuals. Self-employment represents an opportunity to alleviate the economic and social isolation often felt by individuals living with ASD. Along with traditional employment opportunities, self-employment should be considered as a viable option for an individual to become actively engaged in their community.

The preceding study examined organizations and individuals that are focusing on the development of self-employment opportunities for individuals with ASD. It focused on several organizations that have in recent years created programs and services directed to look at this form of employment opportunity. It also focused on understanding the motivations of individuals living with ASD and their support network as they explore the self-employment option.

There is often a preconception that self-employment and business development is a complex process. There also exists the idea that a business is something that employs numerous individuals. The majority of businesses in our society are small or medium size enterprises and in many cases throughout history businesses have been comprised of one or several individuals creating a product or providing a service. If individuals or their support network change the lens at which they view small business and self-employment there is an opportunity to focus on the strengths and assets of the individual and create opportunity for the relief of economic disadvantage or social isolation.

This can be accomplished through the careful assessment of individual resources and cultivation of ideas, while at the same time focusing on the needs and challenges associated with the person's diagnosis. Organizations such as Autism Nova Scotia and Enactus St. Mary's, Enactus Calgary, and Picasso Einstein focus on the individual's strengths and interests as they support the assessment and suitability for self-employment and business development. These organizations understand business development principles and the exceptionalities and challenges faced by people with ASD. Through a dual focus approach, they assist individuals and their support networks as they work through the process to determine if a business can succeed. If they believe the business can be successful, then the organizations will continue to support the individual and their support network through the development process. At the same time, they also focus resources on the social and personal needs of the individual. These organizations have achieved success with individuals and continue to focus on spreading the success stories of individuals with ASD and their support networks starting small businesses and self-employment opportunities.

As a final note, self-employment should not be treated as the only option or as a last resort. As with any business development process, the focus of the potential self-employment opportunity

should be on the individual's assets, strengths and interests – and the long-term sustainability of the enterprise. If there is no market or potential for income generation the success of the business and the goals of potential self-employment will not be met. Careful consideration should be taken at all stages as an individual and their support network weigh the options for self-employment.

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# Appendices

## *Appendix 1 – Ready, Willing & Able (RWA): Analysis*

### **READY, WILLING & ABLE (RWA): Analysis** by Eleanor Dawson, 2016

*Organizations offering self-employment to those with intellectual disabilities and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).*

#### PURPOSE:

Ready, Willing & Able (RWA), in partnership with the YMCA of Newfoundland and Labrador commissioned a review of the entrepreneurial and self-employment programs that exist in Newfoundland and Labrador. Ready, Willing and Able is a national partnership of the Canadian Association for Community Living and their member organization (Newfoundland and Labrador Association for Community Living) and the Autism Spectrum Disorder Alliance.

#### GOAL:

The goal is to determine if these programs are accessible and inclusive, and if they are not accessible what are the barriers and challenges experienced by persons with intellectual disabilities and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The report is to include a scale of relevant support programs, issues and challenges that are identified, as well as, recommendations based on their findings.

#### Methodology and Interviews:

The methodology used included interviews with a selection of stakeholders in network organizations, government, educational institutions, social enterprise advocacy, private industry, social entrepreneurs and financial support agencies. Interviews took place over a period of one month. Individuals interviewed were identified by recommendations of RWA team, community referrals and personal connections. The report includes a consensus of recommendations gleaned from these interviews, in addition, research from similar programs across other jurisdictions.

#### **Federal:**

- Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA)
- National Research Council Canada
- Business Development Bank of Canada
- Canada Small Business Financing Program

#### **Provincial**

- Business Investment Program
- Business Development Support Program
- Department of Advanced Education and Skills

#### **Other Programs:**

- Metro Business Opportunity (MBO)
- Community Business Development Corporation (CBDC)
- Futurpreneur

### **Municipal:**

- Municipal (St. John's, NL) Government does not have any funding support programs in place at this time. However, the City is interested in reviewing and revising their policies with consideration and regard given to individuals with intellectual disabilities to become entrepreneurs in our community.

### **Entrepreneurial and self-employment support programs in Newfoundland and Labrador**

#### **Federal Government**

#### **Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA) [www.acoa-apeca.gc.ca](http://www.acoa-apeca.gc.ca)**

The main program ACOA offers to entrepreneurs is the **Business Development Program**. The Program offers interest free loans to help set up, expand or modernize a business. It can also provide financing to develop innovative ideas and improve competitiveness. The Business Development Program (BDP) can help start up, expand or modernize a business. Focusing on small and medium-sized enterprises, the BDP provides access to capital in the form of interest-free repayable assistance. Most business sectors are eligible except retail/wholesale, real estate, government services, and services of a personal or social nature. The BDP also provides financial assistance, in the form of non-repayable assistance, to not-for-profit organizations that provide support to Atlantic businesses. In addition, ACOA provides sector specific support for such industries as: fishing, farming agriculture etc. This program has eligibility criteria. There is an application process and generally a business plan is required. Additionally, owners' equity and personal net worth statement are to be included with the financial information.

#### **Outcome:**

Currently there are no modifications or accommodations to support the intellectual disabilities and ASD community within this sector of funders.

#### **Recommendation:**

*Funding agencies, such as ACOA, should be familiar with intellectual disabilities and ASD Government policy regarding entrepreneurs whether or not it is applicable to their agency program guidelines.*

#### **National Research Council Canada [www.nrc-cnrc.gc.ca](http://www.nrc-cnrc.gc.ca)**

**The National Research Council offers two programs: Industrial Research Assistance Program** – This program assists businesses involved in the development and commercialization of new technologies. Specifics include advisory support through all stages of the process and funding support. Through national and international networks, industrial technology advisors connect clients with experts and potential partners.

**Youth employment program** – This program provides financial assistance to innovative small and medium-sized enterprises in Canada to hire post-secondary science, engineering, technology, business and liberal arts graduates. Graduates work on innovative projects within the small and medium-sized enterprise environment and may participate in research, development and commercialization of technologies. In addition to meeting the needs of innovative small and medium sized enterprises, this Program facilitates the transition of highly skilled young people to a rapidly changing labour market.

These programs have eligibility criteria. There is an application process and generally a business plan required. Additionally, owners' equity and personal net worth statements are to be included with the financial information.

**Outcome:**

Currently there are no modifications or accommodations to support the intellectual disabilities and ASD community within this sector of funders.

**Recommendation:**

*Funding agencies, such as NRC, should be familiar with intellectual disabilities and ASD Government policy regarding entrepreneurs whether or not it is applicable to their agency program guidelines. NRC youth employment program could provide research and testing within the intellectual disabilities and ASD community to see if some of their community members may be suitable for research groups with the NRC.*

**Business Development Bank of Canada**    [www.bdc.ca](http://www.bdc.ca)

The mandate of BDC is to help create and develop strong Canadian businesses through financing and consulting services with a focus on small and medium sized enterprises. BED offers a full spectrum of specialized financing including venture capital, equity as well as growth and business transition capital.

**Outcome:**

Currently there are no modifications or accommodations to support the intellectual disabilities and ASD community with this sector of funders.

**Recommendation:**

*Funding agencies, such as BDC, should be familiar with intellectual disabilities and ASD Government policy regarding entrepreneurs whether or not it is applicable to their agency program guidelines.*

**Canada Small Business Financing Program**    [www.ic.gc.ca](http://www.ic.gc.ca)

This program encourages financial institutions and lending agencies to make financing available to small businesses. Under the program, a small business must apply for a loan at a financial institution. If the loan is approved, the federal government will reimburse 85% of the lender's losses in the case of default.

**Outcome:**

Currently there are no modifications or accommodations to support the intellectual disabilities and ASD community within this sector of funders.

**Recommendation:**

*Funding agencies should be familiar with intellectual disabilities and ASD Government policy regarding entrepreneurs whether or not it is applicable to their agency program guidelines.*

**Provincial Government**

**Business Investment Program**    [www.btcdrd.gov.nl.ca](http://www.btcdrd.gov.nl.ca)

The Business Investment Program provides term loans and equity investments to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in strategic growth sectors as identified by BTCRD. The fund is also available to businesses, which have export potential and require assistance to enter or

expand in external markets. Funds are provided to complement funding from conventional sources, where a need has been demonstrated, and are also intended to increase the capital base of businesses allowing them to leverage new private-sector investments. The Business Investment Program is in the form of repayable term loans to a maximum amount of \$500,000 per government fiscal year at the department's base rate of three per cent.

**Business Development Support Program** [www.btcrd.gov.nl.ca](http://www.btcrd.gov.nl.ca)

The Business Development Support Program assists Newfoundland and Labrador SMEs with opportunities to increase their productivity and improve their competitiveness. The program supports SMEs who demonstrate a desire to develop and grow by improving the operations of the business, investing in its people, and focusing on trade opportunities. BTCRD assistance will be targeted towards businesses in strategic sectors that normally focus on export markets and/or improve import substitution. Funding is available for productivity improvements, knowledge development, market development and/or professional technical advice.

Equity funding in the form of redeemable preferred shares to a maximum of \$500,000 per project; maximum aggregate of \$1 million is available.

**The Business Development Support Program** is in the form of a non-repayable contribution(s) to a maximum amount of \$100,000 per government fiscal year. The contribution level will be based on 50 per cent of eligible costs, with the business identifying their access to the remaining 50 per cent to complete the project(s).

**Outcome:**

Currently there are no modifications or accommodations to support the intellectual disabilities and ASD community within this sector of funders.

**Recommendation:**

*Funding agencies should be familiar with intellectual disabilities and ASD Government policy regarding entrepreneurs whether or not it is applicable to their agency program guidelines. In the case of the BDSPP, a business plan may include subsidized positions for people with intellectual disabilities and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) for job creation in export and production.*

**Department of Advanced Education and Skills** [www.aes.gov.nl.ca](http://www.aes.gov.nl.ca)

The provincial government provides wage subsidies and training subsidies for businesses to hire and train employees in the following areas:

- Skills Development
- Job Creation Partnership
- Wage Subsidies
- Self employment Assistance
- Employment Assistance Services
- Labour Market Partnerships
- Graduate Employment Program

**Self-Employment Assistance Program** [www.aes.nl.ca](http://www.aes.nl.ca)

This Program provides assistance to unemployed individuals to establish their own business. The program is designed to provide individuals with enough time and resources to complete a business

plan and put that plan into action. Individuals need to be eligible for Employment Insurance to qualify.

**Outcome:**

Currently there are no modifications or accommodations to support the intellectual disabilities and ASD community within this sector of funders.

**Recommendation:**

*Department of Advanced Education and Skills and Self-Employment Assistance Program may presently be aware of intellectual disabilities and ASD Government policy regarding entrepreneurs. The range of programming offered does allow room for individuals with intellectual disabilities and ASD. However, eligibility for employment insurance to qualify is a barrier. These groups may benefit working side by side in small team employment environments.*

**Other Agencies/Programs**

**Metro Business Opportunity (MBO) [www.mbo.ca](http://www.mbo.ca)**

Metro Business Opportunity assists in the creation of small business and in the modernization and stabilization of existing businesses. Business advisory and financial services are offered to entrepreneurs through a full spectrum of business consulting. Services also include research, consultation, analysis, surveying, facilitation, evaluation, program diagnosis, and business training. Focusing on the growth sectors of our economy, MBO boasts a broad mix of targeted self-employment programs and loan funds made available through the support of various partnering agencies. Since its inception in 1991, Metro Business Opportunities Corporation (MBO) has established itself as a key player in the economic development community serving St. John's & Mount Pearl.

MBO Specific programs include:

**Seed loan program** provides loans, which can be used to assist the financing of various business activities.

**Self Employment Assistance** allows participants to continue to receive their Employment Insurance while getting their business up and running.

**Entrepreneurial Opportunities Program** provides income support recipients the opportunity to receive 52 weeks of full benefits while all profits are reinvested back into the business.

**Kick Start** – provides low interest loans for persons under the age of 35.

**Outcome:**

Currently there are no modifications or accommodations to support the intellectual disabilities and ASD community within this sector of funders.

**Recommendation:**

*MBO would be well placed to receive financial assistance and designate some of their self-employment programming to include persons with intellectual disabilities and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), if the proper resources were provided to MBO. MBO already offers business advisory, financial services and entrepreneurial training and this could be tailored to persons with intellectual disabilities and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). MBO training also includes;*

*research, consultation, analysis, surveying, facilitation, evaluation, problem diagnosis, and business training.*

**Community Business Development Corporation (CBDC)**      **www.cbdc.ca**

CBDC is a network of non for profit organizations working with government and the private sector to meet the needs of small business. CBDC's offer a number of services that assist in the creation of small business and in the expansion and modernization of existing businesses through financial and technical support. Offices are located in the various regions throughout the province. Within the metro St. John's region there are two offices: Cabot BDC located in Conception Bay South and Celtic BDC located in Ferryland.

Specific programs: loans, loan guarantees and equity financing to new and existing entrepreneurs, Business counselling and advice, Entrepreneurship development and training, technical assistance usually in the form of guidance and coaching. There are various categories of loans including first – time entrepreneur loan, youth loan (persons under 34) general business, innovation, social enterprise and as well as the self employment benefits program which allows individuals to continue to receive employment insurance while starting up their business. Generally, CBDC services are provided to clients who require customized financing not available from traditional sources.

**Outcome:**

Currently there are no modifications or accommodations to support the intellectual disabilities and ASD community within this sector of funders.

**Recommendation:**

*Funding agencies should be aware of intellectual disabilities and ASD Government policy regarding entrepreneurs whether or not it is applicable to their agency program guidelines. CBDC is well placed to offer self-employment programs to those with intellectual disabilities and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). If the proper resources were allocated CBDC, as a representative of not for profit organizations, could expand its guidance and counselling components to include individuals and intellectual disabilities.*

**Futurpreneur** **www.futurpreneur.ca**

Futurpreneur is a national, non-profit organization that provides financing, mentoring and support tools to aspiring business owner aged 18 – 39. The mentoring program matches young entrepreneurs with a business expert from a network of more than 2,800 volunteer mentors. The Programs offer financing, mentoring and business support for every business stage. Specific components include:

**Pre-Launch coaching** working with volunteer mentors.

**Online resource centre** provides tools, articles and an interactive business plan writer to help with the creation of a business plan.

**Financing** of start up loans between 5,000-45,000 that partner with Business Development Bank of Canada.

The threshold for credit is lower than with the banks however there is no specific accommodation for persons with challenges.

In addition, there are banks and lending institutions, which offer loans and start – up capital to new enterprises as well as Venture Capital entities.

**Outcome:**

Currently there are modifications or accommodations to support the intellectual disabilities and ASD community within this sector of funders.

**Recommendation:**

*Funding agencies should be aware of intellectual disabilities and ASD Government policy regarding entrepreneurs whether or not it is applicable to their agency program guidelines. Futurpreneur, if allocated the proper resources and funding could be encouraged to work with entrepreneurial persons with intellectual disabilities. As a non-profit organization, with emphasis on youth businesses and mentorship, specific business models may be applicable to the Futurpreneur program.*

**Findings and Observations**

One of the biggest challenges for small businesses is getting adequate financing. All of the above programs have eligibility criteria. They have application processes, which can be daunting for most people. Generally a business plan is required. Additionally, owners’ equity and personal net worth statements are often to be included with the financial information. Most require the development of a long-term finance strategy and often, before approving a loan, institutions may initiate a credit rating.

Persons with an intellectual disability and/or ASD have an added disadvantage in accessing financial support from these sources due to: lack of own financial resources (savings, home ownership) poor credit rating after long-term benefit receipt, and or not having previous experience in the work force. Also, there may be a lack of accessible information on sources of grants and loans. They may experience fear of losing the security of regular benefit income which could include housing benefits, child care, transportation supports etc.

There is little engagement by public programs to help people with disabilities explore self-employment as a viable work option. This, no doubt, is due to a genuine regard for the risks disabled people face in starting and running a business. Staff in funding organizations indicates a willingness to work with persons with disabilities but are often constrained by the guidelines of the programs.

Within the current structures of public financing, there are numerous barriers for persons with an intellectual disability or ASD. Currently there are no modifications or accommodations to support this particular community.

Some jurisdictions have initiated Micro Business Development Groups (MBDG) which support small enterprises, often home based. These enterprises may be part time or seasonal and can be used to supplement other income including support. The MBDGs can assist with access to small

loans in the range of \$500 - \$2,500 without onerous administration. MBDGs could address a gap in services to support micro-business development in the province.

**Community Support Groups from persons with an intellectual disability or ASD as related to employment support:**

There are numerous organizations, agencies, and not for profit entities whose mandates include the successful integration of persons with disabilities into the workforce. From the Supportive employment entities (a network of nineteen community based services agencies throughout the province; three within the Metro St. John's region – **Avalon Employment Inc, Visions and The Vera Perlin Society**) to federal and provincial government programs ie **Partners Program** of the **Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work**, the provincial **Department of Advanced Education & Skills** whose career development specialists help individuals transition from income support to employment, to a wide range of community based organizations and not for profit agencies – all of which work in various ways to increase the participation of persons with intellectual disabilities and/ or ASD in the work place.

Community programs and services vary and overlap in the type of supports they provide. Some groups work with intellectually challenged persons only – Supportive Employment Agencies work with persons who are intellectually challenged (persons with an IQ under 70). Note: There is work under way to remove this designation. A person diagnosed with ASD whose IQ is higher than 70 would not qualify for services with the Supportive Employment agencies.

The Supportive Employment Agencies work with both clients and employers while other programs work with employers only ie. – **Ready Willing and Able Program; Business Open of Inclusion NL** and The **Partners Program** of the **Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work**. The **Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA)** offers a new program called *At Work*; this program is designed to provide supportive employment programs for individuals living with mental health issues. There is an opportunity here for CMHA to work with ASNL as research shows that clients often demonstrate multiple uses. The recent Needs Assessment Survey completed for Autism Society Newfoundland and Labrador (ASNL) found that key informants want the Association to develop community partners to help with supportive employment. (ASNL offers Employment Works Canada, an employment preparedness-training program) The current supportive employment programs are geared toward wage employment – a realignment of these programs could provide options for self-employment.

A number of agencies and organizations provide financial support for eligible employers in the form of wage subsidy while others provide return to work programming with the use of wage subsidy, short-term training, and accommodation supports. In some cases clients need to be eligible for Employment Insurance in order to benefit from the program.

The YMCA/YWCA provides employment and enterprise services for entrepreneurs through its Business Planning Program however there are no specific accommodations for persons with ASD or intellectual disabilities.

A trend is emerging in other jurisdictions coined “individualized funding programs/models” – this term is used to describe programs that require individuals to create a plan (which can be created in

conjunction with a support network) and bring this plan to the government. Once the terms of the plan are negotiated, the government disburses public funds to the individuals so that they can purchase services and supports. A variation on the individualised funding program is an individually funded services program. Individually funded services are based on the same principles of individualized funding except that the individual's plan can be co-created with a planner/broker and carried out by an agency that is contracted by the planner/individual. This model is currently being piloted in several jurisdictions within Canada and, of course, would require policy change within government.

In summary there are a number of organizations providing the same or similar service. From employment preparation and work incentives, sheltered workplaces, employer supports, wage subsidies to job coaching and assistance with the development of business plan. In addition to providing similar services, these organizations are responsible for maintaining buildings, staff, developing marketing materials, developing relationships with clients and employers etc. A consolidation of these services could lead to greater efficiencies and may free up resources to be directed toward self-employment and entrepreneurship support within this community. Other models of employment support are being developed throughout North America which merit further exploration.

**Relevant provincial, federal and municipal programs that financially support persons with an intellectual disability or ASD:**

Within the Provincial and Federal government systems, there are numerous departments, agencies, secretariats etc., which are responsible for working with persons with intellectual disabilities and Autism Spectrum Disorder and their families. Both levels of government provide a range of services necessary to successfully prepare for, obtain and maintain employment.

A comprehensive overview of all government supports is available through their various websites. Specific employment services range from training and skills development, wage subsidies for businesses, employment planning, counseling and assessment, and the provision of technical aids.

Both levels of Government provide financial support to community partners to provide services and supports to eligible individuals. These community partners provide additional expertise and relationships with clients to deliver services, which assist individuals with disabilities to prepare for, attain or maintain employment.

Eligible individuals can avail of subsidies, programs and services to help move into employment. However if clients become successful with employment, they will lose their support. There can be some overlap of benefits and wages – support benefits and job earnings are overlapped for the first thirty days of employment. Also, clients can earn a small amount of money before their benefits are affected. This situation is a concern for both clients and advocates working in the sector. Support benefits include; drug cards, bus passes, childcare as well as income support. The result can be that a person is only marginally better off with employment.

In summary, there are numerous government departments and agencies responsible for transitioning persons with intellectual disabilities and ASD into the workforce. A major concern is that income supports will be lost once a person finds employment. The community needs to lobby for changes such that aspiring entrepreneurs suffer no benefits penalty when taking up self – employment or starting a business. Transitions between labour market statuses (employment, self-employment, unemployment, inactivity) should be as seamless as possible while also offering safeguards during the early start-up phase when business revenues may be limited.

Provincial social assistance programs could be designed such that people with low-income employment and part-time employment could continue to receive extended health and other disability-related benefits indefinitely. Presently, the prospect of losing such benefits that may be crucial to health and well being can deter people from moving off social assistance into paid employment. The advantage of encouraging and positively assisting people to make this transition is that governments stand to save on income support transfers to individuals, even if expenditures for other benefits would continue.

### **Barriers**

People with intellectual disabilities and ASD face barriers in many aspects of their lives. Many of the barriers to self-employment are faced by disabled and nondisabled people alike but for disabled people they may be more acute or more difficult to overcome, including: access to start-up capital, interaction with the various departments and agencies and institutions and accessing appropriate training and advice. Difficulties in obtaining start-up capital may be due to: lack of own financial resources (savings, home ownership) poor credit rating after long-term benefit receipt.

There may be a lack of understanding on the part of financial institutions, business advisors, and the employment service and lack of accessible information on sources of grants and loans. In addition, clients express fear of losing the security of regular benefit income.

Perception by society is yet another challenge. Despite much lobbying and education there is still very little awareness within the broader community that persons with intellectual disability and Autism Spectrum Disorder can bring exceptional skills to the marketplace.

There is little engagement by public programs to help people with disabilities explore self-employment as a viable work option.

### **Conclusions & Recommendations**

Within the current entrepreneurial and self-employment programs in the province, there is very little accommodation for access by persons with intellectual disabilities and/or Autism Spectrum Disorder. Throughout government and community networks there appears to be a duplication of efforts within in service providers. Also, existing supportive employment programs are geared toward wage employment – a review of employment service providers and an alignment of these programs could provide options for self-employment.

The promise of self-employment raises the bar of all those working with the disability community. Some individuals might be able and willing to take up self-employment or business ownership as a paid work option – but this is unlikely to be a sustainable option for many without extensive and/or long-term support. RWA should consider the creation of a cooperative model as an umbrella to support self-employment activities. To this end RWA could bring together other agencies to develop with umbrella concept. Partners in such a venture could include an existing business incubator, or agencies already specializing in supported employment. Joining with other groups spreads risk and responsibility, just as in microfinance lending. Partner groups could include other service providers, job developers, and lending institutions located inside or outside the community. There are examples of successful social enterprises and cooperatives within the province.

Employment efforts that combine business support systems with personal support systems can open the option of self-employment and self directed employment for persons with intellectual disabilities and ASD.

Based on the above observations, I recommend the following:

1. Provide some form of accommodation within the lending agencies and programs specific to persons with an intellectual disability etc.
2. Encourage more collaboration and/ or consolidation of programs and services within the community aimed at increasing work participation by person with intellectual disabilities and Autism Spectrum Disorder.
3. Aspiring entrepreneurs should suffer no benefit penalty when taking up self-employment or starting a business.
4. Initiate a review of employment support programs with objectives of streamlining services and realigning resources to assist with entrepreneurial initiatives; ie channeling work – incentive funding to support start – up businesses.
5. Explore options for micro financing.
6. Investigate Collective Impact Model to bring community organizations together to align services.
7. Establish a Committee to oversee the development of a self-employment model to accommodation entrepreneurship for this community.
8. Increase public awareness.
9. Explore the options of either Social Enterprise or Cooperative as a model to advance self-employment activities.

10. Encourage public- and private sector investment in, and purchase of, products and services offered by businesses owned by people with intellectual disabilities and/or ASD.
11. Acknowledge the diverse range of skills accompanying persons with intellectual disabilities and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). One business model will not facilitate all entrepreneurial organizations.
12. Groups such as Avalon Employment Inc. The Stella Burry Foundation, and Inclusion NL etc. are fundamental in skills development; these organizations can act as a feeder system into self- employment and entrepreneurial programs.
13. Training and employment spaces should adhere to ergonomics that create safe and productive work environments for people with intellectual disabilities, ie. Lighting conditions, work flow set-up etc. are key to successful outcomes.

## ***Appendix 2 – Interview questions for Individuals with ASD***

1. Have you started your own enterprise, or are you interested in starting your own enterprise?  
What is the enterprise?
2. How long have you been working for yourself? How many hours a day do you work? Week?
3. Why did you start your own enterprise, or want to start your own enterprise?
4. Have you had a job(s) before working for someone else? How long were you there?
5. Did anyone help you start your enterprise? Is anyone helping you start? Are you still receiving support?
6. What has been the hardest part about working for yourself? What is the hardest part in starting a business?
7. What have been the best parts about working for yourself?
8. What other types of help would you like while you start or operate your small business?

### ***Appendix 3 - Interview questions for Program Administrators***

1. Why did your organization start offering this type of support?
2. Can you describe your business program offering?
3. How long has this program been operating? How many enterprises have you helped?
4. What are the biggest challenges people with ASD face when starting an enterprise?
5. What types of support do you provide to individuals interested in starting their own enterprise?
6. How do you find individuals for this program?
7. Do you plan to continue this program?

#### ***Appendix 4 - Survey questions for individuals, families and caregivers***

1. Where do you live?
2. Are you an individual with ASD?
3. Are you a parent or caregiver of someone with ASD?
4. Have you started or helped someone start their own small business?
5. Are you interested in starting or helping someone start their own small business?
6. Why are you looking at self-employment opportunities?
7. Have you or someone you support been employed in the past 12 months?
8. How long was the employment experience?
9. How many jobs have you had or the person you support had in the past 5 years?
10. What type of small business have you started or would be interested in starting?
11. If you have already started a small enterprise how many hours a week are you working?
12. Have there been any challenges or obstacles for someone starting their own small enterprise?
13. Have there been any benefits for someone starting their own small enterprise?
14. Financial support is an important motivator for starting a small enterprise. (Scaled answer)
15. Social interaction is an important motivator for starting a small enterprise. (Scaled answer)
16. The experience of starting and/or running a small enterprise has been a positive experience. (Scaled answer)
17. The experience of starting and/or running a small enterprise has been a positive experience. (Scaled answer)
18. I could easily find the information I needed to start a small enterprise. (Scaled answer)
19. Is self-employment something you would ever consider for yourself or someone you support?
20. Would you be interested in learning more about self-employment opportunities for yourself or someone you support?