**ABSTRACT for the 2019 CAAC KEYNOTE ADDRESS**

*Research Directions Driven by AAC Speakers: Optimizing Communication for Employability*

Chris Klein, Becoming AAC

Employment, work, and career are greatly valued in this country. Employment gives people far more than financial resources. It fulfills the need of an individual to be productive, promotes independence, enhances self-esteem, and allows participation in the mainstream of America.

Individuals with disabilities have been fighting to have these same opportunities. In 1990, when President George H.W. Bush signed the American Disabilities Act, it was a step towards equaling the playing field for people who have a disability to get a job. However, while progress has been made, employment is still one of the major issues people who have a disability face.

For individuals who use AAC, having meaningful employment is a major factor in life that research hasn’t addressed well. A national survey done by Light, McNaughton, and Stoltz (1996) showed that there are only 25 individuals who use AAC working over 10 hours per week. (McNaughton & Arnold, 2010) It’s 23 years later, and little progress has been made on this issue.

Individuals are taught to develop a work ethic. It’s pulling oneself up by the bootstraps and becoming a self-made man or a woman. Work ethic takes a certain amount of motivation. All individuals are different when it comes to motivational factors, which includes individuals who use AAC. Motivational factors of the individual can factor into how the individual’s work ethic develops. Many individuals can push through the barriers and obstacles that are in front of them. This includes many individuals who use AAC. Yet, factors of life can overwhelm any individual.

There are also individuals with that entrepreneurial spirit. It’s true many individuals admire people like Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, Mark Cuban, and others for their entrepreneurial spirit. Individuals who use AAC may have this entrepreneurial spirit as well. They are people too and sometimes people, no matter their abilities, have this internal drive to make something more or something greater then oneself. Employment is a start, but why not employer!

Employment plays a key role in personal self-image and quality of life for adults. Social relationships, community involvement, financial self-sufficiency, and residential living are positive outcomes that have been all linked to meaningful employment. Employment for individuals with disabilities, particularly those with complex communication needs is an important area of research. It is important to identify ways that individuals who use AAC can have the opportunity not only to be employed but to reap the benefits of having meaningful employment.

The organization SHOUT tried to address this problem by starting the Pittsburgh Employment Conference (PEC) in 1993. Out of these gatherings, friendships were formed, and a resolve was formed among attendees. The AAC community came together and tried to find solutions. It was successful raising the level of awareness of participants, especially those who were children who use AAC. It raised the bar for parents and teachers, who are setting the expectations for their future. It wasn’t successful with increasing employment rates for individuals who use as it set out to be.

There is little doubt that research has improved AAC systems. Yet, this hasn’t translated into improving opportunities for employment or into addressing the every day activities that may lead to employment opportunities. It hasn’t translated in helping connect socially with people.

What research is needed to identify and find solutions to the barriers preventing individuals who use AAC from being employed?

Research has given us data, which has helped us in a lot of different areas. The promise of AAC has been for an improved quality of life, but for that truly to happen meaningful employment needs to happen. This means research has to revisit this area and try to figure out what barriers still exist. What communication and assistive technology barriers are getting in the way? How can we improve on eliminating these barriers? What educational barriers are still out there? How are we assessing individuals who use AAC? How can we better assess them in order for them to gain meaningful employment?

Employment is a key component to living a purposeful life. It helps in every aspect of an individual’s life. This is why it is essential individuals who use AAC to have more opportunities for meaningful employment. This session poses questions that deserve to be studied and funded to improve employment opportunities for individuals who use AAC.

References

McNaughton, D. & Arnold, A. (2010). Supporting Positive Employment Outcomes for Individuals Who Use AAC. Perspectives on Augmentative and Alternative Communication, 19 (2), 51-59. doi: 10.1044/aac19.2.51