



# EMPLOYMENT

A Saskatchewan Self Advocate's Employment Journey

BY ANONYMOUS

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**This resource was made in collaboration with:**



# My Employment Journey

Hello! I am a thirty one year old man who resides in a city in Saskatchewan. I was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder in 1996. I have experienced some difficulties with organization and doing school work. I have had teacher assistants help me with getting work done at school. I would like writing stories and talking about things I liked such as animals or camping. I was good at writing and reading and spelling.

My weak points at school were mathematics and science. There were times in which giving a presentation in front of the class was impossible. I would get anxiety and not be able to speak. There were times in which giving a speech and presentation was relaxing and not hard. I also enjoyed doing book reports. I would summarize each chapter and enjoy the characters and the story.

I had several people help me at school. I needed assistance because I did have problems with attention span and other things. Mrs S and S. L. helped me at C.L. school. I would often go to a room in which we had a quiet place to read and then write about the topics that the teacher discussed. I remember writing about bats. I would fill many pages about bats.

At times writing at school could be quite difficult. I remember being in grade 5 and Mr. W would have us do this thing called "info-books". Info-book was basically what our day or week was and summarize it into several paragraphs. The problem is that the teacher wrote so fast and in this hard to read handwriting, and it was difficult to keep up. So other people gave me a printed copy of what was on the blackboard and I would go from there.

I remember doing spelling tests when I was 12 in Mr. H's class. We would do these spelling tests and I would do well on them. I always liked writing and I had no skill whatsoever in illustrating or drawing. But I could always rely on writing stories and writing my opinions on topics and that was more effective.

In March and April of 2003, I was involved in this babysitting course at C.L. school. I don't remember how I came across it or why I chose it but it looked interesting to me. I think the course lasted 4 to 6 weeks. The teacher gave us a binder and gave us a booklet. I enjoyed the course. I did not find it difficult at all. The course was after the school day was over so it was very easy.

We went over how to take care of kids during babysitting and what to do if there is an emergency and many other things. I no longer remember who the teacher was. She was a nice lady. I still have that babysitting book and it has all the highlights in it. It was from 2003 so I am not sure if things have been updated or changed since then. There were others in the class and there were some jokes and playing games but for the most part it was an interesting experience.

In December 2004. My parents had to go to a Christmas party and they told me that I would be watching my brother Peter at home during this time. I think they were gone for perhaps three to four hours. It was going to be a long night.

After about an hour, Peter was wondering where Mom and Dad were. I explained to him that they were at a party and would not be coming home for a while. He became very worried and he thought that they would never come home and he started getting upset and started crying.

I never saw Peter show this much anxiety and worry over Mom and Dad not being home for so long. So, I pulled out Monopoly game and told Peter that we should play Monopoly until they come home. I was relieved when he stopped crying.

Mom and Dad eventually did come home and everything was ok. I never saw Peter in that state before and so I had to do something to calm him down and distract him from the fact that our parents were gone for the night.

In 2008 I was involved in the work experience program at my High School. I would be employed part time but I would only do the job for experience and not for any money. This was at a large department store at the mall near the school. My responsibilities were to gather the shopping carts from the parking lot and put them back in their place. I had to clean the washrooms and help customers. I also had to make sure the shopping baskets were returned to the front of where the cashiers were. I started this in April 2008.

It was hard at first but it got easier as time went on. I do not remember who my boss was. But she was a kind and understanding person and she was pleased with my work. I really enjoyed working there. My depressive episode lifted in May 2008 and I was really thankful for that.

I took Seroquel but to be honest I don't think the medication helped me. The pill was small. The depression came out of the blue and it kind of put me out of commission for at least a month. I actually started to enjoy the rest of being at the department store. It is very unfortunate that it closed down several years later because I probably would have liked to work there.

After high school, I joined SaskAbilities in September of 2009. SaskAbilities is a training program to assist in people getting employment. There would be monthly pay cheques. We would get paid per month. SaskAbilities was a very good experience. They were very welcoming and supportive and They had several departments. They had the wheel chair lift division.

They had the woodworking sector. They had the packaging sector. They had the kitchen. They also had sewing. I started in the packaging department and I was there from September 2009 to March 2010. The packaging department shut down and I went into woodworking.

I also had spent a short amount of time in the wheelchair lift division. I would lightly dab grease on these pulley's and hand them over to my co worker. I would also be involved in the kitchen at SaskAbilities I would prepare sandwiches and wash cutlery and dishes with the dishwasher. The kitchen was my favorite place to work because you got to see how the food was made but the kitchen and cafeteria was just a positive and nice environment to work and be in. We would get free specials if we worked in the cafeteria.

Eventually we would have to pay the \$3.75 for the meal because people were being vultures and hone in on the last few meals. I would eventually go back into the woodworking section from Jan 2014 to September 2014.

This time around was much more difficult because I had already worked in that section for some time and I started to no longer enjoy it. I would have occasional moderate to severe back pain during this time and I would spend several days either sitting in the office or having to take a day off. I had back pain in February 2006 in high school and I had to adjust my computer chair and use heating pads on my back to reduce the pain. I no longer have debilitating back pain. I make sure to be active and take walks and take breaks when I need to.

In November 2014, I started to work at Cosmopolitan Industries. This was an area in which I have never worked before. It was a recycling depot. They had conveyor belts that had paper and other materials on them. You would shove the paper down the chute rapidly and quickly. The paper was then crushed and then transformed into insulation for building and homes.

Loads and loads of unused items would find their way onto the belts. Keyboards and mice, computer cases, used laptops, phones, Game systems, you name it. The belts would get covered in a brown smelly substance. You can probably use your imagination to guess what that is. The belts would get very dirty and covered in all sorts of stuff and the work was somewhat hazardous.

We had to use hearing protection and wear face masks. I think I also wore steel toed boots for added protection. I would work from 8:30 am to 3pm. This was Monday to Friday. I earned about 1000 dollars every two weeks. I was surprised to be earning this amount for this type of work. I had a conflict with a co worker.

It reached a boiling point in May of 2015. I was eating in the lunch room when she started to laugh at me. I got in her face and whisper shouted some certain words and walked away. As I walked downstairs...I was in shock. I acted in a way I shouldn't have. I was thinking that I would be terminated and lose my job but that did not happen. My supervisors called me into the office and I had explained to them that this person was being belligerent and aggressive.

I told them that I did get in her face but I did not touch her or punch or kick her in any way. They said that they would have to call the police and I would be fired if that happened. But I had quickly calmed down and decided to continue working.

I apologized to the co worker. Several weeks passed by and she was now harassing another worker at Cosmo and this time she was terminated. I was at Cosmo for almost two years. I started on the bottom conveyor belts. The work was fast paced and I got the hang of it very quickly.

I had good relationships with most of the people I worked with. The Cosmo building was large and had somewhat of a cumbersome layout. There were these long stretches of hallways you had to move through to get to where you wanted to go.

There was a cafeteria which you could purchase food. I did not like the menu that they had. The food in the Cosmo cafeteria did not entice me so for most of my time there I took my own lunch. There was a lunchroom above where we ate. It was a small messy room but it had a fridge and a sink and other things.

I need someone to write down a list of instructions on what to do. I am not good with people just explaining it or pointing at it. I always make sure that I arrive at work well in advance.

Some employers will allow the employees to relax in the lunch room or breakroom. I used to take my iPod or music device and just listen to music for 45 minutes to an hour waiting for work to start. If the job is from 8am to 5pm, I would wake up early and get everything ready.

There were some work experience jobs that I did not enjoy for several reasons. Some jobs were either boring or tedious or they just did not fit my profile. These were jobs at work experience at partners in employment. In March 2012 I went to a large grocery store.

I did the job interview process. The job was not particularly difficult. I cleaned some of the containers that hold the vegetables and work on the shelves. I felt the work I was doing was boring and pointless. I think I even left early one day and decided to go home because I felt I was just wasting my time. My boss was not too pleased about my performance.

But the issue was that there was no useful work to do. The store was not incredibly busy. I quickly began to regret that I went there. Every single day I was there it was very tedious and very boring. I was actually wasting my time being there. The store has been shut down and dismantled. Honestly, looking back on it, I kind of wish I did not go there. The work was slow and boring. There was very little interaction with supervisors and the boss. I had no interest in being there.

The other job placement was at a very large hardware store. This was in December 2012. I had a uniform to put on and every day I was there to use a handheld machine to tag items and make sure all the items went to where they were supposed to go. I had a coworker help me. This coworker helped me learn how to use the machine and learn how to tag items using it. At first, I started to enjoy it. But after the second week I started to have some doubts about it. Although this time around my work felt meaningful enough that I continued to do it throughout the weeks that I was there.

I help move merchandise and items. I told the manager that I did not want to be a cashier or speak over the intercom as I felt I would not be good at it. The lunchroom was somewhat small. I had a locker to put my uniform in. I would arrive in the morning and change into my uniform and start working. There was this storage room similar to an attic in which there were more items that we all had to keep track of. Overall it was not the best experience. I have to put those two negative experiences to show that you cannot get discouraged by several bad placements. Some jobs are too mentally stressful or too physically demanding and things can get overwhelming.

I was at Cosmopolitan Industries from November 2014 to August 2016. I do regret quitting but sometimes you have to decide what is best for yourself. I have seen some people get stuck in jobs that burn people out over time and that is not desirable. But I am very thankful for the experience that Cosmo has given me. It was a little hard at first but it became easier over time. I simply did not like the grocery store or the hardware store. They were not a good fit for me.

So my recommendations to employers who are working with people on the autism spectrum is to provide a guideline of all work tasks. Tell them what is expected of the job and talk to them about safe work procedures. Be patient and understand that everyone learns and remembers at a different pace.

For example, if something is too large or too heavy to lift for one person, get a buddy to help carry it. Give the person a detailed list of instructions on what work tasks need to be done. Give a detailed list of where the work will be performed. Tell them what behaviours are expected and all the things that are appropriate and not appropriate.

If there is an issue with harassment or bullying in the workplace, it needs to be taken care of by speaking to the boss or supervisor immediately.

This is important because harassment at the workplace can severely diminish morale and might make the person quit the job early. At Cosmo, I had to adjust to different working conditions. One of the examples I can think of is that my coworkers and I were on the floor clearing debris and garbage. We were not clearing paper on the conveyor belt. We did this for several days straight until the garbage was cleared.

Not all jobs have you doing the same tasks and you may be switched to a task that you may find tedious or hazardous and you might not enjoy it. I had to adjust to the different working conditions which was not too difficult. People should be aware of what type of work they will be doing so they can prepare for it. I had used steel toed boots for Cosmo. I believe they were mandatory. You can never be too careful lifting heavy things. The employers should also give a list of all of the work equipment and work tools that are of use.

# Questionnaire

## **What have you learned about yourself during your various employment opportunities?**

I now know much more about my mental and physical limitations. I found Cosmo and Sarcan in particular to be fast paced work. I had to make sure I was prepared to do things that I would not do otherwise. I had to get my resume and go out and look for work. I can also take instructions better. I need instructions given in a special way. Pointing or gesturing at objects or things does not work for me.

## **What is the biggest hurdle for you to be successful at work?**

Learning where all the safety equipment is and what tasks need to be done at work. Getting to know the bosses and supervisors. I understand that certain people have difficulty in "switching gears" and being able to do different tasks during the day. I have learned that sometimes you have to do different tasks and you might not get them all done in one day. I also need transportation to get to work on time. My car and my license have been very important for me to be successful and independent.

## **What can employer's do to create a work place that considers the needs of those with Autism?**

Employers need to print or write out a detailed list of tasks (e.g. laminated sheets) and things that their workers will be doing. Tell them what is expected of them and what behaviours are accepted and not accepted. Tell them what kind of work they will be doing and the hazards and risks associated with it. It also takes time for people on the spectrum to feel comfortable and be able to repeat their responsibilities.

## **What new skills have you developed during your employment opportunities?**

I have learned to be more assertive at work. I have learned to accept feedback and improve when it is necessary. I use an alarm clock so I can be on time. I have learned to be punctual and early. I think ahead and am proactive. I have learned to manage and budget my money to cover my expenses.

## **What is your favourite part of work?**

Afternoon. I enjoy the afternoon because the day is half over and you get to relax and eat lunch and interact with the people who I work with. You know that you put in a solid day of work and it feels nice to contribute.

## **Have you developed a stronger relationship with your co-workers? With your supervisor?**

I think I have. I think it's important to work with different kinds of people. Sometimes other people need your help because they cannot do the job by themselves. I have good sense of humour and use it to communicate and develop relationships.



**What changes do you want to see in the future with regards to those with disabilities in the work place?**

I would like to see more inclusiveness in the workplace. I think people just automatically assume that people with disabilities will not be advantageous to the workplace. But the truth is that everyone has a set of skills and strengths and that everyone is valuable. I hope in the future that employers and others understand is that everyone has a set of skills that are valuable in the workplace.

**Where do you see yourself in the future?**

Living in independently in my own apartment. I want my own car and other things. Being able to take vacations and trips is a bonus as well.

**What is your dream job? And why?**

I want a fun and fulfilling job that pays enough so I can be independent. I don't know what that could be at the present time. I want to work for a good company with understanding supervisors and be able to support myself. I still want to be working physically. Also working with other people could be a plus.

**What message do you want to pass on to employers?**

Please listen to the concerns of your future employees. Make sure that all bases are covered in terms of the demands and hazards of what your workers will be doing. Take the time to develop a good relationship