People on autism spectrum get new tools and new hope

Tech platform can serve as a “virtual therapist” to guide those with developmental disabilities toward independent living.

George E. Jordan
george@griotmediaworks.com

Katrina works as an assistant at a pet grooming shop in Colorado, one that embraces alternative approaches to hiring.

She is on the autism spectrum, which can make it difficult for her to read social cues. She also can appear socially disconnected at times, but Katrina has a workplace “buddy” to help her with that and teach job responsibilities, including bathing pets, punching a time clock and greeting customers.

Katrina’s job coach, Quint Macaruso, said he starts with face-to-face meetings and then adds a software tool to create customized multimedia presentations and videos she can view on a tablet as often as needed.

“Using it at home and at work, she can go through her daily routine. All her daily tasks at work are on the system, so she can work independently without a job coach,” said Macaruso, who works for Questwell, an employee training service.

“We work the first two weeks together, the full shifts, to make sure she can do the job. Then we can phase out one-to-one sessions,” he said. “The system helps me help more people.”

BIG NEED IN NEW JERSEY

There are a lot of people like Katrina in New Jersey, which has the highest rate of autism in the United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. As many as 1 in 32 children is on the spectrum, according to the data.

That’s why Avail, the software used to train and help Katrina, and other tools like it are more important than ever. Avail is marketed by CentralReach, a fast-growing Matawan-based company that supports professionals who treat people with developmental disabilities, including dyspraxia, dyslexia, ADHD and autism.

Several corporations, including T.J. Maxx, use Avail and other tablet-based tools to train employees on the autism spectrum. Groups such as Autism New Jersey and Easterseals New Jersey said tablet-based training programs will allow more people with autism and other cognitive disabilities to join the workforce.

LOW EMPLOYMENT

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, fewer than 1 in 5 people with a physical or mental disability was employed in 2019. The coronavirus pandemic made matters worse.

“These individuals don’t have the experience. They are afraid. That is a huge barrier,” said Danielle Androvich, an employment counselor at Easterseals New Jersey. "A lot of high schools offer volunteering and job internships, but it doesn’t help with experience.”

Many people with mental disorders excel in pattern recognition, memory or mathematics. Yet they can struggle to fit the profile many employers are seeking.

Chris Sullens, CentralReach’s CEO, said there is a severe shortage of behavioral therapists. He estimated only 45,000 were available to care for 1.5 million people nationally diagnosed on the autism spec-
trum. He said the number of people entering the field is growing 20% annually, a major factor in CentralReach’s expansion and presence on so many lists of fastest-growing companies.

“There are fewer than half of the number of therapists we need to service this community,” Sullens said. “Our mission and goal is to provide technology, content and services that help clinicians work with individuals on the autism spectrum and improve their ability to live more independently.”

CentralReach has hired 200 employees over the past 18 months and plans to add 100 more, Sullens said. The staff includes dozens of licensed therapists, statisticians and software developers. The privately held company paid an undisclosed amount for Avail Support in February to expand the utility of the electronic records system.

The company’s platform dominates the market for office management systems for applied behavioral, occupational, physical and speech therapists.

“We try to look at the therapy practices and provider fatigue of running a business,” said Cheryl Michael, CentralReach’s chief products officer. “How do you improve outcomes ... and make it easier for the therapist to focus on the learner and then individualize the treatment.”

Michael compares CentralReach’s platform to a smaller version of Epic, the colossal electronic medical record systems used to manage the nation’s largest hospitals and health systems. Like Epic, CentralReach organizes medical records, scheduling, test results, insurance claims and other management functions.

CentralReach took a gamble with the purchase of Avail Support, created in Ireland by Lisa Marie Clinton. It represented a dramatic expansion of the company’s core services into the realm of “virtual therapist.”

“Years ago, to teach people with disabilities, they would use videotapes. Now it has advanced so you can use a variety of media, verbal instructions and picture prompts,” Clinton said in a telephone interview from Dublin.

“Today, we try to be a virtual therapist for that individual,” she said. “Service providers can support more individuals but still have a quality program.”

GETTING RESULTS

Consider the case of Oscar, a 9-year-old on the autistic spectrum, who caused quite a scene when told to brush his teeth at bedtime.

“He had most of the ability and understanding of how to brush, but it was still a lot of friction, a lot of tension at home when it came time for him to get ready for bed,” Clinton explained. “It would cause a row and he would get frustrated and the mother would get frustrated.”

So Clinton said Oscar’s counselor assembled a video and photographs of Oscar demonstrating the correct way to brush his own teeth.

At bedtime, they showed Oscar the presentation.

“He was watching a video of himself self-directing through the process,” she said. “He was highly motivated by himself being the star of the show. He didn’t need external help.

“In the end, he wasn’t going to argue with himself,” Clinton said. “It made a world of difference in that home.”

Advocates for children and adults with autism said videos, photographs and other visual aids often work well.

“The wide variety of tech platforms have been tremendously helpful to people with autism across work settings, educational and recreational settings,” said Suzanne Buchanan, executive director of Autism New Jersey, who recalled past years of assembling decks of laminated photocopies.

But “we cannot simply rely on the technology,” said Buchanan, whose organization focuses on services for the poor and patients with severely challenging behaviors. “We can’t forget the fundamentals of good teaching and good therapy, which require an individualized approach, analysis and data collection to make sure there is progress.”
Chris Sullivan is the chief executive officer of CentralReach, a software company based in Matawan that supports professionals who treat people with developmental disabilities, including dyspraxia, dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and autism. Noah Murray, for The Star-Ledger