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Evaluation of the Transformative Autism Program

Prepared For:

Sacramento Employment and Training Agency

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	1
Key Findings	3
Executive Summary	4
Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic	5
Young Adult Contributions and Skill Development.....	6
Employer Participation	7
What’s Next?	8
Introduction.....	9
Overview of the Pilot	10
Development of TAP.....	11
Young Adult Contributions to Training Resources	12
Preparing for Employer Engagement.....	14
Young Adult Skill Development	15
Employer Participation	16
Facilitated Trainings.....	16
Employer Characteristics.....	17
Employee Feedback and Planned Changes	19
Employer Recruitment and Hiring.....	20
Suggested Next Steps	21
Summary and What’s Next?	22
Appendix A	24
Employer Intake Survey	24
Employer Exit Survey	24
Employer Follow-Up Interviews	25
Stakeholder Interviews.....	25
References.....	26

Key Findings

The Breaking Barriers Pilot, funded by the California legislature in 2018, accomplished its primary goals. It created four online video training modules that 32 employers completed between August 2020 and March 2021, exceeding the goal of 24. These online training modules are freely available to employers at <https://tapautism.org/>. Employers can view them at their own pace or in sessions facilitated by staff. The pilot also engaged approximately 30 autistic young adults to develop and help deliver the training. Additional measures of success for the program include the following:

- In interviews, the young adults who helped develop and deliver the training described the skills and experience they gained, including improvements in communication and public speaking skills, comfort with workplace expectations, organizational and leadership skills, and confidence.
- In a follow-up survey, the large majority of employers (approximately 80 percent) indicated that the training was “very informative” or “informative.” Participants most valued learning about inclusive recruitment, application, and interview methods.
- The facilitated training offered a substantial value-add because participants were able to engage in discussion about the content and get clarification from the facilitators.
- Follow-up interviews with eight employers, conducted 1 to 2 months after they completed the training, indicated that several were in the process of making their recruiting, hiring, and onboarding processes more inclusive for autistic people.
- Several interviewed employers expressed interest in connecting to an internship program or a referral mechanism so that they could consider hiring individuals on the autism spectrum.
- Program staff pivoted successfully in a short amount of time from in-person training sessions to online training modules due to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ These free online training modules will be a valuable resource for employers well beyond the end of the pilot.

¹ The pandemic prevented in-person training beginning in March 2020.

Executive Summary

Numerous studies have documented the challenges autistic individuals face when trying to obtain and retain employment.² The California state legislature responded in 2018 by funding the Breaking Barriers in Employment for Young Adults with Autism pilot program (Breaking Barriers Pilot), designed to increase the long-term employment opportunities for autistic youth. The primary goals of the pilot were to:

- create a training and training manual for employers to learn about recruiting, hiring, and retaining autistic employees;
- conduct the training about recruiting, hiring, and retaining autistic employees with 24 employers; and
- engage autistic young adults in the development and delivery of the training to ensure that the content reflects their perspectives and to provide them with an opportunity to develop their skills.

This pilot program was operated through a partnership between Meristem, the Sacramento Employment and Training Agency (SETA), the California Workforce Development Board (State Board), and the California Workforce Association (CWA). The development team was led by Meristem staff and also included autistic young adults. The training, called the Transformative Autism Program (TAP), includes four 20-minute training videos and a reference manual. The employer training materials are organized into four topics:

- **Prepare:** Presents information about autism and provides resources to support recruiting and onboarding autistic people.
- **Recruit and Hire:** Provides guidance for recruiting and interviewing autistic people and other neurodiverse candidates.
- **Onboard:** Presents tips and strategies for planning for the first day on the job—for example, an onboarding checklist, a first-day schedule, and training about work tasks.
- **Retain:** Explains how to establish a career development plan that articulates benchmarks and associated goals and how to provide ongoing feedback.

The training modules were available to employers to be viewed at their own pace, and they were also delivered in a facilitated format. In the latter, a group of employees watched the videos together, and then, after each module, staff and young adults from Meristem facilitated discussion and answered questions.

The state legislature required an evaluation of the pilot program, and SETA contracted with Social Policy Research Associates (SPR) to conduct this work. Using data collected through interviews, surveys, and a document review, the evaluation describes the implementation of the training and employer feedback. Appendix A describes the data collection methods.

² See Coleman and Adams (2018), Hendricks and Wehman (2009), Roux et al. (2013), and Scott et al. (2019).

The evaluation of the pilot indicates that the Breaking Barriers Pilot successfully accomplished its goals. Specifically:

- The Meristem team created four 20-minute training videos and a reference manual with assistance from approximately 30 autistic young adults. These resources are available (at no cost) to employers at <https://tapautism.org/>.
- SPR interviewed young adults who reported growing through the experience—including improved communication and public speaking skills, comfort with workplace expectations, organizational and leadership skills, and increased confidence.
- Thirty-two employers completed the training between August 1, 2020 and March 31, 2021. Twelve were located in Sacramento County and nine were located in Los Angeles County. The remainder were from other counties in California (n=7) or out of state (n=3).³ These employers found the training informative and engaging, and several reported that they were planning to change or were in the process of making changes to their hiring practices.
 - Approximately 80 percent of employers that completed a post-training survey indicated that the training was “very informative” or “informative.” They found that learning how to make their recruitment and hiring processes more inclusive for autistic people was the most valuable aspect.
 - The facilitated training sessions supplemented the training modules in meaningful ways, including by allowing employees to discuss plans for implementing ideas from the training and to ask follow-up questions.
 - Follow-up interviews with nine employers (1 to 2 months after they completed the training) indicated that several were planning to make or were in the midst of making their recruiting, hiring, and onboarding processes more inclusive for autistic people. For example, one company was starting to incorporate the information into its standard operating procedures for recruitment and hiring.

These findings are described in more detail later in this executive summary.

IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

In March 2020, California initiated a shelter-in-place (SIP) order in response to the spread of COVID-19 across the state.⁴ The SIP order had a significant impact on the state’s workforce and education systems, including at SETA, Meristem, and the pilot’s employer partners. At the start of the SIP order in March, Meristem staff were completing updates to a final draft of the

³ One of the 32 employers is excluded from the location counts because information on its location is unknown.

⁴ These SIP orders restricted nonessential in-person gatherings to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Consequently, Meristem had to make adjustments to planned internships and in-person employer training sessions.

employer training manual and beginning to plan for in-person summer internships and employer outreach and training.

The SIP order had at least three major impacts on the pilot:

- Meristem adapted the training modules to be a set of produced videos narrated by a professional actor (who was also an autistic young adult) instead of a rebroadcast of planned in-person training sessions. This pivot involved a more intense focus on scripting and producing the videos. The produced videos wholly replaced the planned in-person training sessions. These videos are available at: <https://tapautism.org/>.
- Several anticipated summer internships with employer partners were canceled, requiring Meristem staff to identify alternative internship settings.
- An in-person class operating at Meristem that was focused on the development of the TAP training pivoted to a socially distant learning environment, and then to a virtual setting. Students contributed to the development of new virtual training modules under rapidly changing circumstances. Several worked virtually from home, while others worked with restricted peer-to-peer contact.

Despite these pivots, students, program administrators, and Meristem staff widely reported that the adjustments, and in particular the development of the virtual training modules, ultimately benefited the project, as they offered employers additional ways to engage with the content.

YOUNG ADULT CONTRIBUTIONS AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Autistic young adults contributed to the development of the TAP manual and facilitation of employer training—as stipulated in the legislation—as well as to the development of the survey of autistic young adults on their experiences with employment, the testing of hiring and employment strategies through participation in summer internships, and the marketing of the program through brand design activities. In interviews, SPR heard from several young adults that being part of the development of this program had a beneficial impact on their personal and professional growth. Specifically, all young adults interviewed discussed their individual growth in at least two of the following areas:

- professional communication and public speaking;
- professional organization and comfort with workplace expectations;
- supervising others and developing professional and social bonds in the workplace;
- advocating for personal and professional needs; and
- confidence in professional settings and situations.

All respondents expressed a desire for the program to continue to operate and mature. Many of the youth also discussed how they hoped the program would continue to support other autistic young adults in the future.

EMPLOYER PARTICIPATION

Thirty-two employers completed the training between August 1, 2020, and March 31, 2021, exceeding the goal of 24 employers. Additionally, 42 employees completed the training.⁵ The main outcomes of the training included the following:

- **A large majority (approximately 80 percent) of employees who completed the training exit survey indicated that the training was “very informative” or “informative.”** The aspect that they found most valuable was learning about inclusive recruitment and hiring, such as guidance for wording job descriptions and interview tips (e.g., providing an interview schedule in advance).
- **Facilitation added substantial value to the online training format because it prompted discussion among staff about making changes.** During the facilitated sessions, employer staff also discussed the implications of the suggested changes and were able to get clarifications from the facilitators.
- **Employer staff who were interviewed 1 to 2 months after the training indicated their companies were in the process of implementing or planned to implement things they learned about during the training.**
 - Among the nine employers that participated in follow-up interviews after the training, all four of the respondents who were in decision-making roles (e.g., president, founder, or human resources manager) planned to make changes to hiring and recruiting processes that they learned about during the training; they had not yet done so because of competing priorities, or they were in the process of implementing changes. The remaining respondents found the training very informative but were not in a position to comment on changes or planned changes at their organizations.
- **Several interviewed employers expressed an interest in seeing the training paired with an internship program or referral mechanism where they could be connected to qualified job candidates.**

The primary reasons employees participated in the training were that they were interested in learning about autism in the workplace (97 percent), in how to build a workplace culture that is inclusive of autistic people (42 percent), and in expanding their applicant pool to include autistic people (42 percent). There were some notable characteristics about the employers, including:

- **The employers were from a variety of industries**, with the most in healthcare (n=5), information systems and technology (n=5), and the nonprofit industry (n=3). The remaining

⁵ To allow time for data analysis, we closed data collection at the employee level on December 31, 2020, yielding a final count of 42 employees from 26 employers that had completed the training since August 1, 2020. However, we still obtained overall counts of employers that had at least one employee complete all four modules of the training between January 1, 2021, and March 31, 2021. An additional six employers completed the training in this period, bringing the total to 32 employers.

13 were in other industries, such as education or finance. The employers tended to be small, with 20 of 26 employing 50 or fewer employees.⁶

- **The employers were mostly located in California.** About 38 percent (n=12) were located in Sacramento County and 28 percent (n=9) were located in Los Angeles County. The remainder were from other counties in California (n=7) or from outside the state (n=3).⁷

WHAT'S NEXT?

As evidenced by exit surveys and young adult and employer interviews, the pilot has accomplished its goals. Moreover, employers who participated in interviews indicated that the training successfully communicated practices for inclusive recruiting, hiring, and onboarding through the voices of autistic young adults. Respondents explained that many of the recommendations would improve their hiring processes for all candidates.

Building on this success—and recognizing employers' interests in connecting with qualified job candidates—Meristem is pursuing grant funding to expand the training model. Specifically, Meristem is pursuing additional funds to pair the training with an internship program so that interested employers can hire autistic individuals.

Meristem will continue to offer the training to employers in both the facilitated format and the self-paced option, and will continue to engage with the business community to make more employers aware of the training opportunity.

⁶ These findings are based on the 26 employers that completed the training between August 1, 2020, and December 31, 2020, and that completed the intake survey.

⁷ These findings are based on the 32 employers that completed the training between August 1, 2020, and March 31, 2021. One employer is excluded from the location counts because information on its location is unknown.

Introduction

The transition out of high school for autistic young adults is often challenging. Research suggests that compared with their non-disabled peers, after exiting high school autistic young adults are less likely to attend postsecondary education, possess a driver's license, or report having friends.⁸ Numerous studies have also documented the challenges autistic individuals face when trying to obtain employment.⁹

Individuals with disabilities (including autistic individuals) are more likely than the average working adult to be unemployed. The unemployment disparities are high both nationally and in California. In 2019, the national unemployment rate for individuals without a disability was 3.5 percent, compared to 7.3 percent for those with a disability.¹⁰ In California, the overall unemployment rate in 2019 was 5.1 percent, compared to 11.1 percent for individuals with a disability.¹¹

Individuals at Meristem, an organization just outside of Sacramento that serves autistic young adults, are all too familiar with these employment disparities. In order to address the high unemployment rates among autistic young adults, Meristem students lobbied the Committee on Labor and Employment under the California State Assembly in 2018 to support a bill sponsored by Assembly Member Blanca Rubio that would provide funding for the Breaking Barriers Pilot. The aim of the pilot was to increase long-term employment opportunities for autistic young adults.¹² The pilot, a training for employers, is designed to engage employers in building their workforce capacity for creating a workplace that is inclusive of autistic individuals, including helping employers learn about strategies for recruiting, hiring, and retaining autistic young adults.

The training was developed through a partnership between Meristem, SETA, the State Board, and CWA; the development team included autistic young adults to ensure that the content reflects their perspectives. The experience was expected to help these young adults develop leadership and self-advocacy skills.

⁸ See Clarke et al. (2020) and Wehman et al. (2012, 2013).

⁹ See Coleman and Adams (2018), Hendricks and Wehman (2009), Roux et al. (2013), and Scott et al. (2019).

¹⁰ See Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021).

¹¹ See U.S. Census Bureau (2019).

¹² The program is specified in Senate Bill 866 (S.B. 866) Section 20, which was enacted in 2018.

The state legislature required an evaluation of the pilot program, and SETA contracted with SPR to conduct this evaluation. The guiding questions were:

- How was the training developed, and in what ways did autistic young adults contribute to developing the guide and employer training?
- How did these individuals benefit from the experience?
- How did the pilot recruit and engage employers?
- What were the employer-related outcomes of the training?

We answered these questions using data from multiple sources and approaches. This included: reviewing the training materials; observing training sessions; interviewing program staff, program partners representing Meristem, SETA, the State Board, the state legislature, and young adults who developed and implemented the training; reviewing data from an employer survey; and conducting interviews with employers 1 to 2 months after they had completed the training. Appendix A includes details about the data collection methods.

Overview of the Pilot

The State Board was designated by the state legislature to manage the pilot. It entered into an interagency agreement with SETA—a local agency with strong regional connections—to implement it. In order to identify a nonprofit organization, as called for in the legislation, SETA developed a set of three requirements. Specifically, the organization needed to have:

- a focus on autistic young adults for services;
- specific experience with outreach, training, and compensation of autistic young adults; and
- experience working with employers to build workplace capacity for the target population.

SETA identified and surveyed six organizations in the Sacramento region with expertise in working with autistic adults and concluded that only one, Meristem, met the requirements of the initiative. Following sole source procurement policies and procedures, SETA submitted its staff report, including background information, to the State Board requesting and receiving sole source approval to contract with Meristem.

Meristem is a day and residential program in Sacramento for autistic young adults and other developmental disabilities. The program is designed to develop students' self-confidence, self-advocacy, and life navigation skills through farming, crafts, and work skills. Meristem is modeled after the Practical Skills Therapeutic Education training model founded by the Ruskin Mill Trust in the United Kingdom, which emphasizes holistic learning by role modelling positive relationships in the fields of arts, crafts, commerce, agriculture, nutrition, living skills, and the environment. Students at Meristem also work in model businesses on campus—a bakery and cafe, a bed and

breakfast, and an herbal arts store. With experience employing and supporting autistic young adults, Meristem was well positioned to lead the development of the Breaking Barriers Pilot.

The pilot had three main goals:

1. Develop an employer training manual of best practices for recruiting, hiring, and employing autistic adults.
2. Conduct a training based on the topics and content addressed in the manual with 24 employers.
3. Engage autistic young adults in the creation of the manual and in the development and implementation of the training.

As called for in the legislation, young adults received a stipend for their involvement.

During the development process, the young adults named the employer training program the Transformative Autism Program (TAP). The TAP training manual and four 20-minute training videos were developed by Meristem staff with support from young adults (described in more detail in the next section). The employer training materials are organized into four topics:

- **Prepare:** Presents information about autism and provides resources to support recruiting and onboarding autistic people.
- **Recruit and Hire:** Provides guidance for recruiting and interviewing autistic people and other neurodiverse candidates.
- **Onboard:** Presents tips and strategies for planning for the first day on the job—for example, providing an onboarding checklist, a first-day schedule, and training about work tasks.
- **Retain:** Explains how to establish a career development plan that articulates benchmarks and associated goals and provides ongoing feedback.

Development of TAP

Central to the enactment of the pilot project were the contributions of autistic young adults. As laid out in the legislation, young adults (along with Meristem staff) made essential contributions to the two key project components: development of the training manual and administration of employer training based on the manual. Additionally, young adults played important roles in gathering information through surveys of other neurodiverse youth and Meristem students, testing ideas with employers through internships, and creating a brand to help with marketing and dissemination of the final products. To better understand the involvement that young adults played in the pilot, one Meristem program administrator described a general timeline of the project, breaking down the work into seven stages:

1. **Project planning** of the overall workplan and project milestones (winter 2019).
2. **Research** on employer needs and work culture, and information gathering from stakeholders, such as employers, other autistic young adults, and family members of autistic young adults (winter–summer 2019).
3. **Year 1 internships** to test ideas for hiring and employment and to collect initial feedback from employers (summer 2019).
4. **Development of the training manual** and supplemental content, such as a website and informational videos (summer 2019–spring 2020).
5. **Development of interactive training modules** in response to COVID-19 (spring 2020).
6. **Year 2 internships**, which included preparing for employer engagement (summer 2020).
7. **Employer engagement** and training (fall–winter 2020).

Young adults spearheaded specific activities during each stage of the pilot and were active contributors at key decision-making points. These contributions are described in further detail below.

YOUNG ADULT CONTRIBUTIONS TO TRAINING RESOURCES

The development of the training manual began in early 2019 with a “Leadership Lab” course made up of 12 Meristem students: six young adults who had contributed to lobbying efforts in front of the California state legislature, and six Meristem students who were hand-selected by Meristem staff based on demonstrated leadership, interest, or motivation. This inaugural group met over the course of the first 6 months of 2019, 5 days per week, 4 hours per day. During this early period, students participated in seminars on business communication and protocol for using common workplace equipment and software programs.


The group also worked together to develop and field a set of surveys targeting employers, parents, and autistic young adults about their job-search, hiring, training, and employment experiences and to prepare public speaking engagements about the pilot project. Additionally, when review of the survey responses from other autistic young adults indicated that further information was needed, participants conducted follow-up interviews.



TAP logo created by
young adults

Notably, one of the outputs from the leadership lab was the development of the name for the project (TAP) and a logo. Students developed early iterations of the name—originally termed the Transformational Advocacy Project—and the logo. Meristem partnered with a design firm to workshop both. The designer made three visits to Meristem over 2019 to gather input from the students and subsequently to present updates on the initial designs. The final logo was presented and accepted in fall of 2019.

In the summer of 2019, 12 young adults (made up of current and new program participants) completed a 3-week paid internship at six different job sites in shifts from 3 to 6 hours: Eskaton Assisted Living Center, the Fair Oaks Recreation & Park District, House to Home Moving, the Orangevale-Fair Oaks Food Bank, Plates Cafe and Catering, and Meristem’s on-site bakery. The jobs were matched to the interests and skills of the interns. Meristem provided four job coaches who assisted participants with interviewing, training, and completing aspects of the work requirements. Along with the young adults, they documented their experiences—both successes and challenges.



“Meristem classes are usually hands-on craft work, but this was a meeting room setting. There was back-and-forth discussion, there was yes’s and no’s...and it was an amazing process to go through....It was a very different experience for us.”

- Participant discussing the Leadership Lab formed in January 2019

The data collected from the Leadership Lab and subsequent internships informed the early and revised drafts of the training manual. For example, post-internship surveys with employers found that the presence of neurodiverse interns appeared to boost the morale of other employees at the worksite. For autistic employees, anxiety on the job was an indicator of potential workplace difficulties; taking steps to address anxiety for all workers benefited autistic individuals too.

Development of the manual began in summer 2019, with Meristem and CWA staff completing a first draft in August. The content was organized around four stages of employment from the employer’s perspective:

- preparing the workplace for employing an autistic individual;
- recruiting and hiring autistic and other neurodiverse candidates;
- onboarding an autistic individual; and
- retaining neurodiverse employees.

The manual drew from data collected through the research of employer hiring and workplace protocols, surveys and interviews conducted by the Leadership Lab students with employers,

parents, and autistic adults, and hands-on experiences during summer internships. CWA provided analysis of similar related efforts to support the employment and retention of autistic young adults across the country. The analysis informed the development of the manual by adding new content and enhancing existing content. The manual then went through several rounds of edits and revisions, with branding input from the designer (as mentioned above), and feedback from enlisted technical writers, experts, and community stakeholders, including representatives from the Department of Rehabilitation, workforce development leaders, experts from the CWA, and employers.

“This Meristem program really changed my life for the better.”

- Participant reflecting on the overall impact of the program on their life

In January of 2020, following the rollout of the TAP website and dissemination of materials the Leadership Lab had contributed to, Meristem initiated a new TAP class. This class had a similar format to the Leadership Lab from the previous year—it combined professional skill development with survey and interview facilitation with employers and other neurodiverse individuals—but comprised half the number of students. The class made refinements to the manual, including significant adjustments to the topics regarding applicant and employee anxiety.

With a working draft of the manual in hand, the young adults were expecting to use 2020 summer internships as opportunities to apply many of the manual’s recommendations in the workplace and make further refinements to the work completed previously. However, the COVID-19 pandemic left all the partnering employers without enough work to justify the onboarding of interns. Meristem therefore shifted the internships to on-campus placements, either within the TAP program itself (preparing for upcoming employer engagement technical assistance activities) or at an on-campus social enterprise cafe. The 2020 internships lasted 10 weeks, Monday through Friday, for 4 hours per day, with socially distant or virtual protocols in place.

By the time all TAP pilot resources had been advanced into an operational state in the fall of 2020, approximately 30 young adults had directly contributed to the project outputs and activities. They did so through the two leadership classes, summer internships, and product development activities.

PREPARING FOR EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT

Young adults engaged with employers in various ways over the course of the pilot: collecting data through surveys, documenting professional experiences as summer interns, and introducing

the newly developed manual as TAP trainers. In interviews, TAP staff and young adults described the various ways they prepared to engage with employers in each of these settings.

To create the employer survey, young adults in the Leadership Lab participated in group discussions and debated about employer perspectives on hiring and training new employees. Meristem staff invited guest speakers, including employers and autistic individuals in stable career positions, to share their perspectives and respond to the questions students had about work experiences and employer expectations. The intent behind these activities was to help the young adults craft useful survey questions that would inform the training manual. While not all students in the Leadership Lab participated in the subsequent summer internship, those who did were able to experience professional settings first-hand and test ideas developed through the Lab.

The 2020 internship served as the primary training ground for two young adults who ultimately joined Meristem staff in the employer training activities. The employer training typically took place over four sessions that covered the four modules. Employers and four trainers—two Meristem staff members and two young adults—watched each virtual training module together, and then held a 15- to 30-minute discussion. The discussion allowed the employers to ask questions and the trainers, three of whom were autistic, to share insights from personal experiences and give suggestions grounded in research.

In preparing for the employer training sessions, young adults and staff closely read the manual to gain familiarity with the content and to develop answers to questions that employers might ask. The young adults also developed speaking scripts to ensure specific content was covered, and they practiced the training with peers, Meristem staff, and other stakeholders to refine their professional demeanor and public speaking skills.

YOUNG ADULT SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Through the creation of the manual and employer training program, the TAP pilot provided autistic individuals the opportunity to develop professional skills and experiences that otherwise may not have been available. SPR invited 10 young adults who contributed to the pilot to participate in interviews. Ultimately seven young adults, which included one Meristem training facilitator, participated. Taken together, they had participated at all stages of the pilot.

All interviewees reported that the pilot had a positive impact on their ability to communicate with employers and to speak in public settings. Additionally, all but one of the interviewees spoke about how the experience improved their ability to work in professional settings and stay organized. Five respondents discussed their increased comfort either managing people or interacting with co-workers in professional settings. Furthermore, when asked about how the pilot had impacted their life, six of the seven individuals interviewed described increasing their self-confidence or learning techniques for self-advocacy, particularly in relation to finding and maintaining employment.

Employer Participation

While the development of the TAP training materials utilizing the perspective of autistic individuals was an important goal, so was engaging employers and getting them to participate in the program. Business services staff from Meristem, CWA, and SETA shared the training opportunities with their professional networks and announced the opportunity at different business conferences they attended. These staff focused their initial outreach on employers in Sacramento and Los Angeles, the two counties identified in the bill that authorized the pilot. Additionally, some employers that took the training invited other employers to do so. For example, one employer that coordinates an internship program recommended the training to employers that hosted interns.

Staff employer outreach began in summer 2020. Between August 1, 2020, and March 31, 2021, 32 employers completed the TAP training, surpassing the goal of 24 employers before the end of the grant period in March 2021.¹³

FACILITATED TRAINING

Of the 32 employers that completed the TAP training, seven participated in a facilitated video-conference training, where employees watched the videos with TAP staff facilitating discussion afterward. The evaluation team observed how facilitation added substantial value when compared to the self-paced version of the training. Employees could discuss the content with each other and ask the facilitators questions.

At one session, the evaluation team observed a human resources employee express that many of the changes (e.g., checklists) could be implemented systemically and would make the onboarding process better for all.¹⁴ This resonated with his coworkers, and this group went on to schedule a meeting with the entire human resources department where Meristem staff presented information about recruiting and hiring autistic people.

Additionally, during the facilitated training sessions, employer staff were able to get clarification and input from the facilitators. Employer interview respondents concurred, explaining that watching the training sessions together with human resources staff helped them advance conversations around equity and diversity already happening at the company.

¹³ We determined employer training completion by examining administrative data from the online learning platform that hosted the training videos. An employer that had at least one employee complete all four training modules was counted as a completion. The learning platform tracks the date an employer completed the training modules. We obtained program documents from Meristem to identify which employers participated in the four training modules with a facilitator.

¹⁴ Evaluation staff observed three of the facilitated training sessions.

EMPLOYER CHARACTERISTICS

Based on intake survey data, the majority (77 percent) of employers that participated in the training were small, with 50 or fewer employees (Exhibit 1). As shown in Exhibit 2, they were from a variety of industries, with the greatest representation from information systems and technology (19 percent), healthcare (19 percent), and nonprofits (12 percent).

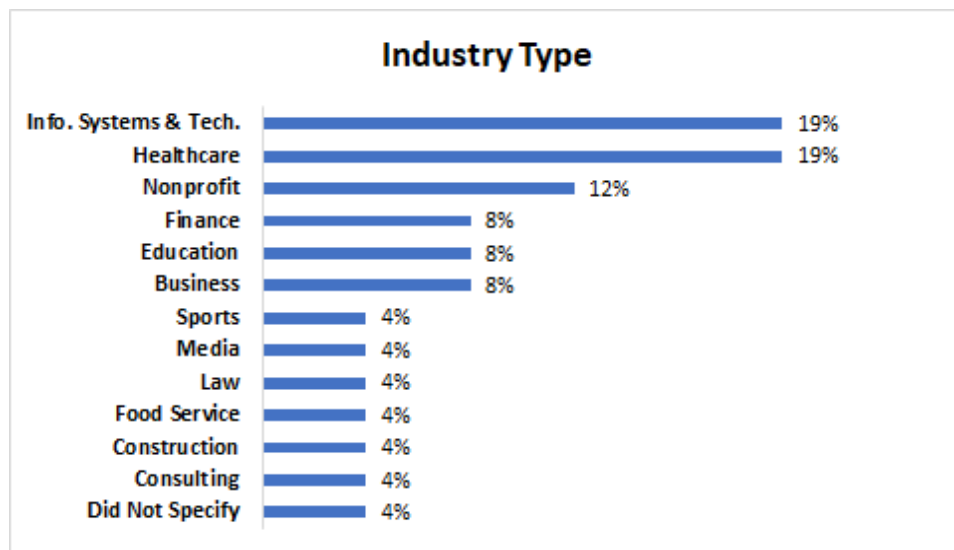
Exhibit 1. Employer Size

Employer Size	% of all
1–20 Employees	46% (n=12)
21–50 Employees	31% (n=8)
51–100 Employees	8% (n=2)
101–500 Employees	8% (n=2)
Did Not Specify	8% (n=2)

Source: TAP Employer Intake Survey, 2020

Notes: N=26. Results are derived from the employers that completed the training between August 1, 2020, and December 31, 2020.

Exhibit 2. Employer Industry



Source: TAP Employer Intake Survey, 2020

Notes: N=26. Results are derived from the employers that completed the training between August 1, 2020, and December 31, 2020.

About 39 percent (n=12) of the employers were located in Sacramento County, and 29 percent (n=9) were located in Los Angeles County (Exhibit 3). The remainder were located in other counties in California (n=7) or were from outside the state (n=3).

Exhibit 3. Employer Location



Source: TAP Employer Intake Survey and administrative data, 2021

Notes: N=31. Results are based on the employers that completed the training between August 1, 2020, and March 31, 2021. One employer is excluded because information on its location is unknown.

The composition of the training attendees was mixed in terms of number and role. A total of 42 employees from these 26 employers attended the training, and 38 of them completed an intake survey. The majority of employers (78 percent; n=21) had one employee complete the training, while six employers had multiple staff complete the training. Most participants (56 percent) served in recruiting or hiring roles at their organizations, and 47 percent served in management or supervisory positions (Exhibit 4).¹⁵

¹⁵ Employer representatives from 24 out of 26 employers who completed the training between August 1, 2020, and December 31, 2020, also completed an intake survey (92 percent). However, since more than one staff person

Exhibit 4. Training Participant Roles at Their Companies

Role of Staff	Yes (#)	Yes (%)
Hiring Role	9	24%
Recruiting Role	12	32%
Management/Supervisor Role	18	47%
Other ^a	11	29%

Source: TAP Employer Intake Survey, 2020

Notes: N=38. Results are derived from the employees who completed the training between August 1, 2020, and December 31, 2020, and who filled out an intake survey. "Other" includes employees such as job coach, engineer, developer, and consultant.

Employees participated in the training for several reasons. Most often, they were interested in learning about autism in the workplace (97 percent), about how to build a workplace culture that is inclusive of autistic people (42 percent), and about expanding their applicant pool to include autistic people (42 percent). As one survey respondent described it, their company was interested in "learning about working with adults on the autism spectrum." Another explained, "We plan to recruit individuals on the spectrum and want to get familiar with working with them."

EMPLOYEE FEEDBACK AND PLANNED CHANGES

Training participants generally viewed the training favorably. Of those who completed the exit survey for all four modules (24 of 42 training participants),¹⁶ a large majority—between 80 and 85 percent, depending on the module—found the training to be "very informative" or "informative"; very few, if any, found it to be "neutral," "uninformative," or "very uninformative" (Exhibit 5).¹⁷

Aspects that survey respondents found to be most valuable included learning about inclusive recruitment, application, and interview methods. For example, one respondent explained that the training had "great tips for ensuring that organizations develop a plan for not excluding qualified candidates by being clear, person-centered, and inclusive" in their recruitment and hiring processes. With respect to onboarding new employees, they valued tips, such as giving

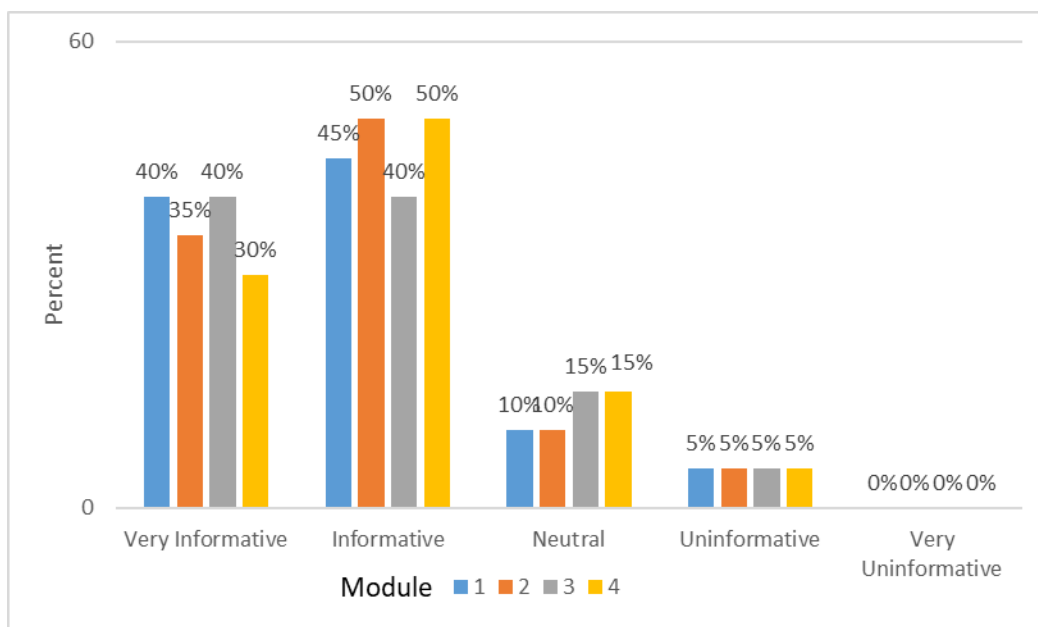
represented some employers, the number of actual survey respondents is higher—specifically, 38 out of 42 individuals (90 percent) responded to the intake survey.

¹⁶ The response rate to the exit survey was 77 percent (n=24) among the 31 employees representing 17 employers. While 42 employees participated in the training, 31 had the opportunity to complete an exit survey after each module. Appendix A explains why some training participants did not receive an exit survey.

¹⁷ The three respondents who indicated "neutral" or "uninformative" did not provide reasons.

specific instructions about work tasks, putting things in writing, and using the Meristem Method (Say it, See it, Model it) at work.

Exhibit 5. How Informative Was the Training?



Source: Employer Exit Survey, 2020

Note: N=24. Results are derived from the employees who completed the training between August 1, 2020, and December 31, 2020, and who filled out an exit survey.

The most common planned changes reported by the training participants in the exit survey were to:

- develop a plan and discuss with the employee team how to incorporate;
- update hiring processes to be more inclusive, including upcoming interviews;
- share information with coworkers to educate them; and
- improve onboarding, including developing a new hire checklist.

About half of the exit survey respondents described how their perceptions changed as a result of the training. Most often, they said they had gained a better understanding of autistic individuals. A couple of respondents learned how accommodations for autistic individuals can benefit all employees. As one respondent stated, “It is really eye opening to see how making small changes to operations can have a large positive impact on everyone and the company.”

EMPLOYER RECRUITMENT AND HIRING

The evaluation team interviewed representatives from about one third (n=9) of the 26 employers 2 to 3 months after they completed the training. The goal was to learn how the

training influenced their organizations. All respondents thought it provided useful and helpful guidance.

About half of the respondents (n=4)—all of whom were in positions of leadership at their organizations—planned to make changes to their company’s recruiting, hiring, and onboarding processes based on what they learned during the training.¹⁸ They had not yet done so because they were either small businesses with competing priorities or they were larger organizations in the process of making changes. For example, after attending the training, a human resources manager at a large company invited Meristem staff to present about TAP to the entire human resources team. The respondent explained that: “Our new human resource department director was at the presentation and is really interested in this. We are going to take this information and incorporate it into our standard operating procedures for recruitment and hiring.”

The remaining five interview respondents were not in leadership positions but worked for intermediary organizations that connect job seekers to employment opportunities. They also found the training helpful and informative. Four of these organizations had provided or planned to provide the training as a resource for employers who host autistic interns.¹⁹ For example, one employer began pairing the training with an internship program it supports. This employer, an educational institution, operates a program that helps young adults on the autism spectrum transition to employment or internships. The program referred participating employers to Meristem. Representatives from four employers participated in the training and reported that it was very informative or informative. One employer representative explained, “It really helped me understand how to communicate better with autistic people and make a work environment inclusive to everyone.”²⁰

SUGGESTED NEXT STEPS

Several respondents said they would really like to see the training paired with an internship program or a referral mechanism so they could consider hiring job candidates on the autism spectrum. This sentiment was echoed by Meristem staff who had employers ask them if TAP could help connect them to qualified interns. Growing TAP to include an internship component and/or job-matching function would help these employers as well as the young adult participants who would be connected to internships.

Exhibit 6 describes an internship example that could be leveraged as part of an expanded TAP model. The California Department of Developmental Services has a Paid Internship Program

¹⁸ Positions of leadership are roles where individuals are decision makers in the structure and implementation of the hiring process. This includes chief executive officers, founders, and managers in human resources.

¹⁹ The fifth organization may use the training to revise its own recruiting and hiring practices.

²⁰The program pivoted away from directly placing participants into internships in order to support youth in the experience of searching and applying for jobs. As such, the direct referrals to Meristem were phased out.

(PIP), which provides individuals with disabilities an opportunity to gain on-the-job skills training and prepares them for permanent jobs. SETA has placed clients in these internships and, as described below, intends to offer TAP as a resource to employers who host PIP interns.

Additionally, some interview respondents suggested it would be beneficial if the training was connected to a human resources certification or continuing education course, with employees who successfully complete such a training receiving professional development recognition.

Exhibit 6. What is the Paid Internship Program?

The Paid Internship Program (PIP) is a program administered by the California Department of Developmental Services through its regional centers. Employers are reimbursed up to \$10,400 per year, per intern.

Employers have the option of having a service provider offer individualized support to each intern as needed. Supports may include regular meetings with a job coach or transportation support.

An employer begins the process of being matched to an intern by contacting the area's regional center to meet with an employment specialist. The employment specialist reviews the program and the options for being connected to a candidate.

Summary and What's Next

Based on data gathered from young adult contributors, employers, and program staff, the program partners accomplished the goals of the pilot and made considerable progress in advancing employer awareness of the needs around hiring autistic employees. Specifically:

- The pilot project resulted in the creation of four online training video modules and an accompanying manual used to educate employers about hiring and employing autistic individuals. These resources produced through the pilot are freely available to employers at <https://tapautism.org/>.
- Thirty-two employers participated in the training between August 1, 2020, and March 31, 2021, exceeding the goal of training 24 employers. These employers found the training informative and engaging, and several are planning to make changes or are in the process of making changes to their recruiting, hiring, and onboarding processes.
 - Several employers expressed interest in connecting to an internship program or a referral mechanism so they could consider hiring job candidates on the autism spectrum.

- The facilitated training sessions provided Meristem staff and young adult contributors an opportunity to lead discussions with employers about making changes to recruiting, hiring, onboarding, and retention practices. This supplemented the training modules in meaningful ways, including helping employees discuss plans for enacting training material lessons.
- Through their experience contributing to the pilot project, 30 young adults on the autism spectrum developed leadership and professional skills that they will carry with them in future professional or academic pursuits. Specifically, in addition to other skills, all young adults who were interviewed reported that the pilot had a positive impact on their ability to communicate with employers and to speak in public settings; all but one described increased self-confidence or techniques for self-advocacy, particularly related to finding and maintaining employment.

Meristem, SETA, and CWA plan to build on these successes by pursuing multiple concurrent efforts:

- Meristem is currently applying for a California Workforce Development Board Accelerator Fund grant to expand its efforts to pair the training with an internship program, so that employers can hire autistic individuals, responding to employers' interests in interviewing qualified candidates.
- Meristem will continue to offer the training to employers in both a facilitated format and the self-paced option.
- SETA will be incorporating the training into its suite of services focused on job seekers with disabilities. For example, as part of its Disability Employment Accelerator grant initiative, SETA will offer the TAP training to all employers interested in expanding their workplace capacity to better hire, onboard, retain, and promote autistic individuals, including those with other developmental and intellectual disabilities. The initiative is designed to accelerate the employment and reemployment of individuals with disabilities through “earn and learn” opportunities—such as on-the-job training, PIP, and apprenticeships—and through education and short-term vocational training.
- The partners are continuing to engage with the employer community to make more employers aware of the training opportunity.

As these three partner organizations continue their efforts to scale the pilot, more employers will have the opportunity to learn new approaches that benefit all job candidates. As one employer representative summarized it, the TAP training provided recommendations about “how to recruit/manage/engage with [neurodiverse] applicants, making a better process for everyone.”

Appendix A

SPR conducted surveys and interviews, observed training sessions, and examined administrative data from the learning platform. We synthesized and triangulated data across sources to answer the guiding research questions. The data collection methods for each data source are described below.

EMPLOYER INTAKE SURVEY

Employer representatives from 88 percent (n=23) of the 26 employers that completed the training between August 1, 2020, and December 31, 2020, filled out an intake survey prior to starting the training. At the employee level, 38 of the 42 employees who completed the training in this span of time completed the intake survey (a 90 percent response rate).

Participants completed the survey between August 1, 2020, and December 15, 2020. It was administered by Meristem staff between August 1, 2020, and October 15, 2020. Afterwards, employees had the opportunity to complete the survey as part of the online training itself.

When more than one employee from the same employer completed an intake survey, we examined the responses for variation. When responses varied for questions related to employer size or industry, we conducted an internet search to reconcile the answers, choosing the answer that best reflected information on the organization's website. This reconciliation process happened in a small number of cases (approximately four employers).

When survey responses had no information about an employer's size or location, we visited the organization's website (when available) or obtained the information from Meristem staff. This occurred in a small number of cases (approximately six).

EMPLOYER EXIT SURVEY

Employee representatives from 71 percent (n=12) of 17 employers completed an exit survey for all four modules of the training between August 1, 2020, and December 15, 2020. A total of 31 employees had the opportunity to complete the exit survey, and 24 (77 percent) did so.

Exit survey responses were not obtained from nine employers that completed the training between August 1, 2020, and December 31, 2020. Employees at seven of these employers did not have an opportunity to complete the exit survey because it was in the process of being incorporated into the online training platform. Initially, the exit survey was external to the platform, but a low response rate led the team to incorporate it more directly into the training platform. Employees at the other two of these nine employers completed their training after data collection for the evaluation ended.

EMPLOYER FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEWS

In January 2021, we invited staff members from the 26 employers who completed the training between August 1, 2020, and December 31, 2020, to participate in phone interviews that lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. We invited staff members who registered in the online training platform. Between February 4, 2021, and May 7, 2021, we interviewed staff members from nine of these employers.

The phone interview explored what changes employers had made or planned to make since completing the training, their impressions of the training, and suggestions for improving the training for the future. In the case of the facilitated sessions, where a group of employees attended, we corresponded with Meristem staff to identify the main point of contact at the employer. We interviewed that individual; in one instance, others who participated in the facilitated training joined the interview.

STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

We conducted interviews with two groups of pilot program stakeholders. The first group involved program personnel (from Meristem, SETA, and the State Board) who had implemented the program as well as staff from the state legislature who had worked on the bill authorizing the pilot program. The second group included autistic young adults who had worked on developing the pilot.

We invited seven staff and consultants representing Meristem, SETA, the State Board, and the state legislature to participate in phone interviews about the implementation of the pilot. Staff were either program leaders or responsible for implementing the program. All of the invitees agreed to participate in the interviews.

We invited 10 young adult contributors to participate in individual phone interviews, and seven, including one instructor, did so. The interview topics explored how they contributed, what they learned, and what their hopes were for the future of the program. In preparing for these interviews and to limit any potential anxiety, we provided options beyond individual phone calls, including video conferencing, group interview settings, and flexible timing. We provided specific information about what interviewees could expect from the interview and emphasized that participation was optional.

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