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# EXCEPTIONAL MINDS

## Exceptional Minds Addresses Autism Job Challenge Head-On with Expanded Work Readiness Program

*Digital arts vocational school expands work readiness program to improve job retention for young adults with autism.*



**Sherman Oaks, Calif. – October 28, 2014** – Like many young adults on the autism spectrum, most of the students at [Exceptional Minds](#) digital arts vocational school can easily find their way around a computer, iPhone or game console. More difficult for these students with high-functioning autism are the “soft skills” needed to succeed in meaningful careers, a challenge that Exceptional Minds is addressing with its expanded job readiness program.

“This is a population with tremendous technical creativity,” said Exceptional Minds’ Director of Operations Yudi Bennett, pointing to her students’ high pass rate for accreditation in major software applications and subsequent visual effects work on movies such as *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes*, *American Hustle* and *Lawless*. “But they’ll never be able to reach their full potential unless we give them the skills they need to be able to work in these highly collaborative, creative fields,” she added.

This month, Exceptional Minds expanded its workplace readiness program. Board certified behavior

analyst Benjamin Maixner now joins Laurie Stephens, Ph.D., Director of Clinical Services for Education Spectrum, Altadena, California, in providing key developmental training and one-on-one consultation for students enrolled in the vocational school. Exceptional Minds is the only digital arts academy of its kind with a three-year vocational program for preparing young men and women living with autism for meaningful careers in digital animation, post-production, visual effects and multimedia.

Few, if any, work readiness practices are available for this population beyond preparing disabled workers for repetitive tasks. "Very little exists in the way of highly specified job training for individuals with ASD, particularly with a focus on teaching both the technical and the intangible, social aspects of the job. While many of the expected behaviors on the job are learned intuitively by most people, those with ASD can also learn the skills, but need explicit training and practice in order to do so," commented Dr. Stephens.

"There have been studies around teaching people with disabilities to work in a pizzeria, for example. But there's a huge gap in terms of this population and post-high school vocational training, and we see that gap throughout society in general," agreed Maixner, who was brought in to incorporate "soft" skills training into all areas of learning, including students' project development similar to a real work environment. "This is really a first in my field of behavior analysis and once we develop a scientifically validated approach, that is going to be impactful for others wanting to prepare these high functioning individuals for other occupations," he added.

Gaps in social skills, difficulty working in groups, and adapting to change are all hallmarks of autism spectrum disorders (ASD), which will affect the job prospects of an estimated 750,000 young adults with autism in the U.S. in the coming decade. These individuals are statistically more likely to have difficulty with the social norms needed to attain a meaningful career, and are less likely to keep a job as a result, even though their skills and technical proficiency may very well exceed others in their age group.

Proven practices such as multiple exemplar training will help develop the resiliency and adaptability students need to succeed in fields that are highly collaborative, and better prepare them for a career in which every project is unrelated to the previous one, yet requires a core set of technical skills. "We're really talking about the fluidity of their skills, or what companies call their 'core competencies' in that when they are presented with a new problem, they can apply all those skills and not just be able to do one thing," explained Maixner.

With soft skills training and what many view as this population's creative and technical advantages, graduates of Exceptional Minds' three-year digital arts program are expected to be strong candidates for fulfilling jobs in the highly competitive fields of visual effects and post production.

**About Exceptional Minds (<http://www.exceptionalmindsstudio.org>):** Exceptional Minds is a non-profit vocational center and working production studio for young adults on the autism spectrum. Chartered in 2011 to provide the training necessary for creatively-gifted individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) who may not otherwise be able to make the transition from high school to the working world, Exceptional Minds offers technical proficiency and work readiness skills that prepare students for careers in graphic arts, animation, web design, visual effects and rotoscoping. Located in Sherman Oaks, California, Exceptional Minds is both an instructional learning facility and a working studio with hands-on student involvement in production projects, many for the film industry.