

2018

# Leaders' Strategies to Support and Accommodate Employees with High-Functioning Autism

Jonathan Pierce  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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Jonathan Pierce

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2018

Abstract

Leaders' Strategies to Support and Accommodate Employees with High-Functioning

Autism

by

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MS, Benedictine University at Springfield, 2010

BBA, Benedictine University at Springfield, 2008

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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## Abstract

Leaders often lack strategies to create supportive and accommodating workplaces that capitalize on the unique skillset of autistic employees. Research has shown that employers benefit from creating supports; however, there is a lack of research on how or why organization leaders provide support and accommodations. The purpose of this descriptive case study was to identify leaders' strategies for supporting autistic employees. The research question centered on managements' support and accommodations for employees while capitalizing on their strengths. The conceptual framework included labor process to address management extracting benefits from labor, and resource-based theory to examine gaining a competitive advantage by using rare resources. Purposive sampling was used to select 11 leaders, managers, or frontline supervisors for in-person semistructured interviews from a northern Illinois organization that recruits and hires employees with autism. Other data sources for triangulation included communications, manuals, observations, photos, artifacts, and field notes following Yin's 5-step analytic model. Eight themes emerged: (a) advocating for self and others; (b) mission, vision, values, and social responsibility; (c) autism challenges; (d) nonphysical support; (e) physical accommodations; (f) policies, procedures, and funding; (g) support personnel; and (h) unique skillset. The results encompass a mission-driven approach to support and accommodation. This study contributes to social change by demonstrating how managers can use disabled employees and assist them in becoming productive members in the workplace and society, while gaining a feeling of self-worth, dignity, and independence. This reduces the burden on taxpayers for care.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this doctoral study to my God, Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who has never left me nor forsaken me. With God's help and unfailing love, I completed my academic journey, in spite of all life's challenges that occurred during this time.

I dedicate this doctoral study to my wife Mary who was my inspiration for this study. I was successful only because of her sacrifice and patience. I also dedicate this study to my son David, daughter-in-law Meghan, daughter Laura, and daughter Claire. My academic journey would not have been possible without your support, encouragement, sacrifice, prayers, and patience. I also dedicate this study to my wonderful grandchildren; may you be filled with the wonder of learning. I also dedicate this study to my father Floyd and mother Helen, whose tireless daily prayers supported me at times when I did not even know they were praying for me. I also dedicate this study in memory of my father-in-law John who passed away 2 years ago and to my mother-in-law Nancy who just passed away at the end of December of 2017, for their kindness and love toward me. I would also like to thank my bother-in-law Ken and sister-in-law Sarah for their prayers and support. I would also like to thank my friends John and Susan, Eric and Karen, who provided moral support and encouragement. I am so appreciative of all your care and concern for me during my academic journey.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Organizational leaders have the responsibility to ensure they are meeting an organization's vision, mission, and goals. Leaders accomplish this through employees by leading, influencing, and motivating employees to produce maximum performance (Self, Matuszek, Self, & Schraeder, 2014). Leaders must also keep morale high and ensure that employees are able to apply their skills and abilities toward meeting the expectations of their jobs, enabling employees to reach their highest potential (Self et al., 2014). At some point, all employees need additional supports or accommodations to perform at optimal levels (Schur et al., 2014). Throughout an employee's tenure, various scenarios arise that necessitate leaders to intervene with some form of support or accommodation (Schur et al., 2014). Short-term illnesses, long-term or even permanent illnesses, injuries, aging, and disabilities of various types lead to a loss of employee productivity necessitating some form of support or accommodation (Durand, Corbière, Coutu, Reinharz, & Albert, 2014). With respect to those scenarios, leaders bear the responsibility of ensuring they manage absenteeism and return-to-work effectively, resulting in a work environment that is supportive of workers with disabilities (Durand et al., 2014).

Support and accommodation may come in the form of altering the physical aspects of the workplace or altering the structure of the job itself (Stein, Silvers, Areheart, & Francis, 2014). Other vantage points of support and accommodation may arise such as accommodating impaired vision, reduced mobility, or speech (Shuey & Jovic, 2013). Some organizations have biased policies against individuals that require supports and accommodation, which can exclude certain members of the population from obtaining

jobs (Stein et al., 2014). Inclusion of workers based on age and disability can foster positive organizational effects such as higher levels of creativity and performance and increased commitment (Boehm & Dwertmann, 2015). As organizational leaders engage in positive diversity management initiatives that are inclusive toward older individuals or those with disabilities, employees gain feelings of inclusion and appreciation, and the organization benefits through broadened ingenuity, creativity, and productivity (Chrobot-Mason & Aramovich, 2013). In this study, use of the term *support* represents intangible aspects of the work environment such as an encouraging, caring, uplifting, and positive organizational culture as a means to mitigate for employee weaknesses. Use of the term *accommodations* represents tangible changes to the physical work environment such as providing quiet workspaces, ergonomic office amenities, or headphones.

Section 1 of this study includes a background of the study, problem statement, purpose of the study, research questions, conceptual framework, nature of the study, definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance of the study.

### **Background of the Study**

The traditional role of management to plan, organize, coordinate, command, and control all facets of organizational life has been the mantra of management for several decades (Fayol, 1930; Mintzberg, 1973, 2015). Management responsibilities include creating value for a broad range of stakeholders that includes owners, workers, suppliers, competitors, and employees; management works to balance the importance of finances, facilities, the environment, and society at large to ensure the success and contributions of



the organization (Strand & Freeman, 2015). With respect to managing workers, organizational leaders must obtain maximum production from every worker regardless of his or her individual demographics like age, gender, ability, education, or even disability (Green, López, Wysocki, & Kepner, 2015). All of these factors, when managed well, lead to competitive advantages that set organizations apart and increase their opportunity for success (Sorenson, 2014; Warnier et al., 2013).

Leaders engage in various strategies to support and accommodate all employees. Leaders base their strategies for supporting and accommodating workers on an organization's sustainability initiatives that move beyond environmental concerns to social concerns, particularly that of creating an inclusive and diverse workforce (Dhanda, 2013). Additional strategies include improving employee retention through flexible work schedules (Idris, 2014), avoiding discrimination claims (Stein et al., 2014), aligning with corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives (Hazarika, 2013), creation of a positive and supportive organizational culture (Blattner & Walter, 2015), creating a workplace that is conducive to employee wellbeing (Zheng, Molineux, Mirshekary, & Scarparo, 2015), creating a work environment that is suitable, creating better work settings, and appreciating each employee's contribution (Balakrishnan & Vijayalakshmi, 2014).

To extract the greatest capacity from every employee and create a competitive advantage, leaders need to develop strategies to ensure the workplace is inclusive and free of barriers that impede performance (Kalargyrou & Volis, 2014; Nicholas, Roberts & Macintosh, 2014). Employees with disabilities require specific accommodations to maximize their potential in the workplace (Nicholas et al., 2014; Stein et al., 2014).

Individuals with disabilities experience a higher sense of wellbeing and productivity in the workplace when their talents are fully used (Konrad, Moore, Ng, Doherty, & Breward, 2013). Organizations benefit from inclusive practices that integrate persons with disabilities, including innovation, creative ideas, a competitive advantage, improved customer service and satisfaction, and improved company image (Kalargyrou & Volis, 2014). When workplace accommodations and natural supports are provided by leaders and enhanced by coworkers, individuals with disabilities are less likely to lose their jobs and may experience a higher quality of life, self-esteem, workplace engagement, and overall improved wellbeing (Corbière, Villotti, Lecomte, Bond, & Lesage, 2014; Nicholas et al., 2014).

To reach maximum productivity from employees, managers must ensure the work environment is conducive for effort and free of barriers, ensuring that employees have the proper tools necessary to fulfill their job requirements (Houtenville & Kalargyrou, 2015). Ensuring the work environment is conducive is necessary for individuals with various disabilities that need accommodations to be productive (Houtenville & Kalargyrou, 2015). While disabled workers can be strong contributors, they are dependent on management to ensure the workplace is conducive and altered to their specific needs (Houtenville & Kalargyrou, 2015). Employers should tailor appropriate support and accommodations to each individual's needs to maximize strengths while minimizing weaknesses (Warnier et al., 2013). In today's business environment, organizations need to differentiate themselves through creativity and innovation to create competitive advantages that lead to organizational effectiveness and efficiency (Dhanda, 2013).

Employing and supporting the right employees is essential to attaining a competitive edge (Kalargyrou, 2014). The population of individuals with high-functioning autism represents one segment of disabled employees that are creative and innovative and that can positively affect and organization's competitiveness and contribute to overall organizational success (Baldwin, Costley, & Warren, 2014).

There are different types of disabilities and impairments including physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, vision, auditory, and mobility. Autism, which is associated with intellectual and cognitive impairments, represents a disability that affects a segment of the population that benefit from workplace accommodations and support (Baldwin et al., 2014). Individuals with autism face significant obstacles in securing and maintaining employment (Nicholas et al., 2014; Vogeley, Kirchner, Gawronski, Elst, & Dziobek, 2013; Wilczynski, Trammell, & Clarke, 2013). Individuals with high-functioning autism offer skillsets that can serve as a competitive advantage, including keen detailed attention, ability to detect patterns, and excellent visual recognition skills (Nicholas et al., 2014); these individuals are also known for being trustworthy, efficient, consistent, and precise (Baldwin et al., 2014). Ensuring adults with autism are assimilated, supported, and accommodated in the workplace is important for management; leaders need to address the workplace needs of individuals with high-functioning autism in conjunction with the company's staffing needs (SAP News, 2013; Warnier, Weppe, & Lecocq, 2013). The social benefit of this study is providing organizational leaders with findings about strategies for supporting and accommodating individuals with autism in the workplace, which may improve the employment outcomes and working conditions for this

population. The findings may also benefit other employees in building upon their strengths and making accommodations for their weaknesses.

Emerging research has indicated that individuals with high-functioning autism can be strong contributors to organizations (Nicholas et al., 2014; Warnier et al., 2013). Organizational leaders and managers are not always aware of the benefits of supporting individuals with disabilities (Kalargyrou, 2014). They often neglect to tap into this source of human capital that could provide a competitive advantage if only they would seek to understand, accommodate, and support individuals with disabilities in the workplace (Kalargyrou, 2014). Organizational leaders can maximize a competitive edge by learning how to create a work environment that uses the strengths of individuals with disabilities while minimizing different types of weaknesses (Harter & Adkins, 2015), which will also benefit all employees (Baldrige & Swift, 2013; Kalargyrou, 2014). If individuals with disabilities do not obtain jobs despite their desire and ability to work, society must pay for their livelihood, which is costly to taxpayers and a burden to society (Fujimoto, Rentschler, Le, Edwards, & Härtel, 2014). In addition, there is a morale issue for individuals who could provide for themselves but are unsuccessful in obtaining a job due to fear and doubt of employers (Kalargyrou, 2014; Nicholas et al., 2014).

There is gap in literature as to how or why organizational leaders support and accommodate individuals with high-functioning autism (Nicholas, Roberts, & Macintosh, 2014). For the purpose of this study, I selected the population of organizational leaders who developed strategies and policies and managers who supervised individuals with high-functioning autism in the workplace while simultaneously meeting company goals

and objectives.

Leaders within high-tech organizations that produce computers and software are beginning to recognize they can gain a competitive advantage by supporting and accommodating individuals with high-functioning autism (Warnier et al., 2013). This population of employees has unique skills and abilities; it is part of positive business acumen that leaders assess how they could gain an advantage by supporting this population (Warnier et al., 2013). Adults with autism can bring a variety of desirable skills to employers such as outstanding visual processing, visual thinking, excellent information processing (Baldwin et al., 2014; Gonzalez, Martin, Minshew, & Behrmann, 2013), pattern recognition, attention to detail (Nicholas et al., 2014), and excellent memories that can result in a competitive advantage or make it possible for an organization to align with its mission (SAP News, 2013; Specialist People Foundation, 2015). Not every sector of business will benefit from this practice, but the sectors that establish this practice may see beneficial results (Kalargyrou & Volis, 2014). Employers may apply the findings from this study to other types of populations with disabilities as well as the aging workforce, or individuals with various learning and personality styles. The field of management might benefit through a better understanding of the employment, support, and accommodation for individuals with high-functioning autism, which may be applicable to other categories of employees.

Historically, as Stalker, Baron, Riddell, and Wilkinson (1999) noted, the theory of normalization and the social model of disability previously pointed to the individual with the disability in attempt to have them *fit in*. Instead, society and organizations may

benefit more through accepting individuals with disabilities and providing the necessary support and accommodation mechanisms within the workplace (Stalker et al., 1999).

Additionally, individuals with disabilities have an equal right to a decent life—one that is rich in meaning, purpose, freedom of choice, and happiness (Barry, 2013). The contemporary view of individuals with disabilities is that they are the source of untapped potential (Kalargyrou, 2014).

The concept of supporting individuals with disabilities in the workplace is anchored in an organization's mission, as a defined competitive advantage, as a catalyst for innovation, and a way to address a rapidly changing workplace (Derven, 2014; Nicholas et al., 2014). Leaders and managers within an organization should be aware of the benefits of including the disabled as part of their workforce strategy (Derven, 2014). For example, preliminary workplace programs in India showed promising results such as higher productivity and unity within organizations that support individuals with autism (SAP News, 2013).

### **Problem Statement**

Leaders can facilitate higher performance from employees if the workplace climate is conducive, supportive, and positive (van Woerkom & Meyers, 2015). As leaders become adept at creating a workplace that is supportive for employees, they capitalize on the skills and abilities of employees who have traditionally not been valued, creating a competitive advantage and increased organizational performance (SAP News, 2013). Traditional employees who receive minimal accommodations are able to function adequately in the workplace (Carpenter & Paetzold, 2013). A high percentage (40%) of

adults with high-functioning autism are unemployed (Vogeley et al., 2013) or lose their jobs and remain unemployed not as a result of technical inabilities but because of behavioral issues and poor social interaction skills in the workplace (Westbrook et al., 2012).

There is a gap in research as to how and why leaders value, assimilate, support, and accommodate individuals with high-functioning autism in the workplace (Richards, 2012, 2015; Westbrook et al., 2012). When leaders gain an understanding that disabled workers can be of value to the organization with some support and accommodations, enhanced profitability, sustainability, and competitive advantage for the company can be realized (Lancaster & Milia, 2014). The general problem is that organizational leaders need to create work environments that capitalize on unique employee strengths while simultaneously accommodating their weaknesses to achieve maximum organizational performance (Richards, 2015). There is a link between organizational performance and a supportive work environment (Zheng, Molineux, Mirshekary, & Scarparo, 2015). If the work environment is supportive for employees, organizational performance increases (Zheng et al., 2015). If the work environment is not supportive, organizational performance will tend to decrease (Zheng et al., 2015). Leaders need to develop strategies and resources to help them do this effectively (Richards, 2015; SAP News, 2013). The specific problem is that some organizational leaders lack strategies to support and accommodate the workplace needs of various individuals with specific needs while building on their strengths. For this study, the specific group of individuals that fall into this category were individuals with high-functioning autism who had specific needs for

accommodations and yielded specific strengths and benefits to the organization.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative, descriptive case study was to explore what strategies organizational leaders and managers used to support and accommodate employees with specific needs while building on their strengths. There were 11 individuals in the company who served as leaders, managers, and frontline supervisors who participated in one-on-one interviews and shared their experiences in supporting and accommodating individuals with high-functioning autism in the workplace. I reviewed company archival documents, mission and vision statements, and employment policy manuals. I conducted direct observations of the work environment to methodologically triangulate the data. By exploring this case, the academic and business community may learn more about accommodating and supporting individuals with high-functioning autism in the workplace to such an extent that leaders may be able to create a productive and motivating workplace that builds on employee strengths while simultaneously accommodating their challenges, which may be helpful with any employee at various times in their lives.

### **Research Questions**

The overarching research question for this study was as follows: What strategies do organizational leaders and managers use to support and accommodate the workplace needs of employees with specific needs while building on their strengths? The following research sub questions served to delineate further the overarching question.



RQ1: What competitive advantages do leaders obtain by supporting individuals with high-functioning autism?

RQ2: What policies, procedures, and workplace settings do leaders within organizations need to establish for supporting individuals with high-functioning autism?

RQ3: What retention strategies of managers lead to establishing support mechanisms for individuals with high-functioning autism?

RQ4: What preparations are necessary for frontline managers to accommodate the workplace needs of individuals with high-functioning autism?

These research questions served as a basis for addressing the lack of research on how organizational leaders and managers support the workplace needs of individuals with high-functioning autism; they addressed the need for organizations to establish policies and procedures whereby individuals with high-functioning autism may have greater opportunities for meaningful and viable employment. The creation of policies and procedures for high-functioning autistic employees may assist in creating an organizational culture that is conducive for engaging and supporting this underserved population of employees.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual basis for this study is an analytical approach to human resources management and employment studies based on labor process theory, which provides a perspective in which management releases the power achieved from labor while simultaneously securing the rewards from labor (Braverman, 1974, 1975; Fitzgerald, Rainnie, & Burgess, 2013; Jonna & Foster, 2014; Richards, 2012, 2015). Labor process

theory represents a fundamental conflict between management and subordinates related to the division of labor, possibilities for deskilling, and the separation of conception and execution (Richards, 2012, 2015; Sawchuk, Duarte, & Elhammoumi, 2006). In the present study, the labor process theory framework may help uncover new methods of management control through the utilization of unique resources, that of individuals with high-functioning autism. I provided more explanation of labor process theory and accompanying literature in Chapter 2.

The central theme of labor process theory is management control over labor in such a way that management achieves the full benefits from labor. Holt and Hvid (2014) stated that labor process theory entails a set of three mechanisms that management engages in to control labor: how managers organize work, increased collaboration among managers and employees through soft control mechanisms that leads employees to internalize management controls, and increased observation of employees and their work. While the soft controls seem positive in nature, these mechanisms of management control create an environment of low trust, low commitment, low involvement, and poor opportunities for learning because management seeks short-term profits instead of long-term confidence in employees (Holt & Hvid, 2014).

For individuals on the autism spectrum, this results in a lack of support in the workplace because management focuses primarily on securing the rewards from labor and lacks strategies to support and accommodate the specific workplace needs of individuals with high-functioning autism and release their full potential (Richards, 2015). Labor process theory aligns well with the study approach and the central research

questions in determining what strategies management engages in to support and accommodate the specific workplace needs of employees while simultaneously building on their strengths. I developed a semistructured interview instrument to uncover leader and manager strategies for supporting and accommodating employees in view of the central concepts of management control over labor. The analysis of accompanying data may lead to a greater understanding of how labor process theory applies to leaders and managers in the organization under investigation as they seek to control labor and extract the benefits derived from labor.

### **Nature of the Study**

The nature of this study was qualitative through the facilitation of a descriptive case study that was bounded by place and time (i.e., within a single organization over a specified time). This approach is best suited for situations where little is known about a particular situation, environment, or phenomenon and where little is known as to current knowledge or conceptual framework (Yin, 2012, 2014). There is limited knowledge about how leaders support individuals with strengths and weaknesses of various types, and more specifically about how organizational leaders strategize for supporting individuals with high-functioning autism in the workplace. A descriptive case study enabled me to uncover specific phenomenon within an organizational setting that may increase the understanding as to how organizations support individuals with high-functioning autism.

## **Qualitative**

I served as the primary data collection instrument. The multiple sources of data collected were the responses from semistructured interviews, documents (written policies, job postings, memoranda, official communications), artifacts (samples of employee work, web content), and direct observations (evidence obtained from observing the work environment). I triangulated the data to ensure the validity of data results and evidence of corroboration amongst data. The unit of analysis was the individual leaders, managers, and frontline supervisors within an organization known for successfully supporting and accommodating employees with high-functioning autism.

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC; 2016) defined autism spectrum disorder as a developmental disorder that significantly inhibits the ability to function in social settings, creates challenges for communication, and affects behavior in varying ranges from high-functioning to severely impaired. Attwood (2003) defined high-functioning autism as a developmental condition that includes significant impairment within social settings, especially social isolation, a high tolerance for singular focus for extended periods of time, and issues associated with managing anxiety, anger, and mood swings. By focusing on the strategies and practices of organizational leaders relative to the workplace support needs of individuals with high-functioning autism, scholars may gain a greater understanding as to how workplace support of individuals with high-functioning autism can improve. The results of this study may yield certain assumptions concerning organizational preparedness toward ensuring that individuals with autism are not only able to function within the work environment but also become independent contributors

in society. The results of the study may be applicable to the development of strategies for supporting and accommodating other populations of employees.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

I facilitated one-on-one interviews with 11 leaders, managers, and frontline supervisors within the organization under investigation who have supported and developed individuals with high-functioning autism. As each participant completed his or her interview, I moved to the next participant in the list. If any participant declined to participate, I selected the next available participant. In qualitative studies, saturation of data occurs when data and emergent results begin to be similar and no new information emerges, there are no new themes or coding, and the study can be replicated (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015). I reached data saturation from interviews when no additional participants who fit the criteria were available for interviews, or when I gained no new information from the interviews. Data saturation is addressed in greater detail in Chapter 3 (see Participant Selection Logic). I collected documents that specify policies, procedures, and organizational culture expectations related to supporting and accommodating individuals with autism. I collected artifacts such as employment agreements, employee handbooks, sensitivity and ethics training media, and materials that are required for employment support of individuals with high-functioning autism. I observed the organization as a nonparticipant and documented the setting and work environment of individuals with high-functioning autism noting physical artifacts such as architecture, lighting, workspace, and other amenities. Lastly, I took photographs only of the immediate work environment arrangements and adaptations where individuals with

high-functioning autism perform their tasks. I did not take photographs of any human subjects.

The researcher ensures validity by serving as the primary data collection instrument (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2014). The researcher's subjectivity plays an important role in securing appropriate data that is necessary to ensure the data is valid, reliable, and accurate, because the data may lead to an improved understanding of the problem and improve the credibility of the study (Maxwell, 2013, p. 45). Although this study was indirectly associated with a vulnerable population, it was necessary to acquire ethics guidance to ensure that no harm comes to individuals with high-functioning autism during the study.

### **Possible Analytical Strategies**

For the purposes of this study, I used NVivo 11 Pro (QSR International, 2014) coding software to organize and code the data in preparation for formal analysis of emerging themes. As Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2011) noted, NVivo is useful as a coding and organizing tool across a full spectrum of qualitative research designs, including case studies. NVivo allows coding of various types of data sources, including spoken words, direct and indirect observations, graphics, photos, video segments, and various documents (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). This method for importing and coding data makes it possible to methodologically triangulate data results, and increase validity, transferability, and reliability of data (Merriam, 2009).

The formal data analysis followed the five phases outlined by Yin (2016). The phases included: (a) compiling and organizing all the available data, (b) dismantling and

fragmenting the data and beginning to assign labels and themes, (c) reconstructing the fragmented data into logical groupings, (d) interpreting the data and assigning meaning to emerging themes, and (e) assigning concluding remarks regarding the entire study.

NVivo 11 Pro made it possible to organize all available data into one system so that data analysis could take place.

### **Definitions**

*Autism spectrum disorder (ASD):* A developmental disorder that significantly inhibits the ability to function in social settings, creates challenges for communication, and affects behavior in varying ranges from high-functioning to severely impaired.

Autism affects how individuals function, communicate, learn, and behave often in ways that are different from the norm. ASD includes diagnoses of autistic disorder, pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS), and Asperger syndrome (CDC, 2016).

*Disability:* A bodily or mental impairment that limits or restricts a person's activities and participation in life (CDC, 2016).

*High-functioning autism:* A developmental condition that includes significant impairment within social settings, especially social isolation, a high tolerance for singular focus for extended periods of time, and issues associated with managing anxiety, anger, and mood swings (Atwood, 2003).

*Leadership:* The practice of influencing and guiding people toward being motivated in such a way that they contribute to the accomplishment of organizational goals and objectives (Haslam, Reicher, & Platow, (2015).

*Monopoly rents*: Profits obtained as a result of differentiation (Peteraf, 1993). In the present study, monopoly rents relate to the uniqueness and advantages of the talents and skills of employees with high-functioning autism and how organizations can differentiate themselves by engaging this limited talent pool.

*Ricardian rents*: Profits obtained from utilizing scarce resources that have a fixed level of supply (Peteraf, 1993). In the present study, Ricardian rents relate to the scarce resource associated with employees with high-functioning autism and the unique and scarce talents and skills they bring to the workplace.

*Workplace accommodation*: Alterations, modifications, or adjustments to jobs or work-related settings that makes it possible for individuals with disabilities who are qualified for a job to perform the requisite tasks (Workplace accommodation, 2016).

*Workplace support*: Official and unofficial sources of workplace accommodations (Dennehy, 2013).

### **Assumptions**

Assumptions are defined as the likelihood that certain things are probably factual and true (Simon, 2011). I addressed three main assumptions that encompass this study. The first assumption was that all participants I interviewed had the cognitive and intellectual ability to answer the questions in an intelligent and meaningful fashion. The second assumption was that each participant's interpretation of the study differed and his or her answers to questions likewise differed resulting in varying answers. The third assumption was that all participants answered the interview questions truthfully and without bias or the influence of stereotypes. These assumptions were necessary in the



study because it was important to know that responses from participants would vary based on their individual ability, training, and experience. Additionally, these assumptions related to the nature of the descriptive case study, which enabled me to uncover phenomenon within an organizational setting to increase the understanding as to how organizations support individuals with high-functioning autism.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The scope of this descriptive case study only involved leaders, managers, and frontline supervisors within a software and technology organization located in northern Illinois that specifically targeted supporting and accommodating individuals with high-functioning autism. I selected all upper level leaders, mid-level managers, and frontline supervisors who were directly involved in decision-making related to supervising, supporting and accommodating individuals with high-functioning autism. I chose this focus because scholars still know little within the field of management as to how leaders strategize to support and accommodate individuals with high-functioning autism in the workplace, although there is a plethora of literature on autism from the clinical and medical fields. Frontline supervisors were included in the study because they had direct involvement in supporting and accommodating individuals with high-functioning autism. Most importantly, I selected this focus because individuals with autism have strengths for particular jobs but also need specific support and accommodations. In using this population in my study, insights may be gained that can be used in understanding other groups beyond this group with special needs and talents.

Delimitations are defined as parameters or restrictions related to the extent of a study (Simon, 2011). I addressed several delimitations in this study. Since little is known empirically about this phenomenon (Nicholas et al., 2014), I only investigated the phenomenon within one single organization within the United States. Organizations throughout Europe and Australia that have implemented similar initiatives were excluded from the study. I did not directly study the population of individuals with high-functioning autism because they did not have direct control over organizational strategies and policies related to providing supports and accommodations.

Another delimitation relates to the findings of a study involving six organizations in which Schur et al. (2014) drew on the human resource theory to assess the correlation between employees' requests for workplace accommodations and resulting attitudes among coworkers. While the human resource theory relates to comprehensive employee policies and procedures related to all employees, this theory did not fit in with the perspective of the organization I explored in the case study because the organization targeted a narrow population of employees and the underlying perspectives of leaders did not relate to all employee populations. Labor process theory (Braverman, 1974, 1975) was better aligned with the case study organization's perspective of releasing the power achieved from labor (high-functioning autistic employees), while simultaneously securing the rewards from that population of employees. This was an important distinction, because leaders of the case study organization seemed to be attempting to capitalize on two benefits: releasing the power of a unique labor force and benefiting from labor by creating a competitive advantage that is difficult to replicate.

### **Limitations**

Purposive sampling limits the study to merely the organizational leaders, managers, and frontline supervisors within the chosen organization. A limitation to this descriptive case study is the chosen geographic location in northern Illinois. Although the phenomenon under investigation is experienced worldwide (e.g., Australia, see Baldwin et al., 2014; India, see Kulkarni & Rodrigues, 2014; and United Kingdom, see Silcox, 2014), I limited this study to one organization in the United States. The results of the study may not apply to organizations located throughout the same geographic area nor across the world. Another limitation is that I conducted the study in an organization's natural setting, which may not be possible to replicate in other similar organizations. An additional limitation of the study is that participant responses were specific to one organization and may not reflect the views or perspectives of other organizations.

There is potential for transferability of this case study because results can be generalized to other organizational settings (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Transferability is one of the means for determining the external validity within qualitative research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). My biases may have impacted the study because I was the sole instrument through which data was collected, coded, and analyzed. Bias was mitigated through data collection methods and data analysis techniques. Specifically, triangulation of more than one viewpoint aided in checking the results of data (see Zappella, 2015). I used within-method methodological triangulation (see Denzin, 1970, 2009) by combining interviews with leaders, managers, and frontline supervisors with archival documents,

artifacts, direct observations, and photographs which reduced bias and provided validation of data.

### **Significance of the Study**

Organizational leaders bear the responsibility to determine how to provide necessary support to all employees, regardless of ability or disability, to ensure employees reach maximum productivity (Stein et al., 2014). It is important that leaders develop comprehensive training and learning programs that align with organizational mission, vision, and values as a means of supporting all employees (Lancaster & Milia, 2014). According to Carpenter and Paetzold, (2013), the underlying reasons for granting a workplace alteration or accommodation are largely dependent on a leader's perception of the employee's actual disability (whether visible or invisible). For individuals with invisible disabilities, such as those with high-functioning autism, leaders often lack the strategies necessary to support and accommodate their unique workplace needs (Nicholas et al., 2014; Richards, 2015).

By addressing the workplace needs of individuals with high-functioning autism, the results of my study may lead to a better understanding of how leaders may improve the support mechanisms that are necessary to ensure this population of employees thrive in the workplace and reach their maximum potential (Zappella, 2015). An improved understanding may extend to other underserved members of the disabled population. Improved support could lead to higher retention rates among the general population of employees that are not disabled (Konrad et al., 2013).

### **Significance to Practice**

There is a gap in the literature on strategies that organizational leaders and managers can develop to support and accommodate the workplace needs of individuals with high-functioning autism (Nicholas et al., 2014). It is important for leaders to match an individual with intellectual disability to a specific job or make necessary changes to a standardized job to ensure the disabled individual is able to reach maximum potential (Zappella, 2015). Leaders need to develop strategies for ensuring all employees reach their maximum level of productivity (Green et al., 2015).

Any employee may need some accommodation or support to be effective at some point (Durand et al., 2014; Lidh, 2013; Schur et al., 2014). The results of this study may be used by managers to assist them in assessing and adjusting to each employee's changing needs in the workplace. This approach of supporting and accommodating individuals with high-functioning autism offers an opportunity to understand the employment practices of leaders in employing individuals with autism. It may also improve the understanding that employees are seeking coping mechanisms and organizational supports that lead to successful and sustained employment (Zheng et al., 2015). By learning how to support and accommodate this at-risk population, managers may secure staff that are dedicated and known for longevity (Corrigall & Cirka, 2014), reducing turnover (Houtenville & Kalargyrou, 2015), and creating a competitive advantage (Kalargyrou & Volis, 2014). Managers may gain some personal satisfaction in knowing they helped improve the lives of some employees. They also may gain experience in understanding a growing population of workers that are entering the

workforce and how these organizational practices may affect employees of all capacities, including those with invisible disabilities.

### **Significance to Theory**

Within the field of management, leaders and managers lack the understanding, strategies, and skill sets to lead and supervise individuals with autism (Johnson & Joshi, 2016; Richards, 2015). Scholars in the fields of neuroscience, psychology, health, and education have increased their attention to the study of autism (Johnson & Joshi, 2016; Richards, 2015), but little attention has been given within the field of management. As Nicholas, Attridge, Zwaigenbaum, and Clarke (2015) reported, there is a general lack of workplace support for individuals with autism because managers are not well informed regarding the challenges that autistic employees face in the workplace. Certain aspects of the physical work environment such as lighting; acoustics (López & Keenan, 2014; Richards, 2015); and excessive noise, smells, and proximity to coworkers (Kenyon, 2015; Richards, 2015) are barriers that can impede individuals with autism from performing at optimum levels and can cause an undue amount of stress (Kenyon, 2015).

### **Significance to Social Change**

All individuals have the right to work and obtain the subsequent dignity that results from meaningful employment, if only leaders can better understand the support and accommodation of needs of all their employees. Organizational leaders who are not familiar with the specific needs of employees with high-functioning autism may be interested in the results of this study. Understanding how to support individuals with autism is important in ensuring the workplace is conducive to their employment

contribution, presenting a significant opportunity for positive social change for the population with high-functioning autism, as well as for the unique and gifted skill sets that this population can provide to the companies that support them. There are additional benefits to families of individuals with autism as their overall wellbeing in the workplace improves (Zheng et al., 2015). The results of this study could have implications for other disabled populations in the workplace, or for employees that are not disabled but have special issues that arise at different times in their employment.

### **Summary and Transition**

Organizational leaders lack strategies to support and accommodate certain populations of employees (Johnson & Joshi, 2016), and leaders lack the understanding of the challenges and difficulties that individuals with high-functioning autism face in the workplace (Nicholas et al., 2015; Richards, 2015). At some point, all employees require some level of change to their jobs as a result from short-term or long-term illness, injury, or aging, and leaders bear the responsibility of ensuring all employees receive support and accommodation (Durand et al., 2014; Lidh, 2013).

Lack of strategies can lead to an underutilization of the skills and talents that individuals with high-functioning autism bring to the workplace and continued misunderstanding of this at-risk population (Richards, 2015). Leaders who create a work environment that is supportive are able to capitalize on the unique skills and abilities of employees who have traditionally not been valued, creating a competitive advantage and increased organizational performance (Richards, 2015; SAP News, 2013). There is a lack of research in management literature related to what strategies organizational leaders use

to support and accommodate individuals with high-functioning autism (Nicholas, Roberts, & Macintosh, 2014; Richards, 2015).

The purpose of this qualitative, descriptive case study was to explore the strategies organizational leaders and managers use to support and accommodate the workplace needs of individuals with high-functioning autism. The results of the study may lead organizational leaders to pursue employment policies and practices that make it possible for this population of workers to thrive while simultaneously capitalizing on their unique skillset and creating a competitive advantage. A supportive and conducive work environment has the potential to create positive social impacts for all employee populations (Baumgärtner, Böhm, & Dwertmann, 2014). This may increase organizations' competitive edge and may lead to more recruitment from populations with unique talents that were previously not considered.

Chapter 2 is a review of the literature on strategies that leaders use to support and accommodate all employees, including individuals with disabilities and able-bodied individuals, including literature on positive and inclusive work environments and leaders' responsibility for creating a highly engaged and conducive workplace. I included literature on the importance of leaders capitalizing on each employee's strengths while mitigating for any weaknesses or shortcomings. Finally, Chapter 2 contains literature that points to the gap in research related to what strategies leaders and managers use to support and accommodate employees with high-functioning autism.



## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Some organizational leaders lack strategies to support and accommodate the workplace needs of employees with specific needs while building on their strengths. For this study, the group of individuals that fall into this category are individuals with high-functioning autism who have specific needs for accommodations and yield specific strengths to the organization (Richards, 2015; SAP News, 2013). The purpose of this qualitative, descriptive case study was to explore what strategies organizational leaders and managers use to support and accommodate employees with specific needs while building on their strengths. By gaining an understanding of supporting and accommodating individuals with high-functioning autism, more can be learned about accommodating and supporting all employees, leading to a productive and motivating workplace (Stea, Foss, & Christensen, 2015) that builds on employee strengths while simultaneously accommodating their challenges (van Woerkom & Meyers, 2015).

Leaders can facilitate higher performance from employees if the workplace climate is conducive, supportive, and positive (van Woerkom & Meyers, 2015), resulting in a competitive advantage and increased organizational performance (Kalargyrou, 2014; SAP News, 2013). Individuals with high-functioning autism face a high rate of unemployment (Vogeley et al., 2013), underemployment (Chen, Leader, Sung, & Leahy, 2015); they may lose their jobs and remain unemployed not as a result of technical inabilities, but because of behavioral issues and poor social interaction skills in the workplace (Westbrook et al., 2012). There is limited research on strategies that leaders develop to support and accommodate the workplace needs of individuals with high-

functioning autism (Nicholas et al., 2014; Westbrook et al., 2012). The results of this study may provide insights as to what strategies organizational leaders develop to improve the workplace for individuals with high-functioning autism. The results of this study may also provide insights as to how leaders create a highly engaged work environment and how leaders improve organizational performance and create a competitive advantage. These insights gained from studying this group may provide insights for other groups with special needs pertaining to disabilities, illnesses, or personality styles.

In this chapter, I provide a review of the primary conceptual framework for the study, which is labor process theory (Braverman, 1974). I provide insights as to how labor process theory relates to leaders' roles in releasing the power from labor while securing the rewards from labor. I review literature on leadership strategies for supporting all employees, including those with disabilities and high-functioning autism. I also identify a gap in research as to strategies that organizational leaders use to support and accommodate employees with high-functioning autism.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

The strategies I employed to locate relevant and peer-reviewed journal articles and resources involved an iterative process that took place over an extended timeframe. I used Walden Library resources, which included databases, dissertations, and journals. I searched through resources within and outside of the field of management. The databases that I used included ABI/INFORM Complete, Academic Search Complete, Business Source Complete, Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, Dissertations, Emerald

Management, Google Scholar, ProQuest Central, PsycInfo, SAGE Premier, and Thoreau Multi-Database Search. Additionally, I searched through references within relevant dissertations and journal articles. This strategy yielded the best results.

I used a variety of search terms including: *accommodate, accommodation, Asperger's syndrome, autism, autism spectrum disorder, cognitive, competitive advantage, conducive, disabled, disability, disability inclusion, diverse workforce, diversity, employee, employee with disability, employment, high engagement, high-functioning autism, inclusive environments, inclusive work environments, inclusion, integrated employment, job, leader, leadership, manage, management, manager, natural support, organizational climate, people with disabilities, positive, productivity, recruit, recruiting, recruitment, staffing, strategy, strategies, strength, supervisor, support, weakness, work, work climate, worker, work environment, workplace accommodations, and workplace performance.*

The search was limited to peer-reviewed journals, books, and professional organization websites, which included Autism Workforce, Job Accommodation Network, Specialisterne, and The National Autism Society. The search criteria for sources were limited to those published between 2013 and 2017. A search with the terms *high-functioning autism* and *accommodation* in Business Source Complete database yielded 12 results, none of which were related to the field of management, and none that dealt with strategies for supporting and accommodating individuals with high-functioning autism. It was necessary to locate literature related to supporting and accommodating all

employees, including those with and without disabilities. The lack of relevant journal articles indicates a gap in the literature that this study addresses.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework of this study was taken from labor process theory (Braverman, 1975). The concept of this theory is that leaders are responsible for extracting the highest level of productivity from employees by providing appropriate accommodations and supports for all employees, including those with disabilities (Brook, 2013; Vornholt, Uitdewilligen, & Nijhuis, 2013; and Zheng et al., 2015). Leaders are responsible for planning, organizing, coordinating, commanding, and controlling all facets of organizations (Fayol, 1930; Mintzberg, 1973, 2015). Leaders are also responsible for creating and sustaining a positive, conducive work environment that capitalizes on employee strengths and maximizes employee performance (Blattner & Walter, 2015). Labor process theory (Braverman, 1975) was the primary theory of the conceptual framework of this study. Labor process theory represents the struggle that leaders and managers face in extracting the highest output from every employee and maximizing labor power while simultaneously getting rewards from that labor (Bolton & Wibberley, 2014; Braverman, 1974, 1975; Richards, 2012, 2015).

Labor process theory is used to uncover the conditions under which organizations gain maximum output from labor. According to Braverman (1975), the purpose of labor is to create surplus resources, which managers extract from production cycles. Surplus resources in turn make it possible for human resources (employees, workers) to obtain personal resources to meet individual needs (Braverman, 1975). In capitalistic systems,

labor is under the complete control of management, which exerts power over labor in dictating every move, often reshaping it as needed to create surplus (Braverman, 1975). To meet or exceed production demands and remain competitive, reinvestment of surplus resources into the production process is necessary (Braverman, 1975). Conversely, to meet increasing production demands, the organization must draw on more workers from the available labor pool, which creates a natural means of competition among individual laborers, reducing the laborer's capacity for earning wages (Braverman, 1975).

One of the central tenets of labor process theory is the concept that organizational actors (managers, employees) exhibit various forms of control resulting in varying degrees of conflict as they attempt to reshape their work environment in minuscule ways (Bolton, 2005; Braverman, 1975; Holt & Hvid, 2014). Controls include dividing of jobs, lowering skill expectations, reducing skill requirements, and substituting employee self-sufficiency with managerial controls (Sawchuk et al., 2006). Conflicts arise as leaders attempt to retain full control over labor, creating estrangement between managers and employees and alienating employees from any source of power over their own destiny (Bolton, 2005). This imbalance of power distances employees from being able to exert any influence over their own workplace welfare (Bolton, 2005). In the case of employees who need some form of support or accommodation in the workplace, they have even less influence to voice their concerns and self-advocate (Bolton, 2005).

Management retaining all power over the laborer creates a struggle between management and the laborer (Holt & Hvid, 2014; Richards, 2012). In the case of the individual with a disability like individuals with high-functioning autism, management

may not have adequate strategies to ensure this source of labor is fully used (Richards, 2015; Self et al., 2014). Richards' (2012) use of labor process theory in a qualitative study on employees with Asperger syndrome (a subset of high-functioning autism) seems appropriate for the present study. As Richards (2012, 2015) explained, individuals with Asperger syndrome lack the ability to engage management in dialogues concerning specific accommodations that are necessary. To accommodate individuals with invisible disabilities such as Asperger syndrome or high-functioning autism, leaders must create new workplace environments and processes, which can create more struggle for control between management and employees (Richards, 2012, 2015). Labor process theory is useful in assessing the reasons managers exclude certain populations of workers and resist providing adequate workplace supports and accommodations (Richards, 2012, 2015). Labor process theory stipulates that opposition to management controls and creation of new counter-measures is necessary to issue in an environment that defends employee interests (Holt & Hvid, 2014).

Labor process theory has its roots in Marxist tendencies, which identifies an antagonistic relationship between capital (management) and labor (employee; Gaines & Domagalski, 1996; Sawchuk et al., 2006). In recent decades, Weberian (bureaucratic management) and Taylorism (scientific management) perspectives that lend credence to the value that employees bring to the workplace have influenced labor process theory (Thompson & Smith, 2000). Central to labor process theory is the three-fold concept of the restructuring of work itself, management retaining full control of labor, and employment affiliation containing social underpinnings (Gaines & Domagalski, 1996;

Sawchuk et al., 2006). Workers are directly involved in production cycles transforming raw materials into products or services that prove useful for human consumption, but workers do not retain the rights to production nor do they receive the highest benefit (Smith, 2015). Rather, workers receive pay for their production, while management retains capital as the highest reward from labor and the means by which to extract value from labor (Cushen & Thompson, 2016; Gaines & Domagalski, 1996). Wealth is concentrated at the highest level of an organization, while lower levels retain less wealth and consequently have less influence on upper levels of the organization (Gaines & Domagalski, 1996).

The result of this conflict is class privilege and class structure (Tinel, 2014). In class structures, skilled workers are favored over unskilled, internal employees are favored over applicants, men employees are favored over women, and Caucasians are favored over other races (Gaines & Domagalski, 1996). This class privilege, or structured antagonism, represents the struggle to maintain control between management and employees where resistance and collaboration work together throughout the production cycle (Edwards, 1990, p. 126; Gaines & Domagalski, 1996). In the present study, labor process theory helped distinguish between able-bodied employees and disabled employees as well as helped to explain the reason leaders exclude certain populations of employees and how employees can increase their individual autonomy (see Nord & Doherty, 1996).

A secondary concept for the conceptual framework was the resource-based theory from the field of strategic management (Barney, 1991; Grant, 1991; Peteraf, 1993;

Warnier et al., 2013; Wernerfelt, 1984), which is based on the fact that organizations can gain a competitive advantage and improve overall profitability by tapping into scarce, underused, or unused resources. Organizational resources are central to strategy formulation, and as such, leaders assess which resources and competencies will provide the greatest differentiation compared to rival organizations (Peteraf, 1993). Resource-based theory produces a competitive advantage under four conditions. These four conditions include resource heterogeneity, which comes from Ricardian or monopoly rents; ex post limits to competition; imperfect resource mobility; and ex ante limits to competition (Peteraf, 1993, p. 180).

Ricardian rents is the concept that organizations that possess rare resources are better able to earn revenues from those resources, and monopoly rents entails the advantages organizations obtain as a result of differentiation (Peteraf, 1993). In the present study, both Ricardian and monopoly rents relate to the scarce resource associated with employees with high-functioning autism and the talents and skills they bring to the workplace. Resource heterogeneity is necessary to differentiate one organization from another and provide products or services in a more economical fashion being superior in meeting customer demands (Peteraf, 1993). Ex post limits to competition involves ensuring the organization is able to sustain heterogeneity long-term to gain a competitive advantage (Peteraf, 1993). Imperfect resource mobility is the concept that rare resources are mostly usable within the organization and not easily replicated (Peteraf, 1993). Ex ante limits to competition is the concept that a particular resource is rare and not easily acquired by other organizations (Peteraf, 1993). Putting these four concepts together with



respect to rare human resources establishes a means by which organizations gain an advantage over their competition (Peteraf, 1993). Within my study, individuals with high-functioning autism represent a rare or unusual source of human capital, and as such, organizational leaders who capitalize on and support or accommodate this rare resource can differentiate themselves from the competition and gain a competitive advantage.

A resource-based approach to developing a competitive advantage is based on the idea that some employee populations are underused, such as individuals with disabilities (Lillestø & Sandvin, 2014) like individuals with high-functioning autism (Kalargyrou, 2014). If organizational leaders can establish positive conditions under which disabled workers can apply their talents, the organization can gain a competitive advantage (Kalargyrou, 2014). The resource-based theory is applicable to the present study, as a competitive advantage seems to be the result of leaders' strategies for improving workplace productivity. I sought to understand the strategies leaders and managers engage in to support and accommodate employees. Uncovering the benefit of a competitive advantage gained from underused resources helped frame the study and improve the overall understanding of the phenomenon.

### **Literature Review**

There is an issue with some organizational leaders lacking strategies to support and accommodate the workplace needs of individuals with disabilities or specific needs while building on their strengths. When leaders provide necessary support and accommodations to employees (with or without disabilities), they achieve each

employee's maximum potential contribution to the organization (Baldrige & Swift, 2013).

The literature indicates no single strategy for accomplishing a supportive and accommodating work environment for individuals with and without disabilities. Instead, strategies encompass a variety of dimensions or vantage points that influence leaders in their decisions to support and accommodate employees. These vantage points span a variety of topics, including cultural, religious, economic, legal, legislative, organizational, and social facets of leader and manager perspectives (Agovino & Rapposelli, 2014; Erickson, 2013; Erickson, von Schrader, Bruyère, & VanLooy, 2014; Gotsis & Kortezi, 2013; Gröschl, 2013; Idris, 2014; Kulkarni, 2013; Lancaster & Milia, 2014; Lindsay, Goodfellow, Stergiou-Kita, Kirsh, & Lero, 2013; Samnani, Boekhorst, & Harrison, 2013; Theodorakopoulos & Budhwar, 2015). Each of these vantage points influences how organizational leaders establish a workplace that is supportive and conducive to all employee populations. Leaders sometime employ these vantage points based on the popularity of diversity topics in contemporary literature, compulsory input, or on purposeful and strategic alignment with core values and organizational missions (Oswick & Noon, 2014). In this literature review, I consider various vantage points and their implications on leaders' strategies for supporting employees.

### **Strategies for Supporting Employees**

Work is a natural organizational and institutional process through which leaders fulfill organizational missions, visions, and goals. Broadly defined, work is the culmination and sum of all efforts put forth by individuals within organizations toward

initiating and preserving organizations (Lawrence, Leca, & Zilber, 2013). Leaders are primarily responsible for planning and directing the work of employees (Fayol, 1930; Mintzberg, 1973, 2015). Labor process theory entails the notion that leaders must structure employee's work and lead and influence labor processes (Gaines & Domagalski, 1996; Holt & Hvid, 2014). Asserting full control of labor, however, creates conditions under which managerial and employee conflict abounds (Bolton, 2005). The implication is that organizational leaders must rely on workers to accomplish organizational goals and objectives (Lawrence et al., 2013). This supports the notion that leaders need to provide the necessary accommodations and supports to extract the highest level of productivity from each worker (Brook, 2013; Lawrence et al., 2013).

The U.S. Department of Labor (2016, May) predictions show that the workforce is changing as the baby boomer generation reaches retirement age. By 2029, there will be a significant increase in employees with disabilities in the workforce, which represent an underused organizational resource (U.S. Department of Labor, 2016). The education level of individuals with disabilities is far less than the population of individuals without disabilities (U.S. Department of Labor, 2016). Kostanjsek et al., (2013) analyzed secondary data obtained from a survey of disability in Ireland conducted in 2006, in conjunction with the worldwide prevalence of disability obtained through the World Health Survey and Global Burden of Disease studies. Based on the results of a previous survey, Kostanjsek et al. (2013) tallied the responses to the original survey questions to arrive at statistics and estimated that 1 billion people (15% of the world's population) have some form of disability. Of this number, 45% indicated the need for some flexibility

in the workplace. Siperstein, Parker, and Drascher (2013) analyzed the data obtained from a random sample survey conducted by Gallup involving telephone interviews of 1,017 blood relatives or custodians of adults with intellectual disabilities, autism, or some form of cognitive disabilities and noted the high unemployment rate of 21% among this population. Of this population, 76% were receiving some form of Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Insurance benefits, further distancing this population of employees from viable and supported work and increasing the cost to society.

If the disabled are not earning their own income, the taxpayers will have to carry the burden of providing a living to them (Bardos, Burak, & Ben-Shalom, 2015). This population of workers is a source of additional workforce if management can unlock the key to making them successful as individuals and an advantage for organizations (Kalargyrou, 2014). This disparity has implications for management research as employee demographics change in the coming years and leaders strategize on how to assimilate the population of disabled workers into the workplace (Fujimoto et al., 2014).

Leaders' strategies for accommodating and supporting all employees (those with or without disabilities) necessitate all-encompassing organizational policies and practices that capitalize on employee strengths and minimize their weaknesses (Harter & Adkins, 2015; Warnier et al., 2013). In a case study involving two individuals with vision impairment, the first brought on by an eye disease, the second brought on as the result of a stroke, Ferronato, and Ukovic (2014) observed the various services these individuals received. The services included vision assessment, occupational planning, compensation

for specific tasks and work, assistive technology, modifications to the work setting, improving skills to navigate in and around the workplace and specific training provided to employers and coworkers. Ferronato and Ukovic (2014) noted that both participants benefitted from various occupational and workplace assessments to determine what type of accommodation they needed to accommodate for their deficiency. Effective strategies for supporting and accommodating individuals with vision impairments require wide range of unified amenities and provisions that have the potential to improve employment outcomes (Ferronato & Ukovic, 2014). Policies related to these strategies are comprised of recruitment, employment, accommodation, accessibility, retention, advancement, funding, pre-employment screenings and case-by-case mechanisms that are necessary for accommodating employees (Erickson, 2013; Erickson et al., 2014). Management has a direct impact on overall employee motivation and engagement (Stea et al., 2015). Evidence suggests management is not creating engaging and conducive work environments that fully supports and accommodates employees of all abilities (Harter & Adkins, 2015).

In a descriptive qualitative study, Huang and Chen (2015) sought to explore the strategies used by organizational leaders in the Taiwanese private sector to employ, support and accommodate employees with disabilities. The participants included twelve leaders who were experienced in supporting disabled workers (Huang & Chen, 2015). Participants were asked semistructured interview questions related to their experiences in employing and supporting individuals with disabilities. As a result of the study, the researchers were able to identify four underlying strategies or reasons for integrating

disabled employees in the workplace, which included how one relates to individuals with disabilities, potential economic impacts, compassion and the effects of policies related to the disabled (Huang & Chen, 2015). These strategies underscore the importance of a multi-method approach to assimilating, supporting and accommodating disabled employees in the workplace (Huang & Chen, 2015).

### **Cultural and Religious Strategies**

Leaders and managers are facing an increase in workers from diverse nationalities, necessitating strategies to accommodate and support various cultural and religious perspectives. The advent of immigration plays a key role in the diversification of workers (Samnani et al., 2013). Contemporary organizations are still grappling with the high prevalence of workers from various nationalities (Samnani et al., 2013). To ensure that organizations are accepting of workers from other countries and nationalities, organizational leaders develop workplace accommodations and supports in direct relation to individual cultural or religious preferences (Idris, 2014; Samnani et al., 2013; Theodorakopoulos & Budhwar, 2015). Another important factor in supporting employees is acculturating individuals from different cultures in an effort to assimilate them into existing national cultures to better manage and support a diverse workforce (Samnani et al., 2013). In an exploratory qualitative case study involving semistructured interviews with 8 human resources leaders in Malaysian banks, Idris (2014) sought to explore how various types of flexible workplace practices affect employee retention. Idris (2014) noted that strategies for accommodating employees include providing flexible scheduling to employees. Results of the study showed that participants favored various types of

flexible workplace practices, such as flex time, flexible leave schedules and flexible workplace to support and accommodate employees with various needs while still maintain adequate working hours and achieving organizational objectives (Idris, 2014). This strategy improved employee retention and directly benefitted organizations (Idris, 2014).

### **Economic Strategies**

There are costs, and sometimes, accompanying benefits associated with providing supports and accommodations for employees who face various types of needs in the workplace. Leaders are concerned about the potential high cost of accommodating individuals with disabilities (Erickson et al., 2014; Lindsay et al., 2013; Gröschl, 2013). In a mixed methods study involving random sampling of 675 human resources professionals, Erickson et al. (2014) facilitated a survey regarding organizational practices associated with disability practices, policies for recruiting, hiring and supporting individuals with disabilities. Results of the study showed that that 1/5 of the respondents were concerned about costs associated with accommodating employees with disabilities (Erickson et al., 2014). Another 1/5 of respondents had some formal fund to accommodate employees (Erickson et al., 2014).

Additionally, leaders have concerns about customer attitudes toward employees with disabilities, productivity (Houtenville & Kalargyrou, 2015), the type of work they consider appropriate for persons with disabilities (Houtenville & Kalargyrou, 2015) and potential costs associated with improvements to infrastructure for individuals with disabilities (Singal, 2014). In a quantitative study utilizing data obtained from 2008

Office on Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), Houtenville and Kalargyrou (2015) sought to determine first if organizations in the service sector were more likely to hire individuals with disabilities compared to organizations that produced goods, and second, if organizations in the service sector that deal directly with customers were more sensitive to consumer opinions related to hiring disabled individuals. Results of the study showed that employers in the hospitality, leisure and retail sectors that provide direct services to customers are more concerned about customer attitudes related to employing people with disabilities, which may lead to exclusion or even discriminatory practices (Houtenville & Kalargyrou, 2015).

Conversely, when management is accepting of individuals with disabilities, there is a reduction in costs associated with employing and training new employees (Vornholt et al., 2013). Similarly, as Tilly (2013) noted, when leaders assimilated individuals with disabilities in the workplace, there was an overall reduction in costs associated with discrimination lawsuits. Durand et al. (2014) asserted there is a cost benefit associated with providing accommodations and support for work absences due to illness or injury. Leaders bear the responsibility for effectively managing absenteeism and return-to-work policies, resulting in a work environment that is supportive of workers who face changes to their physical and mental makeup, reducing the cost of turnover and improving organizational effectiveness (Durand et al., 2014).

In a non-random convenience sample study involving 717 participants who held a supervisory role, Shaw et al. (2014) asked participants to complete an online survey regarding the provision of job modifications for a hypothetical worker with pain in their



lower back. Results of the study showed that supervisors were willing to provide temporary accommodations for employees who experienced lower back pain or injury (Shaw et al., 2014). The most practical and realistic accommodations included altering an employee's physical activity (lifting, movement, posture), whereas changing an employee's work schedule or moving him/her to a different location were less feasible (Shaw et al., 2014). Temporary accommodations, according to Shaw et al. (2014), have the potential to reduce costs and improve the results of return-to-work and disabilities. Despite the clear advantage of providing accommodations, temporary accommodations are typically not well planned or executed (Shaw et al., 2014).

Leaders can optimize organizational performance and gain a competitive advantage when their strategies include supporting a diverse population of employees. Organizations that support workers with disabilities optimize employee performance, reduce turnover and contribute to a workforce that is more dependable, safe and productive (Kalargyrou, 2014). Organizations that integrate persons with disabilities receive benefits through: innovation (Kalargyrou, 2014; Kalargyrou & Volis, 2014); creative ideas (Heffernan, Harney, Cafferke, y & Dundon, 2016; van Woerkom & Meyers, 2015); a competitive advantage (Boehm et al., 2014; Kalargyrou, 2014; Kalargyrou & Volis, 2014; Steele & Derven, 2015); improved customer service and satisfaction (Kalargyrou & Volis, 2014); improved company image (Glavas & Godwin, 2013; Kalargyrou & Volis, 2014; Williams, Kilanski, & Muller, 2014); and create work environments that are free of barriers (Kalargyrou & Volis 2014; Kenyon, 2015; Reeves, McKinney, & Azam, 2013).

## **Legal and Legislative Strategies**

The World Health Organization (WHO) emphasized that governments bear the primary responsibility of ensuring that necessary organizational, legislative, financial and general services are in place to ensure that disabled populations are having their needs met and their overall wellbeing advocated for (WHO, 2013). Legislation plays an integral role in advancing and protecting worker rights and wellbeing and governmental policy is the main driving force for the inclusion of the disabled in employment (Agovino & Rapposelli, 2014). Leaders sometimes take a passive approach to accommodating workers and facilitate policies that ensure overall compliance with legislation (Gotsis & Kortezi, 2013) and avoidance of discrimination lawsuits, but do little to advance the rights of disabled people (Stein et al., 2014). In some cases, legislation itself does not adequately address the needs of certain disabled individuals (Santuzzi, Waltz, Finkelstein, & Rupp, 2014).

The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (2016, September) amended its Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) through the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (ADAAA), which stipulates that employers must provide reasonable accommodations to individuals with disabilities. President Obama (2013) noted the important role that the ADA plays in the lives of individuals with disabilities. The inclusion of at-risk populations became one of President Obama's hallmarks by ensuring that the federal government itself serves as a model employer (Obama, 2013).

In some countries (Hungary and Taiwan for example), legislation mandates that certain quotas be reached in terms of employment of individuals with disabilities (Chi et al., 2014; Hidegh & Csillag, 2013), while the U.S., Canada, the UK and Europe prohibit discrimination against persons with disabilities, but do not mandate specific quotas. The U.S. enforces affirmative action quotas for organizations that engage in federal contracts (Erickson et al., 2014). Conversely, as Luring (2013) observed in an ethnographic study that included participant observation and semistructured interviews with 16 managers of Danish origin and 13 managers from other countries operating in Saudi Arabia, there are challenges associated with the transferability of diversity management traditions from centers of operation to local affiliates because of the differing views on diversity across the globe. Leaders from Denmark had to enforce Saudi human resources quota rules that ran contrary to quota rules from their homeland (Luring, 2013).

Leadership responsibility entails creating a workforce that outperforms the competition and one of the means of accomplishing this is through increasing the diversity of the workforce. Optimization of workplace diversity creates a competitive advantage that competitors cannot easily replicate (Richard, Kirby, & Chadwick, 2013; Tilly, 2013). In a quantitative study involving 7,689 military employees, Boehm et al. (2014) sought to determine whether there was a correlation between an organization's climate of diversity and the overall performance of employees within said climate. Results of the study showed a positive correlation in that an organization that promotes and supports diversity will obtain higher performance from employees (Boehm et al.,

2014). Workplace diversity directly influences workers' performance, especially within organizations that accept and promote diversity (Boehm et al., 2014).

Management literature related to disability is sparse (Corrigall & Cirka, 2014) and many managers are not well versed in issues related to the ADA. In a case study involving business students, researchers sought to test student's decision-making process related to hiring individuals with disabilities. As a result of the study, Corrigall and Cirka (2014) found that participant perceptions of individuals with disabilities improved significantly, particularly in terms of appreciating disabled individuals on the basis of their skills, dedication, longevity, commitment and long tenure. In a cross-sectional study involving 4,072 Canadian employees with disabilities, Shuey and Jovic (2013) used secondary data obtained from the 2006 Participation and Activity Limitation Survey, which is a census survey of Canadian individuals with disabilities. Results of the survey indicated that more than 1/3 of the participants who needed some form of workplace accommodation or support were not receiving the necessary assistance (Shuey & Jovic, 2013). This disparity and lack of accommodation and support significantly increases the unemployment and underemployment rate of individuals with disabilities and further alienates the population of creative and ingenious workers from meaningful and productive employment (Shuey & Jovic, 2013).

Employees with disabilities are overrepresented in temporary and part-time employment (Shuey & Jovic, 2013) and face high levels of unemployment (Stancliffe, 2014). This may be due in part to how disabilities are classified and whether individuals choose to disclose their impairments to supervisors (Stancliffe, 2014). In a Taiwanese

study involving 16 focus groups with 199 participants, Teng et al. (2013) sought to assess employee disabilities based on the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF). Classification of a disability and subsequent provision of support or accommodation was previously solely dependent upon a medical and physician diagnosis (Teng et al., 2013). The evaluation process evolved to include a disabled individual's involvement in day-to-day activities (Teng et al., 2013). Conversely, in some cases, leaders' perception of the employee's actual disability is the driving force as to whether an employee receives an accommodation (Carpenter & Paetzold, 2013). The problem with invisible disabilities (such as high-functioning autism, or any other invisible disability) is that individuals with disabilities may not be aware of the disability or may be afraid to disclose for fear of prejudice, stigma, or harassment (Neely & Hunter, 2014). If a leader or manager suspects a disability, he or she cannot bring it up—it must be self-disclosed (Madaus, Gerber, & Price, 2008).

Leaders bear the responsibility to ensure all employees, including those with invisible disabilities, are able to capitalize on their strengths while minimizing their weaknesses. In discussing the nature of invisible disabilities, Santuzzi et al. (2014) noted the importance of leaders providing ADA training for lower level supervisors and able-bodied employees on how to navigate the complexities of the disabled worker's needs. Diversity training is a strategic business objective (Woodson, 2013) that fosters an inclusive work environment as well as compliance with legal mandates (Lindsay et al., 2013). In a qualitative exploratory case study at Baxter International, Inc., Dhanda (2013) conducted interviews of two participants at corporate headquarters and also collected and

analyzed archival, media and corporate data to assess the organization's corporate environmental and sustainability initiatives. Results of the study showed the organization created an inclusive and diverse workforce that resulted in a robust sustainability program and numerous accolades and awards, enhancing their competitive advantage in the marketplace (Dhanda, 2013). Although diversity was not a driving force behind the organization's focus on sustainability, leaders recognized the importance that diverse thoughts, knowledge, social class and viewpoints in promoting and advancing a sustainability initiative (Dhanda, 2013).

Leaders who strive to create a more inclusive work environment may face higher instances of discrimination lawsuits (Boehm & Dwertmann, 2015) due to inexperience in managing diversity and preventing discriminatory practices (Tilly, 2013). An increase in disabled employees translates into more time and effort on the part of leaders to assess employee needs, opening up opportunities for an increase in lawsuits and associated costs (Boehm & Dwertmann, 2015). Leaders may also simultaneously reap the benefits of a more inclusive work environment through improved organizational climate that has direct impact on workers' performance, especially climates that accept and promote diversity (Boehm et al., 2014; Tilly, 2013). Conversely, individuals with disabilities who disclose the nature of their impairment or disability face higher instances of discrimination (Johnson & Joshi, 2014).

According to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC, 2015) there were 26,968 disability-related lawsuits in 2015, compared to 1,048 in 1992 when enforcement of the ADA began. To combat this rise in lawsuits, some organizations have

initiated employment practices that better support the population of disabled workers, reducing costs associated with discrimination lawsuits (Tilly, 2013). In collaboration with Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), Erickson et al. (2014) facilitated online and telephone surveys of 675 human resources personnel from various organizations through a stratified sampling method regarding their employment practices, policies and barriers for employing individuals with disabilities. Results of the surveys indicated common barriers for individuals with disabilities were lack of knowledge on the part of supervisors regarding the provision of accommodations and stereotyping (Erickson et al., 2014). Additionally, Erickson et al. (2014) found that organizations that had federal contracts were under scrutiny by the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs (OFCCP) and will likely be required to recruit, hire, and support individuals with disabilities and provide yearly reports related to inclusion and accommodation practices.

A strategy for advancing the support and accommodation of employees with disabilities is associated with affirmative action policies. Designed by the U.S. federal government, affirmative action policies create an environment of equality for minorities, women and led to the inclusion of individuals with disabilities and veterans (Fortney & Smith, 2013), but it is often associated as partiality toward certain societal members (Fujimoto et al., 2014). Contemporary diversity management strategy focuses predominantly on gender and income equality and not on disability or affirmative action (Williams et al., 2014). This perspective is changing due to federal mandates for tracking and disclosure of employment and accommodation procedures (Erickson et al., 2014).

Technological advances also provide leaders with additional opportunities to support disabled employees while simultaneously aligning with legislative demands. In a biographical study based in Norway (spanning a 12-year period from 1998-2002) of 66 individuals with various disabilities, Lillestø and Sandvin (2014) sought to understand why disabled people have more difficulty accessing viable employment compared to other portions of society. Results of the study indicated that participants were frequently excluded from the labor market due to changes within the marketplace and that competition for gainful employment has increased with a stronger focus on performance rather than qualifications (Lillestø & Sandvin, 2014). Results of the study also identified that automation and computerization of various types of work make it possible for leaders to mitigate for employee deficiencies (Lillestø & Sandvin, 2014). Telecommuting also enables employees of large organizations to work from home or centralized offices, reducing air pollution as mandated by the Clean Air Act of 1990 (Linden, 2014). Telecommuting has the unique potential to mitigate for employee disabilities associated with limitations to their movement, hearing, sight, speech, or cognition (Linden, 2014). Telecommuting is beneficial in removing certain workplace barriers related to architecture, facilities, office furniture, transportation, or any other facet that impedes performance, such as exhaustion or discomfort (Linden & Milchus, 2014; Moon, Linden, Bricout, & Baker, 2014). In a national cross-sectional survey involving 373 participants (70 of whom telecommute), Linden and Milchus (2014) sought to explore what types of devices and strategies were used to provide workplace accommodations for individuals with various limitations. Results of the study indicated that only 32 of the telecommuters



received accommodations to offset their limitation (Linden & Milchus, 2014). The impetus for facilitating telecommuting as an accommodation is somewhat related to interpretation of EEOC and ADA mandates (Linden & Milchus, 2014).

### **Organizational Strategies**

**Supporting all employees.** At some point in the workplace, all employees need support and accommodations of some sort from leaders. Whether the employee is a new hire in need of acculturation and assistance in navigating through the new workplace (Kulkarni, 2013), or a more tenured employee that requires leader support for learning (Lancaster & Milia, 2014), leaders bear the responsibility for establishing and maintaining employee development programs.

Employees with known or invisible disabilities face difficulty in requesting support or accommodation from leaders. In a quantitative study involving 279 individuals with a hearing disability who participated in a previous survey study, Baldrige and Swift (2013) sought to determine how frequently employees withheld requests for accommodation from their employer. Results of the study showed that men withhold accommodation requests more frequently than women do and the severity of the disability affected the frequency of the accommodation request (Baldrige & Swift, 2013). Withholding an accommodation request limits the employee's ability to perform at their peak and reduces management's ability to extract the highest potential from disabled employees (Baldrige & Swift, 2013). Leaders bear the responsibility of educating and training all employees, including management, on issues related to disability and inclusion in the workplace (Kalargyrou, 2014). Training and formalized processes for

providing accommodations and supports leads to greater job satisfaction (Baumgärtner, Dwertmann, Boehm, & Bruch, 2015), improved morale (Tilly, 2013) and alignment with organizational mission, vision and values (Lancaster & Milia, 2014). In an interpretive phenomenological study involving 30 small to mid-size organizations that targeted hiring individuals with cognitive disabilities, Zappella (2015) sought to explore the attitudes of employers toward disabled employees. Results of the study showed that employers that had previous positive experiences hiring individuals with cognitive disabilities were more likely to hire and support individuals with similar disabilities in the future (Zappella, 2015). It is important for leaders to match an individual with a cognitive disability to a specific job, make necessary changes to a standardized job to ensure the disabled individual is able to reach his or her maximum potential and in general create appropriate organizational conditions that foster productivity and output (Zappella, 2015).

One strategy organizational leaders can use to extract the highest output from each employee is to focus on employees strengths and capitalize on their key abilities and in so doing, reduce the focus on weaknesses or deficiencies (Brook, 2013). Another strategy is for leaders to create and maintain an organizational culture that is accepting of people with disabilities and in doing so, coworkers are better suited to assist new entrants with necessary helps and supports because organizational norms and values predispose the organization to inclusion and support (Kulkarni, 2013). In a qualitative study facilitated through semistructured, open-ended interviews of 41 individuals with disabilities, Kulkarni (2013) sought to understand how disabled workers go about seeking help from organizational leaders and coworkers. Results from the study showed that in

many cases, disabled workers knew managers and workers prior to employment, so the process for seeking help was far easier (Kulkarni, 2013).

Leaders bear the responsibility of ensuring tacit and explicit workplace knowledge transfers from one employee to another as a means for improving overall organizational performance (Lee, Lee, Lee, & Park, 2014). In a quantitative study utilizing a five-point Likert scale in which 365 mid-level insurance professionals in Korea were surveyed, Lee et al. (2014) sought to explore the relationship between employee training and the transfer of knowledge within the workplace. Results of the study indicated that organizational support for transfer of training knowledge is critical particularly for low performing managers (Lee et al., 2014). Support from supervisors and peers played an integral role in the transfer of knowledge for both the high and low performing employee (Lee et al., 2014).

**Innovation and creativity.** Leaders' strategies can also produce side benefits that further the organization's strategic plan. Managerial and organizational innovation are key to overall organizational success, including the advancement of employee ideas, creativity and innovations, which create organizational environments under which innovation can thrive (Nedelko & Potocan, 2013). In a quantitative study involving 1,731 participants in the public sector, Chrobot-Mason and Aramovic (2013) administered a survey to assess organizational diversity climate to understand the mediating effect of an inclusive and diverse workplace climate on employee intention to depart from the organization. Results of the study showed that management practices that are fair and provide equal access lead to improved employee perceptions about the organization

(Chrobot-Mason & Aramovic, 2013). When organizational leaders engage in positive diversity management initiatives, employees benefit by gaining feelings of inclusion and appreciation, and the organization benefits through broadened innovation, ingenuity, creativity and productivity from employees (Chrobot-Mason & Aramovic, 2013; Kalargyrou & Volis, 2014; Steele & Derven, 2015; Williams et al., 2014). Innovation is one of the key drivers of a successful and vibrant organization (Bishwas, 2015).

In organizational settings, learning occurs because of collaborative efforts between and among leaders and employees (Margaryan, Littlejohn, & Milligan, 2013). Leaders need to create a work environment that is supportive and conducive for knowledge sharing. Innovative work behavior can be improved through a positive organizational climate (Montani, Odoardi, & Battistelli, 2014) and through leaders modeling the types of behaviors that lead to innovation and critical thinking (Wziątek-Staśko, 2013).

Conversely, when leaders do not espouse the same ideals as the company related to inclusion of individuals with disabilities, those individuals become alienated from the workplace and viewed as having limitations (Brite, Nunes & Souza, 2015). In a quantitative study involving 89 leaders and managers within a Brazilian grocery store chain, Brite et al. (2015) sought to explore leaders' conception of inclusion for individuals with disabilities in the workplace. Results of the study showed that a high percentage of participants had negative views toward individuals with disabilities (Brite et al., 2015). Yet at the same time, participants believed that organizations bear the responsibility to create a work environment that promotes inclusion of people with

disabilities (Brite et al., 2015). This dichotomous perspective indicates the organization does not facilitate a positive organizational climate of inclusion for individuals with disabilities to be innovative and creative (Brite et al., 2015).

In a case study within six global organizations, Derven (2014) conducted in-depth interviews with various global organizational leaders who were responsible for diversity and inclusion. Results of the study indicated that diversity and inclusion initiatives fostered innovation and provided opportunities for new ideas to flourish (Derven, 2014). Many of the participating organizations noted the importance of expanding their inclusion of a diverse population of employees as a means to leverage a diversity of experience and views (Derven, 2014). Based on positive psychology philosophies in a cross-sectional quantitative study involving 442 participants, van Woerkom and Meyers (2015) sought to explore the impact of strengths-based approach to managing and leading employees. Results of the study showed that organizational leaders could improve employee performance through creating a happy work environment, which results in capitalizing on employee strengths, rather than attempting to fix their weaknesses, further strengthening employee contributions through innovation and creativity (van Woerkom & Meyers, 2015).

**Corporate social responsibility.** Some organizations place a heavy emphasis on sustainability and corporate social responsibility (CSR) as a means of differentiation. Leaders engage in practices that foster positive feelings from various internal and external stakeholders (Dhanda, 2013; Hazarika, 2013; Kulkarni & Rodrigues, 2014) which include suppliers, business owners, government entities, consumers, local

community, organizations and workers (Strand & Freeman, 2015) who contribute both to society and to the labor force (Kalargyrou, 2014; Kalargyrou & Volis, 2014). When organizations engage in robust CSR initiatives, employee perceptions of the organization improve, also improving worker's identification with the organization, which ultimately benefits the organization itself in improved effectiveness and outcomes (Glavas & Godwin, 2013). Similarly, an organizational focus on CSR initiatives tied to disabilities attracts consumers who want to do business with such organizations, creating a competitive advantage (Kuo & Kalargyrou, 2014). In a single-factor experimental design study of 192 restaurant customers, Kuo and Kalargyrou, (2014) sought to explore consumer attitudes toward being served by employees with disabilities. Results of the study showed that consumers' intention to purchase had a positive correlation to restaurants that hire and support individuals with disabilities (Kuo & Kalargyrou, 2014). However, participant's intention to purchase and attitudes toward restaurant servers with a mental disability decreased, but remained high toward servers with physical disabilities (Kuo & Kalargyrou, 2014).

There has been a long-standing battle within organizations to balance the gender inequality gap in business (Steinfield, Park, Gomes, & Estrin, 2014). Equally as important in contemporary business is the need to balance the employment inequality gap for individuals with disabilities (Steinfield et al., 2014). As Singal (2014) observed, CSR initiatives have some correlation to an organization's overall performance, but there is lack of consideration linking diversity CSR initiatives and overall monetary benefit,

whereas Williams et al. (2014) asserted a direct link between a focus on managing diversity and an organization's overall profitability.

**Vision, mission, values, and principles.** Organizations also align their business practices with their vision, mission, values and principles as a means of gaining a competitive advantage and creating a positive workplace. Leaders need to develop comprehensive training and learning programs that align with organizational mission, vision and values as a means of supporting all employees (Lancaster & Milia, 2014). Among the outcomes of a cross-sectional study with 24 subjects who participated in a leadership development program, results showed that participants appreciated organizational alignment between training and company strategy (Lancaster & Milia, 2014). Leaders also need to ensure their values are shared with organizational stakeholders (Durand et al., 2014), including employees with disabilities (Fujimoto et al., 2014). Leaders need to espouse the same values held by their organization (Brite et al., 2015) which directly affects employees and society at large (Idris, 2014). In a qualitative study in which the Gallup phone interviewed 1,055 participants, Siperstein, Heyman, and Stokes (2014) sought to ascertain the individualities of employed adults with documented mental disabilities and to determine how these individuals obtained jobs. Results of the study indicated that individuals with disabilities are more likely to retain competitive employment if they secure such employment early in post- primary and -secondary education and continuous employment is highly dependent on that disabled worker's ability to adapt (Siperstein, Heyman, & Stokes, 2014). For the sake of inclusion of

individuals with disabilities, leaders need to incorporate this population of employees into their corporate social responsibility initiatives (Dhanda, 2013).

The subject of diversity and inclusion encompasses a wide variety of themes, including ethnicity and race, cultural diversity, gender, age, disability and sexual orientation (Theodorakopoulos & Budhwar, 2015). The reasons associated with pursuing diversity and inclusion is vast, including corporate strategy and agenda (Idris, 2014). An emerging organizational strategy for improving workplace policies and practices related to disabled workers is the introduction of a *disability champion* (Bacon & Hoque, 2015), namely an individual that represents disabled workers in the workplace who may influence organizational leaders in a positive way toward the disabled. In a survey of 116 participants who received direct training to become a *disability champion*, Bacon and Hoque (2015) sought to determine the efficacy of such champions in inspiring organizations to alter and advance policies and practices associated with disability and to evaluate the dynamics related to reporting on the effectiveness of such champions. Results of the study showed that participants were more willing to ensure organizational policies and procedures related to disabilities were systematically reviewed (Bacon & Hoque, 2015). By focusing leaders' attention on the workplace accommodation needs of individuals with disabilities, leaders can more easily identify relatively inexpensive and quick accommodations (Bacon & Hoque, 2015).

**Managing risk.** The inclusion of individuals from a variety of backgrounds, culture and ability can lead to increase innovation, as noted earlier. Along with innovation, leaders experience higher levels of risk as they consider whether the risks



outweigh the benefits (Nedelko & Potocan, 2013). While Nedelko and Potocan (2013) noted how managerial innovation is a key driver of organizational success, they also noted how managerial risk aversion thwarts innovation, particularly if the innovation counters organizational objectives. Risk aversion can also influence leaders to exclude disabled workers from employment, or to withhold reasonable supports and accommodations (Shuey & Jovic, 2013). With respect to individuals with disabilities, Tilly (2013) found they pose a much lower risk of injury in the workplace, which has the potential of lowering worker compensation and disability related costs. The responsibility for mitigating and reducing workplace disability risks and claims rests with leaders, a focus that has the potential to lead to improved workplace wellbeing (White et al., 2013).

**Workplace wellbeing.** Research has shown that when employees are able to apply their education, skills and abilities in the workplace, their overall wellbeing improves. Work and employment are basic components of employee functioning, existence and overall wellbeing (Cieza, Oberhauser, Bickenbach, Chatterji, & Stucki, 2014; Emerson, Kariuki, Honey, & Llewellyn, 2014). Disability is defined as a reduction in bodily functions and systems, in addition to any restrictions or limitations to activities and participation (Tucker et al., 2014). When leaders minimize disabled employee weaknesses, mitigate for their deficiencies, and encourage them to apply their education and talents, disabled employees experience improved workplace wellbeing (Konrad et al., 2013; Parr, Hunter, & Ligon, 2013; van Woerkom & Meyers, 2015).

In a quantitative study facilitated over a 1-year period involving 715 participants with mental health and anxiety disorders, Bolo, Sareen, Patten, Schmitz, Currie, and

Wang (2013) sought to determine the link between accommodations in the workplace and the risk of subsequent nervousness or disposition syndromes. Results of the study indicated that employees who received some form of accommodation to mitigate for their disorders experienced a reduction in anxiety at the end of the study (Bolo et al., 2013). Accommodations included making modifications to tasks, having other employees take over lesser tasks to help decrease workloads and instituting flexible schedules (Bolo et al., 2013). One important outcome of this study is that costs associated with providing these accommodations were minimal and ultimately, leaders benefitted by seeing a reduction in sick leave and lost productivity (Bolo et al., 2013).

The onset of unexpected disabilities likewise leads to a decrease in workplace wellbeing (Emerson et al., 2014). In a quantitative multiple regression analysis survey of 642 Australian employees, Zheng et al. (2015) sought to determine the work life balance dynamics that lead to the improved welfare and health of employees, and to comprehend how work life balance strategies, policies and procedures affects overall employee welfare and health. Results of the study indicated that organizational leaders bear some responsibility for ensuring the workplace is conducive to employees' wellbeing (Zheng et al., 2015). Among the findings, Zheng et al. (2015) noted the presence of established work life balance policies or programs positively correlated to employee wellbeing. Additionally, individual employees likewise bear some of responsibility for maintaining a positive attitude, self-control and a supportive home environment, all of which contribute to improved personal wellbeing (Zheng et al., 2015). A key observation from this study is that work life balance initiatives are most effective when leaders tailor such programs to

individual workers and their specific needs (Zheng et al., 2015). Effective employee wellbeing is dependent upon proper training of organizational members (Zheng et al., 2015).

In a UK government report on workplace wellbeing of employees with mental health issues, van Stolk, Hofman, Hafner, and Janta (2014) noted that employers and general practitioners are often ill-equipped and ill-informed to recognize various mental health needs of employees and they lack knowledge and experience to recommend appropriate accommodations. Employers need to implement support and accommodations at the early onset of mental health conditions (van Stolk et al., 2014). Managers lack the understanding and ability to lead and supervise individuals with various disabilities, which negatively impacts workplace wellbeing (Johnson & Joshi, 2016).

Various leadership strategies lead to improved workplace wellbeing. For instance, employees, including those with disabilities, can be more productive by having a work environment that is conducive and supportive (Stea et al., 2015). For example, separate office space contributes to overall employee wellbeing and job satisfaction (Stea et al., 2015). Nowlan (2014) noted the importance of providing training and support for employees who work in harsh work environments in countries that are in the midst of hostilities, war, natural disasters, or other extreme scenarios. Training and subsequent support before, during and after such assignments are critical to an employee's wellbeing and leaders bear the responsibility of ensuring their organizational policies are in alignment with meeting these types of employee supports (Nowlan, 2014). Adequately

equipping employees with the necessary skills ensures their probability of successfully reintegrating into mainstream organizational life (Nowlan, 2014).

In a qualitative study on employee wellbeing in the workplace, Brownett (2015) facilitated onsite survey amongst all employees to determine what employees wanted in terms of improved workplace amenities. As a result of the study, Brownett (2015) observed a general improvement in employee's mental health when leaders developed and implemented a focused approach to improving workers' lives. The design and methodology of this study was weak, which brings to question the reliability of the study results. Despite the weakness, results of surveys showed employee's deep desire for improved workplace wellbeing and leaders began to address those needs over a 3-year period (Brownett, 2015). While the trustworthiness of the study is in question as a whole, the surveys nonetheless gave an important glimpse into employee perspectives relative to workplace wellbeing (Brownett, 2015).

Research suggests that one strategy organizational leaders can implement to support employees is to recognize that all employees experience work related stress (Beheshtifar & Nazarian, 2013). Leaders can help employees by developing mindfulness to mitigate workplace stressors that might interfere with work-life balance and overall wellbeing (Michel, Bosch, & Rexroth, 2014). In an experimental intervention involving 246 German employees over three different timeframes, Michel et al. (2014) sought to determine if teaching mindfulness to employees has an impact on their overall wellbeing in the workplace. Results of the study showed the practice of mindfulness significantly improved participant's ability to detach from work and achieve a balance between work

and life (Michel et al., 2014). The implication of the study is that organizational leaders can implement similar strategies to help employees achieve greater emotional balance between work and their private lives (Michel et al., 2014). Even the leader style and more specifically transformational leadership, directly affects overall employee wellbeing (Michel et al., 2014).

**The effect of leaders and ideal leadership style.** Ineffective leaders have a direct negative impact on employee's mental health. Conversely, effective leaders have the potential to positively impact employee's mental health (Silcox, 2014) and robust, free-thinking leaders foster the pursuit of employee excellence (Sawa & Swift, 2013). Leadership style represents how leaders interact with subordinates (Amankwaa & Anku-Tsede, 2015). Leadership styles based on command and control initiatives tend to foster negative work environments, whereas collaborative leadership styles tend to foster teamwork and employee engagement (Blattner & Walter, 2015). It is a leader's responsibility to ensure work is organized in such a way that workers can contribute at the maximum level (Silcox, 2014). Leadership and management styles play an important role in fostering and maintaining an inclusive, diverse and supportive work environment (Boekhorst, 2015; Durand et al., 2014).

Leadership style plays an important role within the work environment and the task of creating an inclusive workplace climate is dependent upon authentic leadership (Boekhorst, 2015), resilient leadership (Sawa & Swift, 2013), transformational leadership (Parr et al., 2013); or considerate leadership (McGuire, Kristman, Shaw, Williams-Whitt, Reguly, & Soklaridis, 2015). In a cross-sectional survey of 796 US and Canadian

supervisors in various industries, McGuire et al. (2015) facilitated an internet-based questionnaire to determine if a link exists between a supervisor's style of leadership and independence affects the prospect of providing job-related accommodations to employees with back injuries. Results of the study showed that considerate leadership style, along with autonomy, had a positive correlation to participants' probability of providing accommodations to employees with back injuries (McGuire et al., 2015). Autonomy represented supervisors' ability to make decisions to accommodate employees and seek their overall wellbeing (McGuire et al., 2015).

The trend for a workplace characterized by positive leadership styles is increasing, necessitating leaders to reconsider their philosophies and approaches regarding diversity and inclusion of employees with disabilities (Boekhorst, 2015). As Boekhorst (2015) observed, there are four key attributes that characterize authentic leadership: a) *self-awareness* which entails an awareness of her/his weaknesses and strengths; b) *relational transparency* which entails leading others through an alignment with her/his principles and beliefs; c) *balanced processing* which entails considering the perspectives of others and balancing her/his views and decision based on alternate perspectives; and d) *internalized moral perspective* which entails making decisions based on internalized principles and beliefs (Boekhorst, 2015, p. 248). Because authentic leadership emphasizes ethics and moral values, it is best suited for developing and maintaining an inclusive workplace climate (Boekhorst, 2015).

Additionally, transformational leadership style has a greater impact on overall employee wellbeing (Boehm & Dwertmann, 2015), workplace engagement (Breevaart,

Bakker & Demerouti, 2014) and mutual objectives (Brownnett, 2015) through a purposeful approach to ensuring all employees thrive in the workplace. Frontline supervisors who bear the primary responsibility for managing and controlling employee wellbeing benefit from a management style that is participatory in nature (Durand et al., 2014).

In a cross-sectional, quantitative study involving 318 German employees within the technology sector, Jacobs et al. (2013) administered an online survey to determine how transformational leadership style impacts overall employee wellbeing. Results of the study indicated a significant relationship between transformational leadership and overall employee wellbeing (Jacobs et al., 2013). Transformational leaders express trust and meaning and focus on developing employees which leads to improved health and wellbeing of employees (Jacobs et al., 2013).

Counter to perspectives that view employees as a key organizational stakeholder, Zheltoukhova (2015) observed a growing trend in which organizational leaders and specifically human resources professionals, are more concerned with maximizing business interests and less concerned with meeting employee needs. This perspective is counterintuitive in today's business environment where transformational leadership plays a key role in reducing anxiety among employees while strengthening business outcomes (Parr et al., 2013). Certain facets of transformational leadership behaviors are less conducive to overall employee effectiveness, particularly those behaviors weighted with emotive characteristics, whereas individualized consideration significantly reduced employee anxiety in employees with autism, primarily because these employees need a

significant level of leader support with individualized and tailored attention (Parr et al., 2013; Warnier et al., 2013). Individuals with autism struggle with accurately reading other people's emotions, so when a leader exhibits transformational leadership behaviors—high on emotion—those individuals may not understand the message accurately (Parr et al., 2013; Warnier et al., 2013).

**Organizational awareness.** Another strategy that leaders implement as a means of supporting employees is improving overall organizational awareness about employees with disabilities and varying approaches to accommodating them. In a multi-participant survey involving 46 adults with autism, 43 caregivers and 38 specialists such as medical staff, educators, support personnel and advisors, López and Keenan (2014) administered a survey questionnaire to assess practitioners' view of autism strategies for attaining appropriate training and employment goals and to identify potential barriers that individuals with autism face in seeking employment. Results of the study showed the importance of training employers and their staff to recognize various facets of disabilities and to provide training related to acceptable accommodations and supports for individual employees (López & Keenan, 2014). The result of training may lead to a reduction in employment barriers for individuals with autism (López & Keenan, 2014).

Another facet of creating organizational awareness relates to how leaders inform organizational members about specific accommodations for injured workers. In qualitative exploratory study involving focus groups consisting of 8 electrical workers and 10 union leaders, Kosny et al. (2013) sought to explore how coworkers affect fellow employee's ability to return to work after sustaining an injury in the workplace. Results



of the study indicated that supervisors provided very little information as to the nature of the injured worker, specific accommodations they granted, or how coworkers were to support injured workers (Kosny et al., 2013). Coworkers likewise provided very little support and sympathy to injured workers who returned to work (Kosny et al., 2013). The researcher used the results of this study to build a case for the importance of leaders and managers in creating a work environment that promotes organizational awareness, both on the part of management and on the part of employees (Kosny et al., 2013).

**Organizational climate and culture.** Certain organizational climates lend themselves to positive results and leaders who are cognizant of the potential benefits focus their attention on capitalizing on these positive results. Organizational climate directly affects workers' performance, especially within organizational climates that accept, foster and promote an inclusive climate of diversity (Boehm et al., 2014; Erickson et al., 2014; Gröschl, 2013) and provide appropriate supports and accommodations (Vornholt et al., 2013). Just as heterogeneous diversity of the workforce on race and gender can create a competitive advantage, so can diversity create a number of benefits and advantages (Richard et al., 2013). These benefits include competitive and financial advantage (Richard et al., 2013), higher levels of creativity and ingenuity (Chrobot-Mason & Aramovich, 2013), increased performance and commitment (Boehm & Dwertmann, 2015) and a novel and creative organizational climate that competitors cannot easily replicate (Heffernan et al., 2016; Houtenville & Kalargyrou, 2015; Montani et al., 2014). Organizational climates of this type also capitalize on individual employee strengths (Sorenson, 2014; van Woerkom & Meyers, 2015) and create a work

environment that is not only conducive for employees with disabilities, but also facilitates the ability of employers to offer specific supports or accommodations (von Schrader, Malzer, & Bruyère, 2014).

The benefit derived from varying perspectives and points of view are advantageous in creating a collaborative and innovative organizational culture (Richard et al., 2013) that might be attractive to potential job seekers who wish to align with organizations that promote diversity (Avery et al., 2013; Carpenter & Paetzold, 2013). An inclusive organizational culture fosters a climate of trust and collaboration whereby leaders and employees can work together to recreate a positive organizational culture (Blattner & Walter, 2015). This in turn improves employee commitment, identification, overall better utilization of human capital (Dwivedi, Kaushik, & Malodia, 2014) and creates an environment that appreciates and prizes sound decision-making on the part of employees (Sawa & Swift, 2013). A positive organizational culture promotes norms and values that predispose the organization to inclusion and support of employee desires (Kulkarni, 2013; Zheng et al., 2015), significantly reduces stigmas associated with disabilities in the organization (Toth & Dewa, 2014) and creates a conducive environment for all employees to work together (Kalargyrou, 2014). A positive organizational culture also facilitates a means by which organizational leaders hire employees that fit into their organizational culture rather than merely hiring for a specific position (López-Andreu & Verd, 2013).

Gröschl (2013) facilitated an exploratory case study with 49 participants in five German hotels that included hotel management, employees with and without disabilities

and hotel guests with and without disabilities. The nature of the study was to assess whether negative connotations and stigmas associated with employing people with disabilities were valid (Gröschl, 2013). The results of the study showed minimal support for such a view. On the contrary, Gröschl (2013) found that employees who possess some type of disability are devoted, dependable and only require reasonable accommodations. Gröschl (2013) concluded that organizations that promote an inclusive, supportive and accommodating work climate would reduce the negative stigma of employees with disabilities.

Organizational climate produces additional outcomes that positively influence organizations. Human resources policies that foster inclusion and acceptance of a diverse workforce can have a direct effect on behaviors that leaders exhibit within organizations and as a side benefit may result in a climate of care, conscientiousness and shared encouragement (Boehm & Dwertmann, 2015). Human resources strategies need to be directly involved in shaping and creating positive organizational cultures (Zheltoukhova, 2015). Creating an ideal organizational climate and culture that fosters inclusion of employees with disabilities requires ongoing leadership development and training (Boehm & Dwertmann, 2015).

**Leadership and organizational training.** Strategies for supporting employees, including employees with diverse backgrounds and varying disabilities begin with leaders establishing strategic agendas that focus on diversity and inclusion. Alignment of organizational training with corporate strategy is essential for overall success (Lancaster & Milia, 2014). When formal leadership training is not in place, leaders and managers

need to train themselves to promote and appreciate a multicultural and diverse workplace (Green et al., 2015). Besides establishing measurable and attainable metrics, organizational leaders need to ensure a steady increase of diversity in their own leadership ranks (Derven, 2014) and ensure overall support on the part of upper level management (Erickson et al., 2014).

Leaders need to establish company-wide training that promotes a culture of inclusion and diversity (Dhanda, 2013). Training for leadership can include experiential learning in a mock exercise whereby management participants address their biases and stereotypes about individuals with disabilities and are required to facilitate the selection of an individual with a disability based on ADA requirements (Corrigall, & Cirka, 2014). Leaders need to provide training for frontline managers and supervisors related to return to work policies (Johnston, Way, Long, Wyatt, Gibson, & Shaw, 2014); recognize *invisible disabilities* (Santuzzi et al., 2014, p. 216); recognize various *health conditions* (van Stolk et al., 2014, p. 19); and reduce bias and stereotyping related to employees with psychological or intellectual conditions (Toth & Dewa, 2014; von Schrader et al., 2014; Werner & Roth, 2014).

In a mixed methods study involving random sampling of 675 organizations that were members of the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM), Erickson et al. (2014) found that 638 of those organizations provided training and development for managers and leaders with respect to disability and sensitivity. Management ranks need to receive various types of training, including *technical training* (López-Andreu & Verd, 2013, p. 353), awareness of disabilities (Gröschl, 2013), as a means of removing

employment barriers for individuals with disabilities (Kalargyrou, 2014) and to improve how well line supervisors can comfortably discuss issues related to disabilities (von Schrader et al., 2014).

Leaders also need training as it relates to ensuring equitable pay rates for all employees, including those categorized as minority or protected status. In a study of over 500,000 participants within one organization as to whether there is a pay differential between workers who have one or more identifiable disability (based on gender, ethnicity, disability, or age), Woodhams, Lupton, and Cowling (2015) analyzed a large, multi-year data set from one single employer. Results of the analysis showed that pay rates for workers is incrementally lower for each additional identity (Woodhams et al., 2015). Leaders need training in this sector of employee life as a means to mitigate the potential negative impact related to a disability or other minority status (Woodhams et al., 2015).

Leaders need to provide training to improve workplace related issues such as fatigue and physical discomfort associated with long hours of computer-related work. Kirk, Strong, and Burgess-Limerick (2013) facilitated two action research case studies to examine training methods that call center leadership uses to ensure computer operators have minimal or reduced discomfort while working. Of the 214 participants in this study, 88% of them experienced some form of bodily irritation (Kirk et al., 2013). Early training that management provided did not accurately translate into workplace habits, resulting in less-than-optimal performance on the part of workers (Kirk et al., 2013).

Organizational leaders should ensure training is available to all levels of the organization. Human resources leaders can effectively improve overall employee wellbeing by focusing their attention on training, growth and focusing on employee strengths (van Woerkom & Meyers, 2015). Requests for corporate training related to autism spectrum disorders have increased in recent years (López & Keenan, 2014).

**Facilitating disclosure and self-advocacy.** Besides the need to create an organizational climate that is conducive and inclusive of all employee types, leaders need to strategize to create systems by which employees can more easily disclose their disabilities and be encouraged to self-advocate. There is general reluctance among disabled employees to disclose the full nature of their disability and the accommodations they need in the workplace (Bacon & Hoque, 2015; Baldrige & Swift, 2013), despite the fact that individuals with disabilities are required to disclose and make known their disability based on ADA and ADAA regulations (Carpenter & Paetzold, 2013). This is particularly difficult for individuals with invisible disabilities, such as those based on mental illness, cognition, or behavior (Johnson & Joshi, 2014; Santuzzi et al., 2014). While individuals with disabilities who possess high self-efficacy are more likely to be productive, those with low self-advocacy can directly benefit from stronger organizational supports (Baumgärtner et al., 2014). Yet, self-advocacy remains an important facet of obtaining the requisite supports or accommodations necessary to maximize productivity (Shaw et al., 2013).

When leaders create a work environment that is accepting of and conducive for employees with disabilities, employees feel more enabled and experience far less

negative psychological effects (Johnson & Joshi, 2016; Shuey & Jovic, 2013; von Schrader et al., 2014). Employers may benefit through improved employee performance resulting from providing accommodations and capitalizing on employee strengths (Santuzzi et al., 2014) and improved retention rates (von Schrader et al., 2014). Just as disclosure of disabilities produces certain organizational results, so does non-disclosure (von Schrader et al., 2014).

Employees with disabilities may experience negative emotions when determining whether to disclose their disability. The fear of stigmas, discrimination and being marginalized often influence workers to withhold disclosure of their disabilities (Shuey & Jovic, 2013; Toth & Dewa, 2014); stigmas tend to lead to attitudinal barriers within the workplace (Werner & Roth, 2014). If employees with disabilities choose not to disclose, employers are limited in their ability to adhere to specific legal requirements, with an overall effect of a reduction in productivity and increased costs associated with disability claims (Santuzzi et al., 2014; Toth & Dewa, 2014). It is the responsibility of organizational leaders to assess what supports and accommodations are appropriate and necessary in the workplace (Madaus et al., 2008), yet to a certain extent it is the responsibility of the employees to bear the responsibility of self-disclosing their disability or weakness. In addition, leaders are responsible to create a climate where the employees feel safe and secure in the disclosure (von Schrader et al., 2014).

**Workplace accommodation strategies.** Organizational leaders need to strategize and develop workplace accommodations for all employees, including those with disabilities, so that all employees can reach their full potential and capitalize on their

strengths (Kalargyrou, 2014). Whereas attention on a disability focused on therapy or institutionally-based methods for treating individuals with disabilities (Kalargyrou, 2014), the emergent view is that of recognizing disability as another aspect of diversity in the workplace. In broad terms, leaders need to focus on removing barriers associated with structure (resources, costs) and disposition (attitudes, training, experience, skill) toward employees with disabilities (Kalargyrou, 2014). Leaders need to exude empathy, relay their willingness to provide support and accommodations and recognize that individuals with disabilities face significant barriers at their places of employment (Baldrige & Swift, 2013).

Support and accommodation comes in varying forms and varying contexts and typically customized for each individual. Reasonable accommodation is the general standard established by the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, which requires employers to determine on a case-by-case basis (Konrad et al., 2013; Schur et al., 2014; Stein et al., 2014). Accommodation and support may include short-term job alterations (Shaw et al., 2014), workplace accessibility, workspace modifications, alteration of work schedules, or specific devices (Konrad et al., 2013, Stein et al., 2014), all of which allow a disabled worker to perform required duties. In a cross-sectional study related to the benefits of a supportive physical work environment involving 698 healthcare participants, Sadatsafavi, Walewski, and Shepley (2015) sought to explore how the work environment influenced the feelings and attitudes of healthcare professionals regarding their jobs. Results of the study showed that employee feelings and attitudes could improve by designing a conducive and supportive work environment (Sadatsafavi et al., 2015). Well-



proportioned and designed physical workspaces improve employee perceptions of the organizational support (Sadatsafavi et al., 2015).

For example, *natural supports* (Corbière et al., 2014, p. 91) are supports that are readily available and easily provided encompassing structural, bodily, societal, instructional, provisional and communal supports (Corbière et al., 2014). These supports can include technology (Lindsay et al., 2013; Shaw, Tetlaff, Jennings, & Southall, 2013), ergonomics (Kirk et al., 2013), flexible work hours, schedules and telecommuting (Idris, 2014; Linden, 2014; Linden & Milchus, 2014; Moon et al., 2014), modified job expectations, changes to the physical workspace, adjusted coaching, empathetic supervisors and coworkers and adjustments to supervisory approaches (Corbière et al., 2014). Supports may also come in the form of overarching policies and underlying managerial philosophies concerning the acceptance of and support for, individuals with disabilities (Durand et al., 2014), as well as for employees without disabilities (Schur et al., 2014; Stein et al., 2014).

### **Social Strategies**

Managerial strategies for accommodating workers must also take into account the social environment. The assimilation of all employees into the work environment is important for creating an inclusive and accepting workforce (Lindsay et al., 2013).

**Social justice and sociodemographic changes.** Leaders' strategies for supporting and accommodating employees should also focus on the social aspects of the workplace and employee wellbeing. Employees who disclose their disabilities run the risk of social exclusion and other consequences (whether real or perceived) to their image

or status (Baldrige & Swift, 2013). Accommodations for all employees, including those with disabilities, increase the overall social awareness and inclusion of workers, which promotes acceptance of a broader range of employees (Lindsay et al., 2013), promotes positive self-esteem, reduces anxiety and uncertainty (Baldrige & Swift, 2013) and improves social support (Baumgärtner et al., 2014, p. 348). Despite sociodemographic changes and calls for increased awareness of the needs of disabled workers, there is little evidence that employers engage in diversity and inclusion initiatives for social justice purposes (Lindsay et al., 2013; Theodorakopoulos & Budhwar, 2015).

### **Strategies for Employees with High-Functioning Autism**

Employees with high-functioning autism face especially difficult workplace challenges and barriers that prevent them from engaging in competitive employment. Common stigmas and stereotypes diminish their potential to use their unique skillsets and abilities (Werner & Roth, 2014). Within organizational settings, if these barriers go unchecked, it could negatively impact their employability and overall wellbeing (Nicholas et al., 2014; Vogeley et al., 2013). They represent an untapped sector of workers that possess unique abilities (Booth, 2014; Nicholas et al., 2014; Vogeley et al., 2013). Previous researchers suggest this population of employees is not receiving the necessary workplace supports and accommodations needed to capitalize on their talents and strengths (Booth, 2014; Baldwin et al., 2014; Baldwin & Costley, 2016). Neely and Hunter (2014) noted that industrial and organizational psychologists can contribute to the field by examining how leaders can accommodate and support individuals with ASD.

In a quantitative study involving 82 women with high-functioning autism, Baldwin and Costley (2016) sought to understand the lived experiences of these individuals related to healthiness, schooling, occupation, and social or community-based events. Baldwin and Costley (2016) analyzed the data via explanatory text, statistics and emerging themes. Results of the analysis showed that less than 1/3 of the participants received workplace support and accommodations specific to their needs. Those who did receive support and accommodations from agencies outside the organization had adjustments to their physical work environment such as specialized lighting to combat sensory issues and had supportive coworkers and managers (Baldwin & Costley, 2016). The researcher did not use results of this study to advance the understanding, nor outline best practices, as to how to support and accommodate this underserved population. However, the researcher used the results of this study to highlight the importance of understanding the population of individuals with high-functioning autism and providing necessary supports and accommodations in the workplace.

### **Gap in the Literature**

The previous literature review indicates well-supported strategies for accommodating all employees, including those with disabilities. Contemporary journalism and organizations regularly report on the benefits that individuals with autism bring to the workplace (Elejalde-Ruiz, 2016; SAP News, 2013). The majority of literature on autism focuses primarily on children and adolescents from clinical, psychological and psychiatric perspectives (Wright, Brooks, D'Astous, & Grandin, 2013).

Various businesses and organizations have drawn their attention to the employment and support needs of this population (Elejalde-Ruiz, 2016; Wright et al., 2013). The literature indicates a lack of research from leadership and management perspectives as to what strategies leaders use to the support and accommodate individuals with autism (Nicholas et al., 2014; Richards, 2012, 2015; Westbrook et al., 2012) and more specifically adults with high-functioning autism (Baldwin et al., 2014; Vogeley et al., 2013). In this study, I sought to fill the gap by facilitating a descriptive case study within one organization that specifically targeted this population of workers. The results of the study may lead to a greater understanding as to how workplace support of individuals with high-functioning autism can improve through leadership strategies.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

The purpose of this literature review was to consider how leader and manager support for all employees, including those with disabilities, is necessary for organizations to obtain the highest possible productivity from each employee and to remain competitive, effective and efficient. Labor process theory (Braverman, 1975; Richards, 2012) provided the conceptual framework for this review. One of the key tenets of labor process theory is that management maintains full control over labor to extract the highest possible benefit from labor (Braverman, 1975). The strategies for supporting and accommodating all employees align with labor process theory as leadership attempts to gain benefits from labor by supporting and accommodating employees through various methods. The resource-based theory also helped frame the literature review, as leaders seek to gain a competitive advantage and improve overall profitability by tapping into

underused or unused resources (Barney, 1991; Grant, 1991; Peteraf, 1993; Warnier et al., 2013). Organizational resources are central to strategy formulation and as such, leaders assess which resources and competencies will provide the greatest differentiation compared to rival organizations (Peteraf, 1993).

The literature indicates a variety of strategies leaders use to support and accommodate employees, yet there is no single strategy or best practice. It appears from the literature that leaders approach the support and accommodation issue from various vantage points (Oswick & Noon, 2014). At some point throughout their work tenure, all employees need some accommodation or support to be effective (Durand et al., 2014; Lidh, 2013; Schur et al., 2014). To extract the greatest capacity from every employee and create a competitive advantage, leaders need to develop strategies to ensure the workplace is inclusive and free of barriers that impede performance (Kalargyrou & Volis, 2014; Nicholas, Roberts & Macintosh, 2014). As I demonstrated through the literature review, there exists underlying vantage points that influence leaders to engage in supportive and accommodating practices, such as cultural, religious, economic, legal, legislative, organizational and social facets of leadership perspectives, which leaders employ based on the popularity of diversity topics in contemporary literature (Oswick & Noon, 2014). Individual vantage points or the combination of two or more vantage points indicates leaders' focus on extracting the highest potential from every employee, which aligns with labor process theory (Braverman, 1975).

My review of the literature seems to point to a multi-method approach to assimilating, supporting and accommodating disabled employees in the workplace. As

Huang and Chen (2015) observed, this approach could be efficacious for the population of employees with high-functioning autism. Leaders lack strategies as to how to support and accommodate this at-risk population and obtain the highest possible productivity from them. By observing leaders within an organizational setting where individuals with high-functioning autism are valued and assimilated in the workplace, the results of this study helped fill a gap in literature by improving the understanding of what strategies organizational leaders use to support and accommodate this underserved population. The strategies associated with supporting and accommodating individuals with high-functioning autism may also lead to minimizing their weaknesses while simultaneously maximizing their strengths and key abilities. Labor process theory (Braverman, 1975) may also improve the understanding of what strategies leaders use to support and accommodate employees with high-functioning autism. The results of this study may be beneficial to practitioners and academicians in extending knowledge within the fields of business and management. Additionally, the results of this study may also have implications for other disabled populations in the workplace, or for employees that are not disabled but have special issues that arise at different times in their employment (Stein et al., 2014).

Chapter 3 describes in detail the research design and the rationale for selecting the requisite method of data collection and analysis, which may help fill the gap in literature as to what strategies leaders use to support and accommodate employees with high-functioning autism. Chapter 3 also describes in detail the data collection and analysis, unit of analysis, facilitation of participant interviews, how artifacts will be evaluated and

analyzed, how validity was ensured, the transferability of the study and protection of rights and anonymity of both direct and indirect participants.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative, descriptive case study was to explore what strategies organizational leaders and managers use to support and accommodate employees with specific needs while building on their strengths. I facilitated one-on-one semistructured interviews with a group of 11 leaders, managers, and frontline supervisors to learn about their experiences in supporting and accommodating individuals with high-functioning autism in the workplace. I also collected other sources of data such as documents (written policies, job postings, memoranda, official communications), artifacts (samples of employee work, web content), and I conducted direct observations of the physical work environment. The results of this study may assist leaders and managers in learning ways to support an at-risk population of employees, which may also lead to organizations gaining a competitive advantage by being sensitive to the needs of all employees.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the research design, rationale for selecting a descriptive case study, and the research questions that serve to guide this study. I also discuss the role of the researcher, participant selection, recruitment, participation, data collection, and data analysis plan. Lastly, I address issues of trustworthiness, ethical procedures, and provide a summary of the chapter.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

The central research question for this study was: What strategies do organizational leaders and managers use to support and accommodate the workplace



needs of employees with specific needs while building on their strengths? The following research sub questions served to delineate further the overarching question.

RQ1: What competitive advantages do leaders obtain by supporting individuals with high-functioning autism?

RQ2: What policies, procedures, and workplace settings do leaders within organizations need to establish for supporting individuals with high-functioning autism?

RQ3: What retention strategies of managers lead to establishing support mechanisms for individuals with high-functioning autism?

RQ4: What preparations are necessary for frontline managers to accommodate the workplace needs of individuals with autism?

The central phenomenon of the study was leaders' approach to providing support and accommodation for employees with high-functioning autism. Leaders often neglect to tap into this source of human capital that could provide a competitive advantage if only they understood, supported and accommodated individuals with high-functioning autism in the workplace (Kalargyrou, 2014). Leaders have recognized the unique skillset this population of employees brings to the workplace (Nicholas et al., 2014) yet lack strategies for supporting and accommodating them. To reach maximum productivity from employees, leaders and managers must ensure the work environment is free of barriers that impede productivity and ensure all employees have the proper tools, supports, and accommodations necessary to fulfill their job requirements (Houtenville & Kalargyrou, 2015). Organizational leaders can maximize a competitive edge by understanding this underserved population of employees, strategizing how to create a work environment that

taps into their strengths and learning how to minimize different weaknesses (Harter & Adkins, 2015). A focus on support and accommodation may also be of benefit to all employees including those without disabilities (Baldrige & Swift, 2013; Kalargyrou, 2014).

Research within the social sciences focuses on two forms of scientific inquiry: qualitative and quantitative. As Park and Park (2016) observed, qualitative researchers use descriptive narratives to explain parallels and disparities between various social scenarios, whereas quantitative researchers seek to predict and manipulate social scenarios. Qualitative research relies on a well-rounded view of a phenomenon through the assimilation of artifacts, case studies, interviews, and direct observations within a natural setting in describing a phenomenon (Park & Park, 2016). Quantitative research, on the other hand, focuses on segregating the variables within the research setting with the intent to show correlation, relationships, and causality (Park & Park, 2016, p. 4).

As I noted in Chapter 1, there is there is a lack of research from management or leadership perspectives related to strategies leaders use to support and accommodate employees with autism. Richards (2012) is perhaps the only example that used secondary qualitative data in an effort to understand the exclusion of employees with Asperger syndrome, which is a subset of high-functioning autism. Qualitative approaches are most appropriate for studies where little is known about the phenomenon and a thorough investigation of the phenomenon and subsequent description would shed light on the events in a natural setting and within a real-world setting (Yin, 2014). I chose a qualitative approach for my study since little was known about the phenomenon under

investigation. I chose the descriptive case study because it is important to know a single case in detail (Stake, 1995). Descriptive case studies are useful in situations where leaders advanced an action plan, reached a key conclusion or accomplishment, or wielded some form of power that shed light on key learning (Yin, 2012). Descriptive case studies offer unique insights that result from rich and thick narrative of the event being investigated (Merriam, 2009). The resulting narratives and descriptions of the phenomenon answered the research questions and furthered the understanding of the strategies that organizational leaders employ to support and accommodate employees with high-functioning autism, which was the central phenomenon of the study.

I also considered the applicability of ethnography, phenomenology, and grounded theory as possible approaches to the study, but I found that each of these approaches were not appropriate for answering the research question of my study. Ethnography is used to uncover cultural perspectives within social settings and the underlying forces that impact social units and interactions among people (Merriam, 2009; Park & Park, 2016; Yin, 2016). My study was not regarding culture and its impact on autistic employees or their leaders and managers, so this approach was not appropriate. Phenomenology is used to uncover the explicit and detailed human experience of only a few participants related to a specific phenomenon (Gill, 2014; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2016). In my study, I did not seek to uncover individual human experiences, so this approach was not appropriate. Grounded theory is used to extract meaning from the data to identify an emerging theory that best explains a specific phenomenon (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2016), but my intention was not to identify a specific theory.

### **Role of the Researcher**

The role of a researcher in qualitative studies is a teacher, advocate, evaluator, biographer, and interpreter to individuals who will read the study and show how the conclusions and results could be transferrable to other similar settings (Stake, 1995). The researcher serves as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Merriam, 2009), and the researcher serves as the instrument of the research (Maxwell, 2013). The researcher has an obligation to tell a compelling story that other readers may find value in (Maxwell, 2013). The researcher gathers various forms of data, draws specific conclusions based on the data and is responsible to uphold a thorough explanation of the study (Stake, 1995).

As the sole researcher for this study, I served as the primary instrument to observe the inner workings of the phenomenon and collected various types of data that helped gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. I conducted semistructured interviews of 11 leaders, managers, and frontline supervisors of a software and technology organization who were directly responsible for formulating policies related to supporting and accommodating employees with autism or for managing the details of said policies. I also collected other sources of data such as documents (written policies, job postings, memoranda, official communications), artifacts (samples of employee work, web content), and direct observations of the physical work environment. I had no direct or indirect relationship with this organization or with its leaders and managers.

My role as the primary instrument naturally exerted a certain level of influence because I directed the case study. I mitigated power by allowing participants to verify my

data results to ensure accuracy of the transcribed interviews and coding of all forms of data gathered at the site. Yin (2016) indicated there are certain researcher attributes that play an important role in conducting an effective study: (a) listening during audible exchanges but also being attentive and observant to participant moods, attitudes, emotions, and body language; (b) asking good, quality questions; (c) having a keen understanding of the topic and research; (d) handling all data with extreme care, ensuring data are preserved; (e) being able to multi-task; and (f) perseverance and being able to overcome unforeseeable and unanticipated challenges, barriers, or points of resistance. The application of these attributes may also aid in mitigating bias (Yin, 2016).

The potential for bias existed since I served as the sole instrument through which data was collected, coded, and analyzed; however, triangulation of multiple sources of data and constant comparison to check data results mitigated bias (Zappella, 2015). A comparison of the data from interviews, artifacts, documents, and direct observations ensured the achievement of within-methods methodological. Bracketing, as described by Yin (2016), entails setting aside one's own attitudes, ideals, biases, and assumptions in the design, facilitation, and analysis of a qualitative study, meaning a researcher's bias is reduced despite direct involvement with the study.

In this study, I interviewed participants and audiorecorded their responses for future transcription, collected artifacts, and facilitated direct observations of the workplace. I coded and analyzed all data to identify emerging themes. Participation in the study was voluntary with no incentives or payment given.

## **Methodology**

At the core of qualitative inquiry is the researcher who serves as the instrument to inquire, document, analyze, and interpret events or situations that add meaning and improves one's understanding of how the world operates (Patton, 2015). Qualitative research has grown in prominence and acceptance both professionally and academically and represents opportunities to inquire about people, cultures, or social issues (Yin, 2016). Case study research has grown in popularity since 1995 when Yin wrote the first edition of the seminal work *Case Study Design*, and it is a viable research design within the social sciences (2014).

I used a qualitative, descriptive single case study to uncover what strategies organizational leaders and managers of one organization use to support and accommodate employees with autism. I used purposeful sampling in my study as it allowed me to select individuals within one organization who possessed direct knowledgeable about the research problem under investigation. The research design involved 11 semistructured interviews; two leaders, four managers, and five frontline supervisors answered the research questions. I obtained additional data from review and analysis of documents, artifacts, and direct observations of the workplace.

### **Participant Selection Logic**

Purposeful sampling is appropriate for individual case studies to achieve representative results within a single case (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2014). Purposeful sampling is useful in obtaining rich information from a small population of participants (Jabbour & Abdel-Kader, 2016; Robinson, 2014; Roy et al., 2015). I used

purposeful sampling in my study, because it enabled me to select a specific group of participants who were most knowledgeable about the problem under investigation.

Because my case study involved one single organization, the participants were limited to leaders, managers, and frontline supervisors within the organization. Single case studies are useful in identifying underlying patterns and developments that can be analyzed and transferrable to other similar cases (Yin, 2016).

There is no sample size formula for selecting a sample population in qualitative studies (Yin, 2016). In case studies, the purpose of obtaining an appropriate sample size is to maximize what the researcher can learn from the selected case (Stake, 1995) and to reach data saturation (Boddy, 2016). The main objective in the purposeful selection of this population of participants was to reach a point of data saturation (Bagnasco, Ghirotto, & Sasso, 2014). Data saturation entails reaching a point in the study where no new information, coding, or identification of emerging themes is possible (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Reaching a point of data saturation is dependent upon several variables, including the topic itself, the underlying intent of the research, the number and types of participants, the data collection methods, and the analysis of data (Tran, Porcher, Falissard, & Ravaud, 2016). Reaching data saturation is also useful in transferability of the study to other settings (Boddy, 2016). As Yin (2012) stated, transferability for case study research involves richness and thickness of data, versus statistical results seen in quantitative studies; however, the reader decides how transferability applies.

The nature of my study involved interviewing two leaders, four managers, and five frontline supervisors who were responsible for strategy, policy formulation, or

oversight of employees with high-functioning autism. The sample size was limited to a small group of participants. I selected participants of this level (leaders, managers, frontline supervisors) because they possessed specific knowledge and expertise related to the investigation. I selected a single case study because little was known about the phenomenon under investigation, although there were several other organizations that engaged in hiring, supporting, and accommodating employees with autism. The researcher must consider time and financial resource restraints necessary for conducting research (Yin, 2016). There are a several organizations that I could have selected for this study, but due to financial and time constraints, I selected only one organization to study. The number of participants is dependent upon the size of the organization and how many individuals meet the criteria, and once the researcher reaches data saturation (Morse, Lowery, & Steury, 2014).

The participants I selected for this study work for an organization that is noted for recruiting, hiring, supporting, and accommodating employees with high-functioning autism because of the added value and key skillset they bring. The participants met the criteria of being a leader, manager, or frontline supervisor by means of assessing their individual titles, roles, and delineation of responsibilities as assigned within the organization. This information was obtained from the top leader of the organization who depicted the organizational structure and placement of all participants. I identified participants by obtaining a list of their names, titles, and e-mail contact information. Next, I contacted participants via e-mail and asked them to participate in my study. Each participant who agreed to participate in the study received a consent form. I collected



data through in-person semistructured interviews in a location and time chosen by the participants. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes.

The sample size within the case study consisted of 11 participants that met the criteria of being a leader, manager, or frontline supervisor. Although the sample size was small, well-developed interview questions resulted in data saturation, in conjunction with additional data obtained from artifacts and direct workplace observations. It was possible that saturation might occur before interviewing all 11 participants, but due to the small number of available participants, I planned to continue interviews with all 11. There are no specific guidelines that govern the sample size in qualitative studies (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2016).

### **Instrumentation**

The researcher serves as the primary research instrument in terms of collecting and evaluating data obtained from a case study site (Yin, 2016, p. 40). I served as the primary research instrument and the sole interviewer of participants and evaluator of various other forms of data obtained. Interviews are a vital source of information gathered from a case study (Yin, 2014). Interviewing is the preferred data collection format within qualitative research, and semistructured interviews provide a structured format for asking predetermined, open-ended questions (Jamshed, 2014). I collected data by facilitating in-person, semistructured interviews with leaders, managers, and frontline supervisors within the case study site. I used a set of semistructured, open-ended interview questions (see Appendix C). An interview protocol (see Appendix E) served as a guide for conducting all interviews in the study. I used a digital audio recording device

to record the interviews. If a participant declined to have the interview recorded, I took hand-written notes of the interview answers. Next, I had the interviews transcribed to synthesize and interpret what participants stated. Stake (1995) argued against the use of audio recordings as it proved to be costly to transcribe, and it served as an irritation to the participant and the researcher. As an alternative, Stake (1995) recommended the use of shorthand notes. I am not skilled in shorthand; therefore, an audio recording of all interviews was necessary to capture every participant's spoken word. A synthesis of the transcribed audio-recorded interviews captured the meaning or interpretation of each participant's answers. Member check, or respondent validation (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam, 2009), is a means to ensure internal validity or trustworthiness of participant responses. I asked participants to review their interview transcripts and I used member checking to give participants an opportunity to review my interpretation of the findings to ensure I accurately reflected and captured the meaning of what participants stated.

Sources of data were written policies, employee handbook, vision, mission, and values, job descriptions of leaders, managers, and frontline supervisors, memoranda and web content. Analysis of various types of artifacts provides additional insights about the life and internal workings of the case under investigation (Bigby, Knox, Beadle-Brown, & Clement, 2015) and strengthens triangulating the data (Olson, Leko, & Roberts, 2016). A final source of data I used was direct observation of the workplace, which consisted of evidence obtained from observing the work environment. I used an observation guide (See Appendix B) during observations of the workplace. The data obtained from semistructured interviews, organizational documents, artifacts and direct observations

helped answer the research questions and led to a greater understanding of the strategies leaders use to support and accommodate employees with high-functioning autism.

Multiple sources of data ensure the achievement of methodological triangulation and data saturation (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe, & Neville, 2014; Denzin, 1970, 2009).

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

To answer the primary research question, I obtained data from written transcripts of audio-recorded in-person interviews with participants, and from documents (written policies, job postings, memoranda, and official communications), artifacts (such as samples of employee work, web content) and direct observations (evidence obtained from observing the work environment). I was the primary instrument for collecting data and used a digital audio recording device to record the interviews, which consisted of semistructured, open-ended interview questions (see Appendix C) for each participant to answer. Open-ended questions are useful for gathering rich, thick data that helps describe what is happening within the case (Maxwell, 2013).

The process for collecting data from semistructured interviews in this qualitative study entailed the following: (a) sending an e-mail to all participants and attaching a letter of introduction that explained the nature of the research and the level of involvement for each participant and informed consent forms (see Appendix A); (b) coordinating and facilitating semistructured in-person interviews with participants on dates, times and settings of their choosing—interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes; (c) audio-recording the interviews following the open-ended question interview protocol to collect data from

participants, or hand-writing the interview answers for participants who did not want to be recorded; (d) transcribing the audio-recorded interviews and facilitating transcript reviews and member checking via e-mail; (e) acquiring various organizational documents and artifacts such as internal communications, manuals and web content; (f) facilitating direct observations of the physical workplace; and (g) taking photographs of the facility, workstations and amenities. I obtained the remaining data through direct observations by utilizing an observation guide (see Appendix B) and through requesting copies of various documents and artifacts. Multiple sources of data aid in strengthening the explanatory nature of qualitative research (Merriam, 2009).

I collected data over a pre-determined period based on participant availability and the researcher's limited time and resources. Within case study research, there is no prescribed timeframe to complete data collection; research can be accomplished within one week, to as long as 1 year or more (Stake, 1995). Yin (2014) supported the notion that case study research does not encompass a set timeframe. Rather, the length of time to collect data should be determined by whether enough data is collected to confirm the evidence (Yin, 2014). Per Walden University policy, the IRB grants approval to collect data for 1 year and is renewable should it be necessary to extend the data collection timeframe.

The participant sample size is largely dependent on the organizational structure of the company I intend to study. Patton (2015) and Yin (2012) iterated that in case study research, there is no prescribed formula for ensuring a sufficient sample size. Gentles, Charles, Ploeg, and McKibbin (2015) argued that single-case studies should have

between 25-50 participants, but that depends largely on individual cases. Yin (2014) noted that single-case study is appropriate when the case represents a rare or infrequent occurrence. While there are several organizations throughout the United States that support and accommodate individuals with high-functioning autism, those occurrences are rare in comparison to the vast majority of organizations that do not have that capability. The preferred design I chose for this study is single-case. The number of participants available within the case study site were limited to two leaders, four managers and five frontline supervisors. I reached data saturation when all available participants who fit the criteria and agreed to participate were interviewed.

At the conclusion of the interviews, observations and collection of documents and artifacts, I informed participants that I would follow up with them via e-mail ask them to review their transcripts and to member check my findings to determine if I accurately interpreted their insights. I also contacted certain participants to clarify the meaning applied to various documents and artifacts collected. Once all interviews and data collection were complete, participants exited the interview by me informing them that their participation in the study was finished. I presented an executive summary of the study to all participants and those who wished to receive a copy of the entire study could do so via an e-mail request.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Data analysis in qualitative studies encompasses a wide variety of activities associated with the collected data. These activities include listening to recordings of interviews, reviewing and critically thinking about the responses from the interview

transcripts, observation notes of the environment and the artifacts collected during the data gathering events (Maxwell, 2013). Data analysis involves applying some type of meaning to initial intuitions and to the final collection of data (Stake, 1995). Yin (2016) stated that qualitative analysis encompasses a series of five phases: (a) compiling; (b) disassembling; (c) reassembling; (d) interpreting; and (e) concluding. Analysis of qualitative data is distinct from quantitative data in that it encompasses words, whereas the latter encompasses numbers (Yin, 2016). The use of a computer software system is very useful to sort the data, code various data elements, and combine data to identify emerging themes, categories and meanings from the data (Yin, 2016).

I coded all sources of data (interviews, documents, artifacts, direct observations) so that each source of data related to the research questions as a means to uncover the phenomenon. First, semistructured in-person interviews with participants led to a greater understanding of the overarching research question as to what strategies leaders engage in to support and accommodate the workplace needs of individuals with high-functioning autism. The semistructured interviews also aided in answering the following research sub questions: (a) what competitive advantages do leaders obtain by supporting individuals with high-functioning autism?; (b) what policies, procedures and workplace settings do leaders within organizations need to establish for supporting individuals with high-functioning autism?; (c) what retention strategies of managers lead to establishing support mechanisms for individuals with high-functioning autism?; and (d) what preparations are necessary for frontline managers to accommodate the workplace needs of individuals with high-functioning autism?.

Each of the remaining sources of data aided in answering individual research questions. For instance, documents and artifacts, analysis of mission and vision statements, employee handbook, support staff manual, memoranda, e-mail communications, web content, employment agreements and materials that are required for employment support, as well as observations of the physical workplace, all answered research questions 2, 3 and 4: (a) What policies, procedures and workplace settings do leaders within organizations need to establish for supporting individuals with high-functioning autism?; and (b) What retention strategies of managers lead to establishing support mechanisms for individuals with high-functioning autism?; and (c) What preparations are necessary for frontline managers to accommodate the workplace needs of individuals with high-functioning autism?.

For the purposes of this study, the computer software I used was NVivo 11 Pro (QSR International, 2014) to code the data, which aided in analyzing the data to identify emerging themes and categories that helped explain the phenomenon. As Sotiriadou, Brouwers, & Le, (2014) noted, NVivo is useful as a coding and organizing tool in qualitative research designs and has been widely used in business and management research. NVivo allows coding and interpretation of various types of data sources, including spoken words, direct and indirect observations, graphics, photos, video segments and various documents (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). This method for importing and coding data makes it possible to methodologically triangulate data results, increase validity, transferability and reliability of data (Merriam, 2009). Triangulation of

data results from collecting, comparing and checking various types of data associated with the issue under investigation (Maxwell, 2013).

The overarching research question was as follows: What strategies do organizational leaders and managers use to support and accommodate the workplace needs of employees with specific needs while building on their strengths? To answer this question, I obtained relevant data from in-person, semistructured open-ended interview questions, direct observations of the workspace, documents and artifacts and photographs of the work environment arrangement and adaptation. Each of these data sources added a dimension of richness to the overall understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. To manage the large volume of data and to ensure easy retrieval of specified parts of data, I incorporated the recommendation by Merriam (2009) to assign specific labels to each piece of data so that each had a distinct and varying identifying mark. In addition to managing the data and categorizing it for future retrieval during the analysis phase, I used field notes to incorporate and keep track of my personal reflections, premonitions, thoughts and assumptions.

As the research question unfolded during the data collection phases, it was necessary to be aware of potential discrepant cases that posed rival assumptions. While my research focused on the assumption that leaders provide supports and accommodations to employees with high-functioning autism, there may be rival views that emerge during the interviews or other sources of data. Rival views from discrepant cases may appear to be negative, yet Yin (2016) iterated that research studies are strengthened as a result of assigning value to those differing views.



### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Qualitative research rigor includes trustworthiness, transferability, data saturation and validity, which in quantitative research is analogous to internal and external validity, reliability and generalizability (Malagon-Maldonado, 2014). Creating trustworthiness in qualitative research is analogous to developing credibility (Yin, 2016). Trustworthiness also entails assuring readers are able to determine the quality of a given study (Moon, Brewer, Januchowski-Hartley, Adams, & Blackman, 2016). A researcher undertaking a qualitative study builds trustworthiness by explicitly including the research method, design, research site, participants and data collection (Yin, 2016). Trustworthiness can be further developed through engagement with the study site over a prolonged period of time and ensuring the facilitator of the study is able to convince readers that the fieldwork actually took place (Yin, 2016). The researcher establishes trustworthiness through contemplation, consideration, interfacing with, examining the collected data and ensuing interpretation development (Stewart, Gapp, & Harwood, 2017).

### **Credibility**

The strength of qualitative research studies is dependent upon ensuring a measure of credibility exists in the study (Yin, 2016). Credibility entails strengthening the study during both the research design phase, as well as during data collection and interpretation (Yin, 2016) and retaining the authentic connotation of participants (Moon et al., 2016). I conducted in-person semistructured interviews, interpreted the information that participants provide and shared the interpretation with participants to member check and gain validity. Member checking is a way to ensure credibility in a qualitative study by

having participants review summaries of the researcher's interpretations (Harvey, 2015; Malagon-Maldonado, 2014). In describing how to ensure credibility, Stewart et al. (2017) noted rich and thick story-telling descriptions and constant comparison of the data create a sequence of verification of the phenomenon under investigation. Credibility is synonymous to creating authenticity to such a degree that one could extrapolate the findings (Patton, 2015) and develop legislation or policies based on the implications of the study (Merriam, 2009). The counterpart of credibility in quantitative research is internal validity (Amankwaa, 2016). I used secondary data from documents and artifacts obtained from participants and from the organizational website related to the research topic.

### **Transferability**

Within qualitative research, transferability carries the notion of replicating the study results in another setting or context (Farquhar, 2013). Transferability is a form of external validity enabling the results and findings in a study to be replicated in other settings (Moon et al., 2016). The idea of transferability entails providing extensive detail to replicate the findings in comparable circumstances, locations, or participants (Malagon-Maldonado, 2014). Researchers achieve transferability by providing extensive contextual information about a study as well as in-depth, rich, thick descriptions of the data (Farquhar, 2013). The reader decides the transferability of any given study (Malagon-Maldonado, 2014). In my study, I enhanced transferability through rich, thick descriptions of the data obtained from semistructured interviews with participants, from analysis of various documents, artifacts and direct observations, and through the selection

of a varying group of participants, i.e. leaders, managers, frontline supervisors. The counterpart of transferability in quantitative research is generalizability (Amankwaa, 2016).

### **Dependability**

A detailed explanation of multiple sources of data helps ensure dependability in qualitative research (Merriam, 2009; Moon et al., 2016). Throughout my study, I incorporated detailed explanations for each data source obtained from interviews, documents, artifacts and direct observations of the workplace. Qualitative researchers must vary their strategy for achieving dependability, such as debriefing, member checking, triangulation, or use of a reflexive journal (Olson et al., 2016). I e-mailed to each participant a copy of their interview transcript and asked him or her to review, amend, correct, or add any additional pertinent information, or to accept the transcripts as-is. Four participants revised their transcripts, but the revisions did not substantially alter the overall content and meaning; three participants accepted the transcripts as-is; and four participants did not respond. I then uploaded the transcripts and other data sources into NVivo 11 Pro. After coding, analyzing and interpreting the data, I assigned emerging themes. I then e-mailed each participant the list of 8 emerging themes and their associated 105 individual codes and asked him or her for feedback as to whether my findings accurately interpreted their insights, as described by Merriam (2009). Transcript reviews and member checking yielded no new information. I used NVivo 11 Pro software as a means for achieving triangulation, as stated by Salmona and Kaczynski (2016).

An audit trail ensures dependability of the data so that readers can validate the findings and to a certain degree, even replicate the study in a similar setting (Merriam, 2009). Johnston et al. (2014) noted they achieved triangulation of data by sourcing data from multiple businesses spread out over two different locations. Zappella (2015) achieved triangulation of data by interviewing employees with cognitive disabilities as well as studying organizations that recruit individuals with disabilities. Olson et al. (2016) achieved triangulation of data by sourcing and analyzing five varying sources and types of data. Acquiring data from multiple sources, as well as through varying methods, aids in achieving within-methods methodological triangulation (Carter et al., 2014; Denzin, 1970, 2009). The data I acquired was obtained from multiple sources, including in-person semistructured interviews, documents (written policies, job postings, memoranda, official communications), artifacts (such as samples of employee work, web content) and direct observations (evidence obtained from observing the work environment). The counterpart of dependability in quantitative research is reliability (Amankwaa, 2016).

### **Confirmability**

The achievement of confirmability entails being able to show a clear connection and consistency between the results of the study and the conclusions in such a way that a reader can follow the process and even reproduce or repeat the study in a different setting (Connelly, 2016; Moon et al., 2016). Confirmability of a study requires a high level of impartiality on the part of the researcher, ensuring that participant discoveries shape the research (Amankwaa, 2016). At the conclusion of my study, I developed a detailed

account of all collected data, analysis of data and any changes that were necessary throughout the study. I ensured confirmability by engaging participants in the review process whereby they verified whether the interpretation of the semistructured interviews matched what they said. The achievement of confirmability comes through an audit trail that clearly describes all the steps undertaken in the research from the initial phase of the study to identifying and reporting of the results (Amankwaa, 2016). In the event the study deviates from the original plan, I documented the process and provided the rationale for the change. The counterpart of confirmability in quantitative research is objectivity (Amankwaa, 2016).

### **Ethical Procedures**

The essence of ethical procedures in qualitative studies entails obtaining an array of approvals from the case study client site, individual participants and from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Ethical procedures are an ongoing process throughout the entire study and not merely a pre-approval process (Øye, Sørensen, & Glasdam, 2016). Researchers must be prepared to mitigate for unplanned ethical dilemmas to protect participants (Øye et al., 2016). I obtained written permission from the top leader of the site organization to conduct case study research. A copy of the permission was included in the IRB application. I formalized the permission by preparing and submitting a letter of cooperation, which outlined the nature of the agreement between the research partner and the researcher.

I submitted an IRB application seeking approval to collect data in the form of semistructured interviews with leaders, managers and frontline supervisors of employees

with high-functioning autism, as well as documents (written policies, job postings, memoranda, official communications), artifacts (such as samples of employee work, web content) and direct observations (evidence obtained from observing the work environment). The IRB application included a Consent Form (see Appendix A), an e-mail invitation (see Appendix D) to all participants asking for their permission to interview them in which data collected would be in the form of audio-recordings of their responses and a confidentiality agreement (see Appendix E) which outlined my responsibilities to participants and the data they provided. Once I received IRB approval, I included the approval number and the allotted timeframe for its use.

I recruited participants for this study via e-mail invitations (See Appendix D). To protect participant privacy and confidentiality, I asked participants to identify a private interview location and time of their choice. For individuals who agreed to participate in the study, I gave consent forms for them to sign indicating their voluntary agreement and allowed them time to ask questions or address their concerns regarding the consent forms. I used an interview protocol script (See Appendix C) to assist in progressing through the interview in a consistent manner. In the event that participants refused to participate in the study or withdrew mid-way through the study, I respected their decisions and reaffirmed that I would maintain confidentiality of their information. Should participants wish to withdraw from the study, they could do so verbally in person, or in writing via e-mail. Although I could not anticipate or plan for unexpected situations, I attempted to be mentally sharp and focused and addressed questions that participants directed at me. Yin

(2016) noted the importance of understanding the setting within which the study will take place and be prepared for potential threats.

I stored recorded interviews, transcriptions, artifacts, documents, photographs of the work environment arrangement and adaptation and any other data collected on a password-protected computer. If collected data include paper copies, I scanned those electronically and stored them on the password-protected computer and destroyed the hard copies. I will permanently delete the files after the required 5-year period. I assigned a pseudonym to all participants to ensure confidentiality of their identity. Participants did not have direct access to any information or data collected during the study.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 3, I provided an overview of the research design and rationale for participant selection and for selecting the requisite method of data collection and analysis. The data collected helped fill the gap in literature as to what strategies leaders and managers use to support and accommodate employees with high-functioning autism. Chapter 3 included the process for collecting and analyzing data, facilitating semistructured interviews with participants who agreed to be part of the study and for maintaining participant confidentiality. I attended to issues of trustworthiness related to credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability and ethical procedures for the study.

In Chapter 4, I will address the setting where the study took place, participant demographics and data collection and analysis of data collected. I will restate issues of

trustworthiness within the study and discuss the results and findings of this qualitative study. Chapter 4 will conclude with a summary of the results to the research questions.



## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative, descriptive case study was to explore what strategies organizational leaders and managers used to support and accommodate employees with specific needs while building on their strengths. The participants were limited to leaders, managers, and frontline supervisors within one organization in northern Illinois. The nature of my study involved interviewing two leaders, four managers, and five frontline supervisors who were responsible for strategy, policy formulation, or oversight of employees with high-functioning autism. I also acquired, reviewed, coded, and analyzed organizational documents (written policies, memoranda, official communications), artifacts (web content), facilitated direct observations of the physical work environment, and took photographs of the facility and work areas to demonstrate within-method methodological triangulation of the data to ensure the validity of data results and evidence of corroboration among data. The overarching research question was as follows: What strategies do organizational leaders and managers use to support and accommodate the workplace needs of employees with specific needs while building on their strengths?

In Chapter 4, I describe the research setting, participant demographic information, and features of this qualitative, descriptive case study. This chapter also includes details related to data collection and data analysis methods, evidence of trustworthiness, and concludes with a summary of the study's results.

### **Research Setting**

The organization was a not-for-profit located in northern Illinois that specializes in employing and supporting individuals with high-functioning autism as software and hardware testers. The structure of the organization consists of a board of directors made up of 13 individuals (eight men and five women), a management team made up of six individuals (two men and four women), and other personnel and employees made up of 58 individuals (44 men and 14 women). According to the top leader, there are over 50 employees on the autism spectrum. The organization also comprises of an advisory board made up of eight individuals (six men and two women) consisting of a renowned actor, licensed clinical social worker, psychiatrist, webmaster, chief financial officer, juris doctor, business cofounder, and a research professor, most of whom are intimately connected to the field of autism either personally or through a loved one.

The natural setting for the interviews encompassed the case study organization site, per the recommendation from the top leader who granted permission to every participant to take part in the interviews during work hours in a private conference room that was set aside for the interviews. Participants were given the opportunity to choose a different location, but all participants chose to meet in the designated room. The organization is located within a professional building that also houses doctors, dentists, and other professionals. I scheduled, coordinated, and facilitated all in-person interviews on-site in the assigned conference room as instructed by the top leader. I conducted all the interviews during a 3-week period between August 29 and September 12 of 2017. During the interview timeframe, one of the participants had to reschedule the interview

because the top leader asked him to join the leadership team to assess additional office space that was going to be available to the organization. Several leaders, managers, and frontline supervisors assessed the additional office space to determine the feasibility of acquiring that space for future growth, or to create additional private, single-person offices.

### **Demographics**

I selected participants for this study using purposive sampling to identify potential individuals who met the criteria of being a leader, manager, or frontline supervisor within the case study organization. Participant H served as my primary point of contact throughout the data collection process to provide participant names and titles that met the criteria, and to provide various documents, artifacts, and access to workspaces. Thirteen participants met the criteria and all received invitations to participate in the study, of which 11 agreed to participate.

As Table 1 shows, 18% ( $n=2$ ) were leaders, 36% ( $n=4$ ) were managers, and 46% ( $n=5$ ) were frontline supervisors within the case study organization. During the interviews, three participants self-disclosed as being on the autism spectrum, but I did not exclude them from the study since they met the primary criteria and their insights were valuable. I notified the IRB of this issue and submitted an adverse event reporting form, which stated details about the participants that self-disclosed as being on the autism spectrum. The IRB responded indicating no further action was required and that I could proceed with my study. I did not implement any other exclusionary criteria.

Table 1

## Demographic Data of Participants

Participant Demographics				
	Men	Women	Total	% of Total
Leader	1	1	2	18%
Manager	1	3	4	36%
Frontline supervisor	4	1	5	46%
Total	6	5	11	100%

Table 2 provides more details about participant gender, race, age, job tenure, and titles. Table 2 also includes descriptions of the pseudonyms I assigned to each participant represented by a capital P, followed by their designated letter ranging from A-K.

Table 2

## Participant Profiles

Participant	Gender	Race	Age	Tenure	Title
P-A	Woman	Caucasian	36	2.5 Years	Sr. QA Analyst
P-B	Man	Pacific Islander	32	1 Year	Sr. QA Analyst
P-C	Woman	Caucasian	35	1.5 Years	Program Services Specialist
P-D	Man	Caucasian	48	<1 Year	Sr. QA Analyst
P-E	Man	Caucasian	28	<1 Year	Job Coach, Tech Specialist
P-F	Woman	Caucasian	27	1.5 Years	Sr. QA Analyst
P-G	Man	Caucasian	42	3 Years	Sr. QA Analyst
P-H	Woman	Caucasian	60	<1 Year	Social Worker, Counselor
P-I	Woman	Caucasian	62	9 Years	Executive Director
P-J	Man	Caucasian	66	7 Years	Director of Operations
P-K	Man	Caucasian	29	1 Year	Sr. QA Analyst

### **Data Collection**

As the primary instrument for this study, I planned, coordinated, and facilitated all facets of data collection for the study. Prior to collecting data, I secured the names and titles of individuals who met the criteria of leader, manager, or frontline supervisor. The top leader assigned one individual (Participant H) to coordinate all my data gathering activities, including setting aside a private conference room for me to facilitate the interviews, compiling and gathering other sources of data, and giving me access to various work areas to facilitate observations of the physical work environment, and to take photographs of work areas. Participant H provided me with copies of various documents and artifacts as other sources of data, and gave me a tour of the facility, affording me the opportunity to take photographs and facilitate direct observation of the physical work environment.

The documents that Participant H provided included (a) a support staff manual which contains policies and procedures for screening, hiring, meeting with, coaching, and supporting employees; (b) copies of internal e-mail communications that applied to my study in terms of supporting and accommodating employees, addressing employee anxiety, and providing training for frontline supervisors; and (c) internal untitled documents such as a weekly newsletter that is distributed to all employees, and fliers that appear to be for the purpose of marketing and business development. I also perused the organization's website looking for pertinent data that corroborated with other data and copied content into a Microsoft Word document for further coding and analysis. During my time on-site at the case study organization, I also facilitated observations of the

physical environment, noting the work setting, workspace arrangements, furnishings, and layout, and I took photographs of various work areas, furniture, amenities, and devices that employees could use. In between participant interviews, I took field notes about the general work environment and conversations between managers and employees.

After receiving approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB #08-21-17-0396447), I informed the top leader and Participant H that I was approved to proceed with data collection and provided them with a synopsis of my study. Based on their recommendation, they disseminated these details to all participants during one of their weekly staff meetings, informed them of my study and that I would send them individual e-mail invitations (Appendix D) to participate in the study. I e-mailed Participant H and requested e-mail addresses for the list of available participants. Next, I invited the research participants to take part in semistructured interviews for this qualitative, descriptive case study. At the conclusion of all interviews, I provided audio files to a transcriptionist who transcribed the interviews into Microsoft Word documents. I received the transcribed interviews and reviewed each one for clarity. I removed all identifiable personal and organization names and applied appropriate pseudonyms or titles.

Next, I e-mailed each transcript to the respective participant to check for accuracy. Seven participants returned transcripts, four of which made some minor, nonsubstantive revisions, and three accepted the transcripts as-is. I reviewed participant replies, noted their corrections, and uploaded the transcripts into NVivo 11 Pro, coded and analyzed the data. After I coded and analyzed the data and identified emergent

themes, I facilitated member checking by e-mailing to participants the list of themes, noting their connection to the overarching research question, and asked if my interpretation of their insights was accurate. Member checking is the process of garnering feedback from participants regarding the findings, as described by Yin (2016). I asked participants if they wished to add anything, or if they needed clarification regarding the themes. Only Participant I, the top leader of the organization, replied stating, “These are definitely themes that play out here in our work.” Member checking yielded no new data. I collected, coded, and analyzed data, and reached a point of data saturation where no new information surfaced, no additional participants surfaced, and no new codes or themes emerged, as described in Fusch and Ness (2015).

### **Number of Participants**

Through purposive sampling strategy noted previously, Participant H identified a list of 13 individuals within the case study organization who met the criteria of leader, manager, or frontline supervisor. From this sample, 11 participants agreed to participate in the study, of which there were two leaders, four managers, and five frontline supervisors. Two participants declined to be part of the study. The sample of participants was relevant to my study, as I wanted to gain insights from leaders, managers, and frontline supervisors as to what strategies they engaged in to support and accommodate employees with specific needs while building on their strengths.

Triangulation of data is vital to ensuring credibility and reliability of qualitative research (Carter et al., 2014; Denzin, 1970, 2009). I focused on within-method data collection, ensuring methodological triangulation by combining interviews with leaders,

managers, and frontline supervisors, with archival documents, artifacts, direct observations and photographs of the physical work environment, thus reducing bias and providing validation of data. Participant H provided me with copies of various documents and artifacts pertinent to the study, and gave me tours of the facility, affording me the opportunity to take photographs and facilitate direct observation of the physical work environment.

### **Location and Data Collection Details**

I recruited participants for my study by using an e-mail invitation (Appendix D). Beginning August 24, 2017, I sent e-mails to all participants informing them of my study, requesting their participation, and asking them to reply if they wished to participate in the study. By September 5, 2017, 11 participants responded indicating they wanted to participate, listing their preferred date, time, and interview location. I scheduled each interview accordingly, and sent each participant a copy of the informed consent form for adults that included a sample of my semistructured interview questions. I informed each participant I would bring two copies of the form for each of us to sign, one for his or her records and one for my records.

On the chosen date, time, and location of each interview, I welcomed each participant, reviewed the consent form, asked if participants wished to continue, and had them sign two copies of the consent form for both of our records. Prior to each interview, I gave each participant two copies of the informed consent form for them to sign, and asked each participant for their permission to record the interview on digital recording devices. I used an interview protocol (Appendix E) and facilitated all the interviews using



my interview questions (Appendix C) at the case study organization site. The interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes and took place over a 3-week period from August 29 to September 12, 2017. During this same timeframe, I collected other data sources such as organizational documents, e-mails, photographs, and artifacts, and facilitated observations of the physical work environment. Immediately following each interview, I informed participants that I would transcribe the interviews into Microsoft Word documents and that I would provide them a copy to review. I explained the meaning and purpose of member checking and asked them to determine if my interpretation of the findings accurately reflected their insights. In the days after the interviews, I e-mailed each participant a copy of his or her respective transcribed interview and asked participants to review the transcripts to ensure accuracy, and I gave them the option to correct, amend, or accept the transcript as-is. After I completed the analysis of all available data and created the list of eight emergent themes, I e-mailed to each participant the themes, accompanying codes, and my central research question and asked if my interpretation and emergent themes accurately represented their insights and whether they would like to add or clarify any of the themes. This member checking process is consistent with that described in Merriam (2009).

### **How the Data Were Recorded**

I recorded each interview using two digital recording devices to mitigate for the potential malfunction of one device. I took notes during each interview, specifically noting key topics or themes emerging from the interview and other personal observations. As I completed each interview, I immediately transferred each associated digitally

recorded mp3 file onto my password-protected laptop for safekeeping and as a third backup. Upon completion of each interview, I placed my copy of the signed consent form and field notes into a manila folder labeled with each participant's pseudonym. After returning home, I placed completed interview folders into a locked file cabinet in my home. I scanned copies of each consent form and placed them into appropriate files on my password-protected home computer for safekeeping. I used a transcriptionist to convert audio files into Microsoft Word files. As I received each transcript, I read them carefully, replaced personal names with actual titles, and removed any identifiable organization names. Next, I saved each document in pre-assigned electronic files on my laptop and computer associated with each participant pseudonym. Additionally, I uploaded the transcripts into NVivo 11 Pro to begin the coding and analysis process, and used the memo function to record my decision-making process related to coding, analyzing, and interpreting the data.

### **Data Collection Variations**

The actual data collection process proceeded mostly as planned and outlined in Chapter 3. The only change I made to the data collection process was that I expanded the interview protocol that outlined the details I would discuss with participants prior to recording the interviews, the actual interview questions, and next steps after I turned off the recorder. To assist participants in following my questions, I provided them with a copy of the interview protocol so they could follow along with each step and question. I wanted participants to not only hear the question but also be able to read each question to help them develop their answers.

I also sought approval from IRB to use an external transcription service to transcribe the audio files into Microsoft Word files. I sent an e-mail to IRB, attached the appropriate change request form, and received approval to proceed without any change to the IRB number I was assigned. I provided the transcriber with a copy of the confidentiality agreement, had that person sign the agreement and return it to me. The transcriptionist converted audio files into Microsoft Word files and provided them to me in electronic format. I reviewed each file carefully and made necessary corrections, assigned pseudonyms or job titles to identifiable personal names, and removed all other identifiable organization names. I sent each transcript to the appropriate participant via e-mail requesting they review for accuracy. I informed each participant they could amend or accept the transcript. If they made any changes, I asked them to save the changes and return the updated transcript to me via e-mail. If they did not make changes to the transcript, I asked them to respond to my e-mail indicating they accepted the transcript as-is. Once I received replies or amended final transcripts, I uploaded the transcripts into the appropriate participant folders on my home computer and uploaded each file into NVivo 11 Pro to code and analyze. Transcript reviews yielded no new data.

Some of the other forms of data that I uploaded into NVivo 11 Pro included organizational documents such as a support staff manual, internal documents, internal e-mail communications and content from the organization's website. I also included my observations of the physical work environment, field notes and photographs of various work areas, furnishings, amenities and devices that employees could use. I uploaded all sources of data into NVivo 11 Pro and began coding, analyzing the data and identifying

emergent themes. As I analyzed the organizational documents noted above, I looked for words or phrases that were similar to those I analyzed and coded from interview transcripts, and as similar words or phrases appeared, I coded them to the same codes assigned from interview transcripts. These additional sources of data yielded some new information. As such, I reviewed each interview transcript again looking for words and phrases that corroborated the organizational documents and vice versa. I applied the same principle when coding my field notes and observations, although those sources of data yielded no new information, yet corroborate the interview data. Lastly, in terms of the photographs of the physical work environment, I applied codes appropriate for each photograph, noting whether the picture applied to physical accommodations and amenities and coding them accordingly. The photographs yielded no new data, yet corroborated the interview data as well as organizational documents, observations and field notes.

After coding and analyzing the data and identifying the eight emergent themes, I e-mailed each participant and provided them with the list of themes and the accompanying codes from NVivo to member check and asked them to review the themes to determine if I accurately interpreted their insights. I asked participants if they wished to add anything else or if they needed clarification regarding the themes. After coding and analyzing all available data, I e-mailed to each participant the emerging themes and asked if my interpretation and findings accurately reflected their insights. I asked participants if they wished to add anything else or if they needed clarification regarding the themes. Only one participant replied affirming that my themes accurately represented

the organizational phenomenon. Member checking yielded no substantive changes and no new data.

### **Unusual Circumstances Faced During Data Collection**

I facilitated each interview in a private conference room assigned to me at the organization site. I learned during one of the interviews that the conference room had multiple purposes, including meetings, or as a decompression room for employees that needed to step away from their work area. During one of the short breaks between participant interviews, one of the employees entered the conference room with a laptop in hand, as I was preparing for the next interview. Knowing this individual probably needed a quiet environment, I asked him if he needed me to leave, or if I could turn the lights off. He said no to both questions. I went about my business continuing to prepare for the next interview. After just a few minutes, Participant C arrived, and upon noticing the employee was in the room, she asked if he was OK and if he needed anything. He indicated his back hurt because of his office chair and that he just needed to take a break on the couch for a few minutes. Participant C was very understanding and encouraged him to stay in the room if it would help him. She also offered to give him a different chair to help ease his discomfort. After a few minutes, he left the room and went back to his work area. Participant C explained to me that this employee had very sensitive body and that any bodily discomfort would be extremely uncomfortable for him. She informed me that this type of accommodation was common and that the organization focuses on mitigating any situation that interferes with employee performance.

Another unexpected event occurred on September 5, 2017 at 8:35am as I interviewed Participant F, at 2:30pm as I interviewed Participant D and on September 12 at 2:04pm as I interviewed Participant K. All three participants self-disclosed that they were on the autism spectrum. My IRB Application did not directly address how I would handle this issue, but from the standpoint of participant criteria, all three participants held a functional role as a frontline supervisor and thus were included as viable participants in the study. The interviews progressed as planned without any direct or indirect negative impact neither on the participants nor on the general nature of the study. The participants did not experience anything of a negative or adverse nature. In fact, they were very congenial, pleasant, thoughtfully engaged during the interview and provided invaluable insights into the supports and accommodations that employees receive. Because the mission of the organization and the overarching environment that fully supports individuals on the autism spectrum, there was no direct or indirect impact on other employees. From top leadership to frontline employees, everyone knows that many individuals in the workplace are on the autism spectrum and that everyone on the spectrum receives some form of support and/or accommodation.

These events did not interfere with the nature of the study, nor did they present any new risk, aside from what might be usual and customary to any participant. These participants received the same protections as any other participant. I maintained full confidentiality of each participant, whether on the autism spectrum or not. My original recruitment plan included identifying individuals who served as leaders, managers, or frontline supervisors within the case study organization site. I did not make any

provisions for excluding participants who were on the spectrum, nor address how I would handle that situation if it occurred. In fact, the perspectives of all three participants were invaluable to the study as they serve as both a supervisor and as an employee on the autism spectrum who receive various types of support and accommodations consistent with the organization's mission and vision.

To acquire other sources of data, I e-mailed Participant H and asked her to provide me with sample documents that leaders, managers, or frontline supervisors use in administering their duties. The types of documents she provided included a support staff manual that details the roles and functions of support staff. She also gave me copies of internal e-mails between support staff and top leaders because upward communication within the organization is crucial to ensuring supervisors inform leaders of employee support or accommodation needs. I received tours of the facility and noted the varying locations where employees worked, making note of workstation arrangements in different sections of the facility and listening to my tour guide explain the purpose for the variety of workstations. I facilitated observations of the physical work environment by using the observation guide (Appendix A) to document the furnishings, amenities and layout of workstations. While touring the facility, I bypassed a work area designated for a project for one of the organization's clients. I did not enter the room nor take photographs of the physical area as it contained identifiable information that could compromise the confidential nature of that project and the client organization.

### **Data Analysis**

The process for analyzing qualitative data entailed organizing all forms of data, identifying emerging themes and categories, and synthesizing the data, showing how it connected to the overarching research question. Computer-based software programs such as NVivo are very useful for storing and coding data, but the process of analyzing the data is the primary responsibility of the researcher (Zamawe, 2015). Yin (2016) outlined a qualitative analysis process that encompasses a series of five phases: (a) compiling; (b) disassembling; (c) reassembling; (d) interpreting; and (e) concluding. Analysis of qualitative data is distinct from quantitative data in that it encompasses words, whereas quantitative data encompasses numbers (Yin, 2016). I used Yin's (2016) qualitative analysis process to move inductively through the data. The use of a computer software program is very useful to sort, code, and combine data to identify emerging themes, categories and meanings from the data (Yin, 2016). I used NVivo 11 Pro to store and code the data, which served as aids to analyze and interpret the data. As Sotiriadou, Brouwers, & Le, (2014) noted, NVivo is a useful storage tool for coding and organizing qualitative research designs, which has been widely used in business and management research.

Following the five phase analysis process that Yin (2016) developed, I moved inductively through the data as follows: (a) compiled into NVivo 11 Pro all available data sources, from artifacts, documents, interview transcripts, observations, web content, photographs, sample e-mails, manuals, revised transcripts from participant reviews and member checked the emergent themes, which yielded no new data; (b) I assigned various



codes to the data; (c) disassembled the data by assigning new codes to fragmented data, reassigned codes and combined data points where duplication or similarity of topics existed; (c) reassembled the data and associated codes to identify emerging, overarching themes, categories, patterns, conducted word frequency and text query searches to create graphical representations of the most frequent words; (e) interpreted the data by creating a narrative with relevant tables and graphics that represented emergent themes; and (f) drew conclusions based on the interpretation of the data related to compiling, disassembling and reassembling the data.

### **Moving Inductively from Coded Units to Larger Representations**

In this study, the conceptual frameworks and the overarching research question informed the coding and analysis of the data. As described in Chapter 2, two theories informed the conceptual framework of this study. The primary conceptual framework was labor process theory (Braverman, 1975) which entails management extracting the maximum production from labor while simultaneously reaping the rewards from labor. The secondary theory of the conceptual framework was resource-based theory (Barney, 1991; Grant, 1991; Peteraf, 1993; Warnier et al., 2013; Wernerfelt, 1984) in which organizations can gain a competitive advantage and improve overall profitability by tapping into scarce, underused, or unused resources. The conceptual framework informed my coding process which led to identifying overarching categories and themes.

Informed by the conceptual framework and overarching research question of my study, I attempted to align each emerging theme to four overarching categories: (a) power obtained from labor and (b) benefits derived from labor, as outlined in labor process

theory (Braverman, 1975); and (c) competitive advantage and (d) tapping into underused or unused resources, as outlined in resource-based theory (Barney, 1991; Grant, 1991; Peteraf, 1993; Warnier et al., 2013; Wernerfelt, 1984). The process of integrating a conceptual framework into a study is iterative that entails creating linkages between theories and the phenomenon under investigation (Maxwell, 2013). As such, the conceptual framework incorporated into my study informed a more complete understanding of the strategies that leaders, managers and frontline supervisors in the case study organization engage in to support and accommodate autistic employees.

I initiated the coding process by first uploading into NVivo 11 Pro all available forms of data, such as transcribed interview files, observations of the physical work environment, photographs of various workspaces, offices and amenities, content from the organization's website, various other documents and artifacts in the form of Microsoft Word or PDF files. Next, I proceeded to read every interview transcript and other written sources of data within NVivo 11 Pro and assigned free nodes to words and phrases located within each participant answer, tying each free node to the overarching research question (see Appendix E). I continued the coding process until all the data corresponded to specific nodes. As I ran queries in NVivo searching for specific words or phrases, I noticed some discrepancies and inconsistencies in how I coded data, so I went back through each data source, and in some instances, reassigned certain words or phrases to codes that corresponded more closely. I began to notice that some nodes had similar or duplicate meanings, so I merged those nodes together. Coding the interview transcripts was by far the most time consuming and cumbersome, since the majority of the

interviews contained rich and thick descriptions. Next, I moved on to other data sources following the same process and coded the remaining data.

My next step was to run queries to identify commonly and frequently occurring words and analyzing those queries for additional coding possibilities, represented in a word frequency cloud shown in Figure 1. This analysis informed my need to further code one of the themes, which added an additional 21 nodes. In all, I identified and coded 105 individual and distinct nodes, and from these distinct codes, I categorized them into eight overarching and emerging themes (see Appendix E). This process coincides with the five phases of qualitative data analysis that Yin (2016) described: (a) compiling; (b) disassembling; (c) reassembling; (d) interpreting; and (e) concluding.



Figure 1. NVivo 11 Pro word cloud extraction.

### **Emerging Categories, Themes, and Codes**

As I moved through the data coding process, I kept in mind the overarching research question for my study, which was: What strategies do organizational leaders and managers use to support and accommodate the workplace needs of employees with specific needs while building on their strengths? From the 105 distinct codes, I categorized them into eight overarching emergent themes as follows: (a) advocating for self and others; (b) mission, vision, values, and social responsibility; (c) autism challenges; (d) nonphysical supports; (e) physical accommodations; (f) policies, procedures, and funding; (g) support personnel; and (h) unique skillset. Table 3 (Appendix E) displays the parts of the conceptual frameworks, the emerging themes and distinct codes.

The following sample interview narratives and excerpts from documents, e-mails, or web content exemplify the connection between associated emerging themes and unique codes resulting from the interview questions. By assigning various distinct codes to specific emerging themes, I was able to consolidate all coding into overarching themes that represent strategies that leaders, managers and frontline supervisors in the case study organization use in supporting and accommodating their autistic employees.

The emerging theme titled ‘advocating for self and others’ resulted from asking participants about the process that determines whether employees need additional support, to which Participant F replied:

I think it's not even just supervisors, I've had testers come to me and say 'this other tester who sits next to me is struggling' and it's not their job to do that, but it's great that they do because it may not have been clear.

Participant I replied to the same question:

A lot of times their peers will say 'so and so is struggling' 'so and so is pounding on the desk again', 'so and so is raising their voice and I can't focus'. So even if you don't observe it, sometimes someone will come.

An excerpt from internal e-mail between one of the support personnel and leaders regarding an employee stated, "He shared a 'journal of worries' file with me, where he's been documenting his issues since earlier this year. Looked through it and it seems to make sense, mostly things he's already discussed."

The emerging theme titled 'mission, vision, values, and social responsibility' resulted from asking participants what competitive advantages leaders obtain from supporting employees, to which Participant C replied, "Also, the mission was, is, to support individuals with autism and help them find gainful employment and the fact that we are fulfilling our mission every single day is a huge advantage to us."

An excerpt from the organization's mission statement states, "[Organization] empowers individuals on the autism spectrum to fulfill their potential through meaningful employment combined with social opportunity." An excerpt from the organization's web pages states, "Social responsibility objectives may be met by employing a highly skilled yet underused domestic resource pool. Maximizing the positive effect of employing a

previously underused workforce. Minimizing the potential social burden. Creating an effective channel for corporate social responsibility.”

Participant E replied:

I think it is the first thing we are always thinking about is how to help individuals on the spectrum and find work and be successful with this work. We are going to find any accommodation out there, or whatever is needed to help meet that goal. I see it every single day. We are doing everything we can to alleviate the anxiety that someone is having so that they can be successful.

The emerging theme titled ‘autism challenges’ resulted from asking participants what types of preparations are necessary for managers to accommodate employee needs, to which Participant D replied:

Patience is a big one. I’m repeatedly impressed with how patient the management here is—even folks that don’t have some kind of social worker background. It is useful. They have more patience than I would in a similar situation. Having some level of understanding just around what it means to be on the spectrum, just like some basic information, I think is crucial. But the more you know the better.

An internal e-mail between one of the support personnel and leaders regarding an employee stated:

Met with [Employee] this morning. He seems relieved that his issues are being addressed, so I’m hoping this signals an attitude shift...we’ll see. [Employee] is going to keep track of his anxiety level <1-10> at the beginning of the day, and again at the end of the day. He’s also going to write a short description about what

happened throughout the day that might have contributed to his anxiety...then we can assess and figure out if there's a pattern, whether he gets stressed around specific people/during specific times/etc.

An excerpt from the organization's support staff manual that all leaders, managers, and frontline supervisors use stated:

Aside from social challenges, members of this population frequently have difficulties in areas such as executive functioning (planning, organizing, time management), anxiety and mood disorders, sensory processing, and regulating certain behaviors, all of which may have limited their vocational opportunities.

The emerging theme titled 'nonphysical supports' resulted from asking participants about other types of support are offered to employees, to which Participant A replied:

We have regular meetings, (the monthly, every other week, or weekly) just to talk things through with anything that's going on with the employee. Frequent breaks, shorter work days, flexible schedules if they have therapy or anything like that they can have that time off whatever they need. We don't necessarily expect most Analysts to work much more than 5-6 hours a day. [We provide] shorter work days, flexible schedules if they have therapy or anything like that they can have that time off whatever they need.

Participant C replied:

So if you have somebody who needs frequent sensory breaks, you need to be willing to accommodate that. We have different areas where people can take a

sensory break. People are encouraged to go into [sensory break room] if they need a sensory break.

Participant D replied, “The majority of the employees here don’t work full time, like five days a week for a number of individual different reasons. They work when they can, and as much as they can.”

The emerging theme titled ‘physical accommodations’ resulted from asking participants about supports or accommodations to the physical environment that employees receive, to which Participant I replied:

That’s a lounge, a ‘chilax’ area, where people can, you know, this is, I mean, we did this in the beginning. It was in the first room with the blue covers on the lights, if you look at the training room, different chair types.

Participant C replied, “You just saw someone in here with headphones, because his back was hurting. His body is very sensitive. [We] make it absolutely 100 percent fine for people to put on headphones, if they need to.” Participant A replied, “So if people to just completely chill out and not talk to anyone during their lunch break, they have that option.” Participant I replied:

Having a...quiet kitchen just if you need to tune out everyone and play on your game and just decompress. You want to socialize? That’s available.

For the emerging theme policies, procedures, fundraising, Participant I noted: Well first of all you have to educate [managers] about that every person is an individual; you see one person with autism, you’ve seen one person with autism.

Participant J replied:



This is really important because one thing that I established from the very beginning for myself is the ability to be a ‘punching bag’. You can very easily be insulted by people on the spectrum in a way that most managers will absolutely not tolerate.

The emerging theme titled ‘policies, procedures, and funding’ resulted from asking participants about necessary preparations to support and accommodate employees with high-functioning autism, to which Participant H replied, “So just knowing something about people on the spectrum and as they go along getting more and more training, I would say any manager would need to have either training or experience to support the people here.” Participant J replied, “[I]t’s more supporting the people who directly provide supports for them. I don’t say I do it so well all the time, perfectly.”

Participant J replied:

This is really important because one thing that I established from the very beginning for myself is say the ability to be a ‘punching bag’. You can very easily be insulted by people on the spectrum in a way that most managers will absolutely not tolerate. From the very beginning, people will tell me I have no idea what I’m talking about and things like that so I developed an attitude before I even started in that my ego should not be part of it and I think if I achieve anything in this company it is this thing; to put my ego aside, because it really doesn’t affect me, I don’t get insulted, it doesn’t hurt me later. That I’ll be insulted in public, it does. But I have to live with it. I have to live with that.

The emerging theme titled ‘support personnel’ resulted from asking participants their role in providing support or accommodation to employees, to which Participant E replied:

My role is, I am a Job Coach and Technical Support Specialist at [Organization]. My role didn’t exist before and I think there is a desperate need for job coaching in this sort of atmosphere to help people provide confidence in what they are doing and direction and assurance that they are on the right path to accomplishing their goals. But as also there in a management role to insure that they are doing things appropriately, following the correct technical guidelines on some of the complicated work that we do.

Participant E replied, “We have a physical on site social worker here to assist with those needs or requests.” Participant K replied, “[Social Worker] just sets a regular meeting with everyone once a month to just check in on how we’re doing and if we need any help with anything. That’s one thing.”

The emerging theme titled ‘unique skillset’ resulted from asking participants about the competitive advantages associated with supporting and accommodating employees with high-functioning autism, to which Participant A replied:

I think you get a very unique perspective on things. With our particular type of work, the attention to detail, the ability to find those defects and errors within a [computer software] program is considerably above a neurotypical individual just because things seem to pop out more to people that are on the Spectrum.

Participant B replied:

When it comes to the nature of repetitive tasks, a person who has high-functioning autism is different than a person without high-functioning autism in regards to their threshold of tolerating repetitive tasks. It also varies amongst people with high-functioning autism. In general, when it comes to repetitive tasks and repeating those tasks, whether it is a series of tests, or executing a series of similar test steps over and over, there's a point where a person with high-functioning autism has an advantage.

Participant D replied, “[B]y and large people on the spectrum have the capacity for a much more intense, sort of all exclusive kind of focus on a project.”

As these previous examples show, the eight overarching themes that emerged from the data encompass a wide variety of distinct and individual dimensions of support or accommodation, which is consistent with the literature presented in Chapter 2. As I worked through the codes and assessed how to best generalize them into meaningful themes, I noticed that some codes were relatively easy to attach to a theme, while others were more complex, necessitating careful analysis of the codes and their meanings.

### **Discrepant Cases**

Although there were no discrepant cases *per se*, the interviews with two frontline supervisors were relatively brief in comparison to all other interviews. I attribute that somewhat to their lack of direct involvement in formulating, implementing, and enforcing policies or procedures related to supporting or accommodating employees with autism. Participant G seemed less engaged in the process and appeared to be in a hurry to complete the interview. Although he had some helpful insights, his answers tended to be

brief with little depth. Participant K on the other hand seemed to have difficulty with verbal communication. On the day that I scheduled his interview, he asked for a copy of the interview questions so that he could review them in advance. At the time of the interview, I provided him with a printed copy of the questions so he could follow along. His responses were not necessarily brief, but he made it clear that his direct involvement in supporting and accommodating employees with autism was minimal.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

A critical component in the design and methodology of this study was establishing trustworthiness. In qualitative studies, trustworthiness entails assuring readers are able to determine the quality of a given study (Moon et al., 2016). Trustworthiness refers to the issue of rigor in qualitative research, including issues of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, which in quantitative studies are analogous to internal validity, generalizability, reliability, and objectivity (Morse, 2015). Rigor is synonymous to trustworthiness, and entails the concept that individuals who are external to the study determine the value of qualitative research, according to Morse (2015). I ensured validity in my study by reaching a point where adequate information existed to reproduce the study in other settings, I exhausted the availability of new information from participants or other data sources, and the feasibility of additional coding became impractical, as stated by Fusch and Ness (2015). The resulting rich and thick data obtained from participant interviews and other data sources further established validity. In this study, I established trustworthiness by undertaking a qualitative study that explicitly included the research method, design, research site,

participants, data collection, and engaging with the study site over a specified timeframe so that readers can ensure the fieldwork actually took place, as noted by Yin (2016).

### **Credibility**

I established credibility by ensuring a measure of rigor existed in the study and strengthening the study during both the research design phase, as well as during data collection and interpretation, as stated by (Yin, 2016). I conducted in-person semistructured interviews, transcribed the interviews and asked them to verify the accuracy, interpreted the information that participants provided, and asked participants to member check my interpretation of the emergent themes to gain validity. Member checking is a way to ensure credibility in a qualitative study by having participants review summaries of the researcher's interpretations (Harvey, 2015; Malagon-Maldonado, 2014). I also established credibility through rich and thick story-telling descriptions combined with constant comparison of the data to establish verification of the phenomenon under investigation, a process noted by Anney (2014) and Stewart et al. (2017).

In selecting participants to engage in my study, I used purposive sampling to help identify individuals that served in the capacity of leader, manager, or frontline supervisors. These individuals had first-hand experience related to supporting and accommodating the population of employees with special needs. I compared and contrasted the resulting interviews with archival documents, artifacts, photographs, and direct observations of the work environment to establish methodological triangulation of the data, as noted by Carter et al. (2014).

**Transferability**

In qualitative research, transferability is a form of validity, which entails the ability of readers and researchers to replicate the results of a study in another setting or context (Anney, 2014; Farquhar, 2013; Moon et al., 2016). In this research study, I established a strong probability of transferability by providing extensive detail regarding the organization and participants, research design and methodology, excerpts and quotes from participant interviews, and other data sources so that readers and researchers can replicate the findings in comparable circumstances, locations, or with participants, as discussed by Malagon-Maldonado (2014) and Merriam (2009). By providing extensive contextual information as well as in-depth, rich, thick descriptions of the data obtained from semistructured interviews and analysis of various documents, artifacts, and direct observations and photographs of the physical environment, I established transferability of the study to similar settings, as noted by (Farquhar, 2013). It is the responsibility of another researcher to exhibit whether a study is applicable in a different setting or context (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

**Dependability**

Establishing dependability within qualitative studies is another means for ensuring trustworthiness. I created an audit trail of all the collected data, the decisions and rationale associated with collecting specific data, and how I recorded, coded, and analyzed the data, as described by Anney (2014). Throughout my study, I incorporated detailed explanations for each data source obtained from semistructured interviews, and analysis of archival documents, artifacts, photographs, and direct observations of the

physical work environment. I also asked participants to review transcribed interviews to ensure accuracy, or transcription validation, and to make changes or corrections deemed necessary, a process that according to Yin (2016) improves a study's credibility. I facilitated member checking to determine if my interpretation of the findings accurately reflected their insights, giving participants opportunities to make corrections or make improvements to correctness of the study, as stated by Yin (2016). I acquired data from multiple sources, as well as through varying methods, which aided in achieving within-methods methodological triangulation, as noted by Anney (2014).

### **Confirmability**

A final aspect of trustworthiness in qualitative studies is confirmability. This process involves ensuring other researchers could review the study and confirm or corroborate the results (Anney, 2014). I achieved confirmability through a detailed audit trail that described my data collection and analysis methods, including the use of NVivo 11 Pro to store and code the data for further analysis and interpretation. Throughout each interview, and during my time within the case study organization, I maintained a reflexive journal detailing specific insights, feelings, or insights that aided in tentative interpretation of codes or themes, as described by Anney (2014).

### **Study Results**

The conceptual framework for my study included labor process theory (Braverman, 1975) which entails management extracting the maximum production from labor while simultaneously reaping the rewards from labor; and resource-based theory (Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984) in which organizations can gain a competitive

advantage and improve overall profitability by tapping into scarce, underused, or unused resources. I used these theories to inform the central research question, which was to identify leader's strategies for supporting autistic employees. With the conceptual framework as a lens, I developed the semistructured interview questions (Appendix C) to uncover in more detail the strategies that leaders, managers, and frontline supervisors use to support and accommodate employees with autism. I had the interviews transcribed into Microsoft Word documents and proceeded to code each transcript, assigning individual and unique codes to various elements of each transcript.

My overarching research question was: What strategies do organizational leaders and managers use to support and accommodate the workplace needs of employees with specific needs while building on their strengths? To answer this central question, I developed 11 semistructured interview questions (Appendix C) that helped inform my study and improve my understanding of strategies that leaders within the case study organization implemented to support and accommodate their autistic employees, while building on their employees' unique strengths.

As I coded various data (interviews, observations, documents, e-mails, web content, and photographs), I assigned individual and unique code names to each source of data. Once I completed a full round of coding of all available data, I began consolidating individual codes into larger categories, which eventually emerged as the overarching themes. In the following descriptions of the emergent themes and excerpts from various data sources, I use rich, thick descriptions and extensive quotes from participant interviews and other data sources required in descriptive case studies, as stated by



Merriam (2009). Table 4 depicts the frequency of each emergent theme resulting from  $n$  sources of data and subsequent codes obtained from interviews, organizational documents, photographs, web content, and observations of the physical work environment.

Table 4

Emergent Theme Frequency

Emergent Theme	$n$	% of Total Coverage
Advocating for self and others	9	6%
Mission, vision, values, and social responsibility	13	9%
Autism challenges	8	6%
Nonphysical supports	19	14%
Physical accommodations	48	35%
Policies, procedures, and funding	16	12%
Support personnel	12	9%
Unique skillset	14	10%

*Note:  $n$ =frequency*

**Emergent Theme One: Advocating for Self and Others**

As I coded various data sources and began assimilating them into overarching categories, I discovered an emergent theme, advocating for self and others, which correlated to leaders creating a work environment that is conducive for advocating for supports and accommodations for employees, and likewise for employees to advocate for each other. Analysis of the data indicated there were no discrepant cases to report

associated with this theme. By creating a conducive work environment, leaders are essentially creating a mechanism by which they can extract higher productivity from workers, while simultaneously reaping the rewards from labor, which aligns with labor process theory, as stated by Braverman (1975).

The impact of self-advocacy and others-oriented advocacy is such that if leaders create this type of environment, employees who need support and accommodation are not only identified, but are put on a path toward receiving the appropriate support or accommodation they need to maximize their potential. As I discussed in Chapter 2, there is general reluctance among disabled employees to disclose the full nature of their disability and the accommodations they need in the workplace (Baldrige & Swift, 2013). As such, an organization that focuses on employee support and accommodation needs will likely achieve higher performance from employees. Table 5 exemplifies the frequency of terms associated with advocating for self and others.

Table 5

Occurrences for Advocating for Self and Others

Codes	Number of Sources	Number of References	% of Total Coverage
Advocating for others	2	4	21.05%
Advocating for self	9	15	78.95%
Total	11	19	100%

Self-advocating is a means by which employees with disabilities inform their managers of specific supports or accommodations. Despite the fact that individuals with disabilities are required to disclose their disability based on ADA and ADAA regulations

(Carpenter & Paetzold, 2013), many disabled employees are reluctant to disclose the full nature of their disability (Bacon & Hoque, 2015; Baldrige & Swift, 2013). Self-advocacy remains an important facet of obtaining the requisite supports or accommodations necessary to maximize productivity (Shaw et al., 2013). Data from the present study confirms the findings from Baldrige and Swift (2013) in that, by creating a work environment that is accepting and supportive of individuals with disabilities, employees will be more apt to openly discuss their support and accommodation needs.

In the present study, five participants spoke about self-advocating, and an internal e-mail communication and the support staff manual further support the preceding notion that self-advocating is not only acceptable and promoted from leaders' perspectives, but also necessary to maximize productivity. Participant responses related to self-advocacy support the preceding theme.

Participant A stated:

But I would say most of the things that come up are if someone's getting upset or angry – we pick up on it right away because we can see it or the other employees are telling us somebody's doing something and this is making me upset. And they know they can come to us and tell us these sorts of things. It's not a very formal process. When we hire people we also have them do a self-evaluation to tell us any accommodations they already know that they need.

Participant D stated:

So even if it's not really them being consciously deciding what to ask for sometimes there are people that ask for what they need very bluntly. But not

everybody is like that. Now of course it would be to a person's advantage to be able to advocate for themselves and the more the better.

Participant E stated:

For example, I had a meeting this morning with an analyst that wasn't feeling very strongly about the work they were doing and they were worried that if they weren't to do this work, that they might be let go-which was the furthest from the truth. It was good that they spoke up to me about how they felt in that they felt comfortable in the atmosphere to speak to me because that tells me I need to get them onto another project.

Participant K stated, "I know if you were an employee and feel that you need an accommodation, you can go to one of them and request an accommodation." An internal e-mail between one of the support personnel to the top leaders of the organization contained the following statement related to one employee who self-advocated, "He shared a 'journal of worries' file with me, where he's been documenting his issues since earlier this year. Looked through it and it seems to make sense, mostly things he's already discussed."

Some of the self-advocating takes shape in the form of employees, leaders, managers, or frontline supervisors speaking on behalf of another employee who appears to be having difficulty. For example, Participant F stated, "I think it's not even just supervisors, I've had testers come to me and say 'this other tester who sits next to me is struggling' and it's not their job to do that, but it's great that they do because it may not have been clear." Participant I stated:

A lot of times their peers will say ‘so and so is struggling’ ‘so and so is pounding on the desk again’, ‘so and so is raising their voice and I can’t focus’. So even if you don’t observe it, sometimes someone will come.

In each of these sample statements, participants emphasized the importance of self-advocacy as a means to identify specific supports or accommodations. At that point, it becomes the responsibility of organizational leaders to assess what supports and accommodations are appropriate and necessary in the workplace, as stated by Madaus et al. (2008). When leaders create a work environment that is accepting of and conducive for employees with disabilities, employees feel more enabled and experience far less negative psychological effects (Johnson & Joshi, 2016; Shuey & Jovic, 2013; von Schrader et al., 2014). Leaders need to create a work climate and environment that is conducive for self-advocacy (von Schrader et al., 2014). Positive and accommodating work environments emanate from an organization’s mission, vision, values, and overall stance on social responsibility, which is the theme I discuss next.

### **Emergent Theme Two: Mission, Vision, Values, Social Responsibility**

The mission is the impetus for the case study organization’s focus on supporting and accommodating employees with autism. As I continued analyzing the data, another theme that emerged was mission, vision, values, and social responsibility as depicted in Table 6, which shows the number of sources and references. Analysis of the data indicated there were no discrepant cases to report associated with this theme. As Lancaster and Milia (2014) noted, it is important that leaders develop comprehensive training and learning programs that align with organizational mission, vision, and values

as a means of supporting all employees. Data from the present study confirm and extend knowledge related to creating an organizational environments based on overarching strategies, as stated in Lancaster and Milia (2014). It is critical that leaders espouse the same values held by the organization (Brite et al., 2015). At the core of the case study organization is its mission statement, which states “[Organization] empowers individuals on the autism spectrum to fulfill their potential through meaningful employment combined with social opportunity.” The mission aligns with labor process theory in that the top leaders of the organization seek to extract the power from labor, as stated by Braverman (1975).

Table 6

## Occurrences for Mission, Vision, Values, and Social Responsibility

Codes	Number of Sources	Number of References	% of Total Coverage
Mission	13	25	80.65%
Social responsibility	1	3	9.68%
Values & vision	2	3	9.68%
Total	16	31	100%

Because an organization’s mission is generally the foundation on which it operates, I developed an interview question related to mission. In response to the interview question as to how the organization’s mission aligns with providing supports or accommodations to employees with high-functioning autism, Participant C replied:

That is our mission. This is sort of a constant discussion here. What is our end goal? Is our end goal to be a profitable business? Or is our end goal to be to support people on the spectrum? They are one in the same. It’s what we have sort

of found. We need to make money otherwise we can't exist. We need to make our employees feel as comfortable and as safe as possible otherwise we won't exist. So that's what we do here. Our mission doesn't only align with this idea, our mission is this idea. And it always has been and it always will be. Even if it means that management is sometimes really thin. Even if it means that someone is stepping into a role they are not entirely comfortable with in order to accommodate, in order to help or support somebody. It's not ever a question and our founders they are incredibly serious about being there and providing support and helping the people who work for us.

Participant D stated:

It's all about it. That is the mission. To establish an environment in all the sense of the word, where people can contribute and work to the best of their ability and be proud of the work that they are doing.

Participant H stated:

They are always looking for ways to more discreetly and more completely align with the mission but this is an organization that has grown tremendously since starting 7 years ago and so now we are in the middle of strategic planning and trying to acquire governmental work so I think the organization aligns very well with the mission and is always working to improve itself.

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) also plays a key role in in an organization's overall effectiveness. An organization that engages in robust CSR initiatives improves worker's identification with the organization, which ultimately benefits the organization

itself in improved effectiveness and outcomes (Glavas & Godwin, 2013). As is true with the case study organization, a focus on social responsibility initiatives creates a competitive advantage, as stated by Kuo and Kalargyrou (2014). Social responsibility aligns with labor process theory in that leaders seek to extract the benefits from a specific niche of employees, as stated by Braverman (1975). It also aligns with resource-based theory in that leaders create a competitive advantage by utilizing a scarce resource, as stated by Barney (1991) and Wernerfelt (1984). The case study organization's website contains a few statements related to social responsibility such as:

Social responsibility objectives may be met by employing a highly skilled yet underused domestic resource pool; Maximizing the positive effect of employing a previously underused workforce; Minimizing the potential social burden; and Creating an effective channel for corporate social responsibility.

In terms of the importance that vision and values plays in organizational life, leaders need espouse the same ideals as the company to create a work environment that promotes inclusion of people with disabilities (Brite et al., 2015). Values have the greatest impact on organizations when they are shared with organizational stakeholders (Durand et al., 2014), including employees with disabilities (Fujimoto et al., 2014).

When asked about the policies, procedures, and workplace settings that leaders need to establish for employees with high-functioning autism, Participant I stated, "On a vision and values level, having an understanding organization that recognizes the strengths and is willing to address the challenges. That's number one. Without that you can't have anything."



Leaders sometime implement supports and accommodations for employees based on core values and organizational missions (Oswick & Noon, 2014). In the instance of the case study organization, the very foundation and reason for its existence is to provide employment to individuals with autism who need specific workplace supports and accommodations. As discussed in the next emergent theme, autism exhibits some significant challenges with presenting symptoms that, if not mitigated for, could prevent individuals from securing and retaining competitive employment.

### **Emergent Theme Three: Autism Challenges**

As I was coding transcripts and tying physical and nonphysical supports or accommodations to employees, I noticed that leaders and managers portrayed autism in terms of challenges associated with autism challenges, as exemplified in Table 7. Analysis of the data indicated there were no discrepant cases to report associated with this theme. High-functioning autism is a developmental condition that includes significant impairment within social settings, social isolation, and issues associated with managing anxiety, anger, and mood swings (Attwood, 2003). Some employees with autism have difficulty with verbal communication, resulting in an inability to request necessary accommodations (Richards 2012, 2015), or may be afraid to disclose their disability for fear of prejudice, stigma, or harassment (Neely & Hunter, 2014). Data from the present study disconfirms results of the study by Richards (2012) in which organizations that employed individuals with Asperger syndrome placed the burden of disability disclosure on the employee. In the present case study organization, leaders are

cognizant of the autism challenges, and make every effort to anticipate possible support or accommodation needs.

Table 7

Occurrences for Autism Challenges

Codes	Number of Sources	Number of References	% of Total Coverage
Anxiety & mood	1	1	4.55%
Behavioral issues	2	3	13.64%
Drawback to physical accommodation	1	1	4.55%
Executive function	1	1	4.55%
Legal mandates end	1	1	4.55%
Other mental disorders	3	5	22.73%
Prevalence of autism	1	1	4.55%
Sensory processing	1	1	4.55%
Social cues	4	4	18.18%
Underemployment and unemployment	2	4	18.18%
Total	8	22	100%

Disabilities and impairments differ in types and presenting symptoms, such as physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, sight, hearing, and mobility. Autism, which is associated with intellectual, cognitive, and social impairments, represents a disability that affects a segment of the population that benefit from workplace accommodations and support (Baldwin et al., 2014). Disabilities of other types have their own presenting symptoms, such as impaired vision, reduced mobility, or speech (Shuey & Jovic, 2013).

Leaders of the case study organization provide supports and accommodations directly tied to specific symptoms or issues associated with autism. The organization's support staff manual addresses this concern as exemplified in the following statement:

As a member of [Organization's] support team, one of your primary responsibilities will be to work directly with our employees, most who have been

diagnosed with some form of social-communication disorder, including autism.

Aside from social challenges, members of this population frequently have difficulties in areas such as executive functioning (planning, organizing, time management), anxiety and mood disorders, sensory processing, and regulating certain behaviors, all of which may have limited their vocational opportunities.

An internal e-mail between support personnel and the top leaders of the organization contains verbiage associated with mitigating for an employee's anxiety, which states:

[Employee] is going to keep track of his anxiety level <1-10> at the beginning of the day, and again at the end of the day. He's also going to write a short description about what happened throughout the day that might have contributed to his anxiety...then we can assess and figure out if there's a pattern, whether he gets stressed around specific people/during specific times/etc.

When asked about what process determines whether an employee with high-functioning autism needs additional support or accommodation, Participant C stated:

There are situations where it is just one thing. So many of these diagnoses come with just a whole boatload of other things. And so, a lot of our people have autism in addition to something else. They are autistic in addition to and its usually something like anxiety, generalized anxiety or depression, or lot of OCD [obsessive compulsive behavior].

In similar responses to the question regarding what process determines whether an employee with high-functioning autism needs additional support or accommodation,

Participant J stated, “You need to be ready to deal with people with a melancholy and depression,” and Participant I stated:

Not everyone just has autism here. So, they may have comorbid conditions. You deal with ADD [attention deficit disorder] or OCD [obsessive compulsive behavior] or depression, anxiety, so that is something to really look at and one thing we have learned, just recently with this impending government work, is you have to make sure they’re actually diagnosed with autism.

Workplace accommodations and support generally lead to reduced anxiety in the workplace (Bolo et al., 2013). As such, by providing the necessary remedies for the presenting symptoms associated with autism, organizational leaders extract higher levels of productivity from employees while retaining the benefits from labor, which aligns with the conceptual framework related to labor process theory, as stated by Braverman (1975). Similarly, by providing the necessary supports or accommodations to employees with autism, leaders maximize the use of rare resources, which aligns with the conceptual framework related to resource-based theory, as stated by Barney (1991) and Wernerfelt (1984). Providing nonphysical supports to employees with autism is another means by which leaders extract the maximum potential, as discussed next.

#### **Emergent Theme Four: Nonphysical Supports**

Work is the culmination and sum of all efforts put forth by individuals within organizations toward initiating and preserving organizations (Lawrence, Leca, & Zilber, 2013); therefore, leaders must structure, lead, and influence employee’s work and labor processes (Gaines & Domagalski, 1996; Holt & Hvid, 2014). Organizational leaders must

rely on workers to perform their tasks at optimal levels to achieve organizational goals and objectives (Lawrence et al., 2013). As such, leaders need to provide the necessary accommodations and supports to maximize employee productivity (Brook, 2013; Lawrence et al., 2013). Supports and accommodations come in various forms, including nonphysical supports. The present study confirms and extends knowledge related to the findings from Zappella (2015) in which employers who had previous positive experiences hiring individuals with cognitive disabilities will continue to seek out those employees. In the present study, the organizational leaders focused on continuous provision of nonphysical support as a means to maximize employee performance, thus creating a work environment that is conducive for future members of the autistic community.

As I continued analyzing the data, another major theme emerged, that of nonphysical supports for employees with high-functioning autism. As table 8 shows, there were 22 distinct codes associated with this theme. Analysis of the data indicated there were no discrepant cases to report associated with this theme. While each code represents important elements related to how leaders at the case study organization support their autistic employees, my focus will be on the codes with the highest reference percentages: (a) breaks, (b) flex time, (c) interviewing, onboarding, and training, (d) social activities, (e) supports (general), and (f) supportive culture. By providing nonphysical supports to employees with high-functioning autism, leaders in the case study organization are better equipped to extract benefits derived from labor, which aligns with labor process theory, as stated by Braverman (1975).

Table 8  
Occurrences for Nonphysical Supports

Codes	Number of Sources	Number of References	% of Total Coverage
Assessing needs	2	3	1.2%
Behavioral support	1	1	0.4%
Breaks	8	14	5.6%
Check-in meetings	3	5	2.0%
Coaching	2	2	0.8%
Communication system	11	12	4.8%
Counseling support	1	1	0.4%
Flex time	9	14	5.6%
Gender-neutral restrooms	2	2	0.8%
Interviewing, onboarding, and training	9	20	8.0%
Life skills and hygiene	2	2	0.8%
Morale	1	2	0.8%
Noise reduction	1	1	0.4%
Opportunity for growth and advancement	1	1	0.4%
Patience	1	1	0.4%
Recognition and pay	3	3	1.2%
Social activities	13	26	10.4%
Spirit bucks	1	2	0.8%
Structure	7	10	4.0%
Supports-general	12	97	39.0%
Supportive culture	8	29	11.6%
Talking is minimal	1	1	0.4%
Total	22	249	100%

**Breaks.** At some point, all employees need specific supports or accommodations. Employees with disabilities can be more productive by having a conducive and supportive work environment (Stea et al., 2015). Supports in the workplace often lead to improved overall wellbeing (Zheng et al., 2015). Employees with autism often exhibit behavioral issues and poor social interaction skills in the workplace that lead to potential

job loss (Westbrook et al., 2012). To mitigate for behavioral issues, leaders of the case study organization allow and encourage employees to take frequent breaks throughout their shifts to ease tensions and anxieties. Allowable breaks include going for a walk around the block, going to an internally designated ‘decompression room’ where the atmosphere is quiet, and employees can rest from workplace commotion.

Employees with autism also face significant communication challenges. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC, 2016) stated that autism spectrum disorder creates challenges for communication, which also affects behavior. To mitigate for communication deficiencies, leaders created an explicit policy for breaks, as shown in an excerpt from the support staff manual, which states:

From time to time, some employees may need to take a timeout if they become overwhelmed or are exhibiting disruptive behavior. Some employees will recognize this themselves and take a break. Others may need prompting. In some instances, we may need to insist that an employee takes a break. If an employee is resistant, it is best to use unambiguous language, such as “I need you to come with me to the break room now.”

When asked about the workplace policies, procedures, and workplace settings that leaders established to support employees with high-functioning autism, Participant A stated, “We encourage people to take additional breaks, longer breaks when needed, things like that” and “frequent breaks.” Participant C stated, “So if you have somebody who needs frequent sensory breaks, you need to be willing to accommodate that.” Participant D stated:

I mean, they don't want you to go and take an hour nap when there is work to be done, and certainly not on the clock anyway, but there is stuff like that available for people that just kind of need to take a break. They accept that these are issues that come with having people on the spectrum at your place of employ and so they factor in frequent breaks.

When asked about the types of supports provided to employees, Participant B stated:

And the other thing, sometimes it's nice to be able to take a break so we are also allotted a 15 minute walk. We can charge that to the company and we can do that. For a scheduled work shift we have a 15 minute allotted walk. You're taking a break. You're realigning your stimulation and removing yourself from the overstimulation at work.

Along with providing autistic employees with frequent breaks as well and sensory breaks, flexibility in the workplace plays an important role in making sure employees maintain balance. Flexibility, as will be discussed next, encompasses a variety of applicable schedule- and work-related scenarios.

**Flex time.** The second code with a high reference percentage is flex time, that is, flexible work schedules and absence policies. As Idris (2014) noted, leaders can improve employee retention through flexible work schedules. Zheng et al. (2015) concluded that flexibility with respect to work schedules can significantly improve employee work-life balance. When asked what preparations frontline managers need to accommodate employees, Participant A replied, "We don't necessarily expect most Analysts to work



much more than 5-6 hours a day.” As I took field notes and had a general awareness of what was transpiring around me, I overheard one of the support personnel members say to one of the analysts, “if you don’t feel good, it’s perfectly fine for you to go home, so go ahead, and thanks for coming in and trying.” Participant D stated, “The majority of the employees here don’t work full time, like 5 days a week for a number of individual different reasons. They work when they can, and as much as they can.” Participant J, who is one of the two top leaders in the organization stated:

So you have to understand most people cannot work 8 hours a day. That’s the big thing. I’m in touch with many companies all over the world that do similar work to us, and usually half of the people don’t do more than 4 hours a day. So here it started to change and more and more people are doing 6 hours a day, but it’s also the type of work that is really demanding and requires a lot of focus, etc. So, I have to be ready for that. Now, it depends on the work.

When asked about the workplace policies that leaders established to support employees with high-functioning autism, Participant K stated:

There’s also the schedules can be pretty flexible so if people have appointments or whatever, or if they would just prefer to work a few days a week rather than the entire week, those are things that they can do. They are pretty accommodating with time off. Like if you need time off to do something.

Participant F provided further insights as to the flexible and supportive environment:

I haven't worked in a lot of places before this but I think that the one that is most striking to me is the scheduling flexibility. At first it bothered me, the idea that I, people, didn't have a regular routine that they could rely on, because that is something that's very important, but management here is incredibly flexible. If someone has a problem, if someone can't get up that morning, if someone has difficulty getting to work, if someone feels sick, if someone feels not up to coming in-for whatever reason, they can say 'I'm not feeling up to this' or they can say, in the middle of the day to their project manager, 'I'm having trouble focusing on the project I'm working on right now' and they will be given some options. They could go home, or they could move to another project. There are options and not all of those options are 'if you can't work-you can't work-good bye'. That's huge. It's a huge deal and I think it makes people feel safe. The idea that if they have a problem; there are solutions and even if there aren't solutions the administration is going to understand.

When asked how leaders promote support or accommodations for employees with high-functioning autism, Participant F stated:

Part of it is just the flexibility. If I don't feel well, I can call Director of Operations, he's the director of operations. I can call him and say 'I'm not feeling well today. Is there anything you need me to do from home?' Because there is some work I can get done from home. Other testers generally can't, but he always understands. Always. Always. I've never seen him say to someone 'Well we need

you to come in anyway’ or anything like that. The most it will be is ‘well we are going to miss you because your work is important’.

As these previous narratives show, flextime in all its fashions and variations are an essential part of supporting employees with autism. Flexible work schedules (Bolo et al., 2013), flextime, flexible leave schedules (Idris, 2014), workplace flexibility (Kostanjsek et al., 2013), and flexible work hours, schedules and telecommuting (Idris, 2014; Linden, 2014; Linden & Milchus, 2014; Moon et al., 2014) all lead to improved employee performance. Next, I discuss how leaders in the case study organization go about interviewing, onboarding, and training employees.

**Interviewing, onboarding, and training.** Comprehensive training and development programs are essential elements of employee supports (Lancaster & Milia, 2014), which may lead to overall reduced costs associated with hiring and training new employees (Vornholt et al., 2013). Formalized training processes leads to greater job satisfaction (Baumgärtner et al., 2015), improved morale (Tilly, 2013), and alignment with organizational mission, vision, and values (Lancaster & Milia, 2014). As such, the case study organization established a comprehensive training and onboarding program to help employees with autism acclimate to the new environment and work.

An internal document that touches on the overarching problem of high unemployment or underemployment of individuals with autism, states:

[Organization] addresses this problem through

- Vocational Training – teaching job skills that align with the unique capabilities of this population and that harness their strengths (like software testing, data analysis).
- Providing Employment – employing them directly in the fields of software testing and quality assurance, as well as aligning the skills they excel in to the needs of the business community.
- Job Coaching – tools and mentoring that prepare them to be successful in a job environment (both at [Organization] and in the marketplace beyond).

The support staff manual that all leaders, managers, and frontline supervisors adhere to further states:

We receive applications year-round, and bring on candidates in groups of six to eight to participate in a two-week unpaid training/evaluation program, which is run by our QA manager. These sessions will be offered a few times each year.

You may be asked to help out with the training as well.

Content from the organization’s website further elucidates the nature, structure, and intensity of the training program, which states:

Training is provided at no cost. The training program consists of two parts-

a) Two weeks of instruction in the basics of quality assurance (QA): Monday-

Friday, 9 am - 3 pm

b) On-the-job training

The training period is also a time for the candidate to decide whether this type of work is a good fit for him/her and for [Organization] to assess whether the

candidate is a good fit for our team. While most candidates who successfully complete training will be hired by [Organization], the completion of the program does not guarantee employment.

When asked about what process determines whether an employee with high-functioning autism needs additional support or accommodation, Participant C addressed their onboarding process, and stated:

We have a pretty good process for that but I think the key to that is making the choice to continuously work on the process and change it and augment it if we need to. What we do now is we have a pretty lengthy application and it asked all sorts of questions such as ‘have you ever been kicked out of a social program?’ ‘Do you have a support person, therapist, counselor who we can contact if need be?’ There is a consent form they fill out for those. There are several questions that our Human Resource person has come up with that really helps to examine things such as: ‘do you have [further] needs? Do you have any other diagnosis that you want to share with us?’

When asked the same question, Participant H provided further insights as to ongoing evaluation of their training program:

We are working on trying to fine-tune our training process. They used to do it much smaller, individual by individual, and then about a year ago they went more group training. We are trying to fine-tune that process; I don’t think there is one particular process. We are going to a multi-pronged approach where we have the managers from the different disciplines [involved]. Two counselors interview

that person, and the tech people interview them, and then a senior QA interviews them, and then coming together to kind of talk about the feedback that we can provide to the group. Also, we work on the tech training but I think we're also trying to fine tune more of us having exposure to the potential trainees, because it's clear who's going to be a 'superstar' but it's not always clear -from trickling down from the superstars- it's not always clear who's going to be successful here. So we are trying to fine tune that process by having more of us talk with the trainees at the beginning process to ensure more success so that we don't have to put them through 2 weeks of training and then by the second to the last day say what they and we both realize, 'it's not going to work.'

Accommodation for interviews extends beyond traditional mechanisms. For instance, Participant J explained, "When I invite them to an interview I say if you want to be interviewed with a parent, with a social worker, with another family member or friend, I have no problem." As the previous narrative shows, the interview, onboarding, and training processes are crucial to components of establishing a supportive work environment. Next, I discuss an additional support that leaders provide to their employees in the form of social activities.

**Social activities.** Another effective support for employees with autism is to focus on the social aspects in and out of the workplace, and on overall employee wellbeing. Employees who disclose their disabilities run the risk of exclusion in the workplace (Baldrige & Swift, 2013). Additionally, one of the presenting symptoms of autism includes significant impairment within social settings (Attwood, 2003; CDC, 2016). For

this reason, leaders within the case study organization established a formal employee-socializing event called “Stepping Up and Out.” A document artifact from the organization states:

In addition to social-communication challenges, many of our employees have experienced social isolation, rejection and bullying. As a result, they may avoid social situations, which further halts the development and maintenance of social skills. In addition, some employees may have a distrustful attitude toward others in social settings (e.g. instinctively perceive laughter and jokes as malicious, and/or lack self-esteem.) [Organization] offers a variety of opportunities to socialize and build social skills through our Stepping Up and Out program, which is also open to members of the local autism community.

The organization’s website outlines monthly social activities that are available to all employees, which states, “We also provide social and team building activities through our Stepping Up & Out program.” When asked what types of support or accommodation the organization provide to employees with high-functioning autism, Participant A stated, “Although we do have our social group and things like that too, if they want to have help to try and develop those social skills.” Participant I stated:

An additional accommodation is that we’ll have group lunches for special events and that’s also to build community. So many of the people are isolated and food is easy to bring people together. We have group meetings and do ‘ice breakers’ and sometimes use food. What are you going to talk about? Your favorite food or least favorite food to go around.

When asked how leaders promote support and accommodations for employees, Participant D stated:

They have a whole bunch of social programs too. That's a very important component that sort of parallels with the work aspect. That is one thing that really sets the company apart. There are a number of different things that they do-group outings, and stuff like that.

When asked what other types of support leaders offer to employees with high-functioning autism, Participant H stated:

In the last half year, we've started what we call 'lunch and learns' where our analysts who have a special talent, or special area of interest, if they want to share that with the rest of the staff, and we've found that's been really successful. People are sharing things about their life [such as] 'lessons learned along the way' and 'how to use technology to acquire a foreign language'.

The previous narratives and data show the importance of establishing structured social activities to help employees with autism overcome their social anxieties and get better connected with fellow workers. Social activities in the work environment, and outside of the work environment, help employees connect with each other to share common experiences. Next, I discuss other general supports that employees receive.

**Supports-general.** As I continued coding the data, I uncovered supports of a general nature that did not fit a specific code. These data points focused on an underlying philosophy and overall organizational awareness about employees with autism and varying approaches to supporting and accommodating them. The idea is to create an



environment whereby all employees can reach their full potential and capitalize on their strengths, as stated by Kalargyrou (2014). Leaders need to focus on removing barriers associated with structure (resources, costs) and disposition (attitudes, training, experience, skill) toward employees with disabilities (Kalargyrou, 2014). Leaders need to exude empathy, relay their willingness to provide support and accommodations, and recognize that individuals with disabilities face significant barriers in employment and at their places of employment (Baldrige & Swift, 2013).

An example of the overarching environment of general support is an excerpt from the support staff manual, which states:

Support staff may need to show employees how to use the equipment and encourage them to use as needed. Please be mindful, however, that some employees may attach a stigma toward sensory equipment, or anything they might perceive as infantilizing or for people with “special needs.” We must be respectful of the employee’s feelings and never pressure them to do anything they do not want to do.

When asked what process determines whether an employee with high-functioning autism needs additional support or accommodation, Participant A replied:

We worked with a University to put in a model of support where we would just meet with people. We kind of classified them in terms of where their [analysts] needs are. They either meet with a support person monthly, every other week or weekly. One of the first things we ask is ‘How’s it going? How’s everything at work?’ And if they give feedback where it indicates they may need an additional

support, we would do that. But I would say most of the things that come up are if someone's getting upset or angry – we pick up on it right away because we can see it or the other employees are telling us somebody's doing something and this is making me upset. And they know they can come to us and tell us these sorts of things. It's not a very formal process.

When asked what other types of support are offered to employees with high-functioning autism, Participant K replied:

[T]hey have a regular check-in meetings. This is kind of abstract and should apply to anyone, not just those with autism, but I hear it...sometimes people wind up getting fired for mistakes that they made that they weren't ever even really told about so that's bad practice for anyone, but especially for people who might not always be totally familiar with the professional rules of interaction or things like that so I know that if anyone has any issues like that, someone will take them aside and explain it so that they can correct what they're doing or if they need an accommodation to like help with that, [if is provided]. If someone is disruptive, [there are] alternative things that they can do.

Participant H stated:

Especially [Program Services Specialist] and I and some of the others have helped people in the past find apartments when they were looking at being without, we've helped people with insurance issues, we just kind of help. We try to keep with work related issues but once in a while if someone is having a significant issue we will jump in and try to help them problem solve.

With respect to a general environment where employees with high-functioning autism feel respected, Participant K stated:

If there is a conflict between me and the autism specialist, etc., when employees are disrespectful to me, screams at me, or things like this, I don't care. [Social Worker] and [Sr. QA Analyst] do care and they say this is unacceptable and they have to learn it is unacceptable and I totally disagree. I say I am a punching bag, and they need me to be there to be punched, that is ok.

I asked a follow-up question related to leader's efforts to retain employees and that perhaps retention is not their main focus, to which Participant I replied:

We lose a lot of our senior QA analyst because they move on. And that is part of our mission. It's hard. It's to help them get gainful and meaningful employment. For some, it's here. For others it's 'now I feel really good with my skills and I'm going to go out and get a corporate job where maybe I'll be paid more'.

Participant G stated:

And so there still is all of that, but it's also you're a lot less likely here to actually have to undergo some sort of disciplinary procedure than you would be elsewhere. Because here it's going to be more about 'ok let's try to learn coping skills, and learn people skills, and learn whatever it is that you need to learn to be able to function in the work environment rather than saying 'you're not functioning, you're going to have to go now.'

Participant D stated:

They [management] try to make it clear from the outset if you have any concerns or questions you can talk to any of us. If we put you on a project, especially as a new employee when you are trying to get [to know each other] and you don't like it or you're having some kind of personality conflict, come talk to us about it.

Don't just suffer in silence and be miserable because that doesn't help anybody.

As these previous participant statements show, the top leaders of the case study organization created an overarching supportive and accommodating atmosphere that positively affects employees with autism. This overarching supportive and accommodating atmosphere segues into the final dimension of nonphysical support, and that is the organization's supportive culture.

**Supportive culture.** Certain organizational climates lend themselves to positive results, and leaders who are cognizant of the potential benefits focus their attention on capitalizing on these positive results. Creation of a positive and supportive organizational culture is an essential element for supporting and accommodating employees (Blattner & Walter, 2015). Leaders need to create and maintain an organizational culture that is accepting of people with disabilities, because organizational norms and values predispose the organization to inclusion and support (Kulkarni, 2013). Organizational climate directly affects workers' performance particularly in organizations that foster an inclusive diversity climate (Boehm et al., 2014; Erickson et al., 2014; Gröschl, 2013).

Benefits derived from creating a supportive culture include competitive and financial advantage (Richard et al., 2013), higher levels of creativity and innovation (Chrobot-Mason & Aramovich, 2013), improved employee performance and

commitment (Boehm & Dwertmann, 2015), and a unique organizational climate that competitors cannot easily replicate (Heffernan et al., 2016; Houtenville & Kalargyrou, 2015; Montani et al., 2014). As I coded various data sources and analyzed results, I began to uncover an underlying culture of support for employees with high-functioning autism. Content from the case study organization's website illustrates this in the following statements:

[We] provid[e] our Test Engineers with a combination of intensive training, structure, and support to mitigate potential workplace challenges. Individualized and extensive hands-on training. Ongoing supervision, training and support. Supportive work environment managed by autism specialists. Employees are expected to be 90-95% independent, needing only very limited support. However, our accommodating and understanding environment (including a sensory break-room, fidget cubes, etc.) is designed to help alleviate stress. We also provide social and team building activities through our Stepping Up & Out program.

When asked what policies, procedures, and workplace settings that leaders establish for supporting individuals with high-functioning autism, Participant E replied:

A procedure that we have in place is we have on site social worker to help provide free support to our staff, due to the sensory needs of some individuals it is extremely beneficial toward their own success and able to stay focused on our work. Not letting other aspects that may be less important take over- such as ruminating thoughts, potentially. The actual setting of our office, of having a comfortable atmosphere where people could be open with each other and share

their thoughts. For example, I had a meeting this morning with an analyst that wasn't feeling very strongly about the work they were doing and they were worried that if they weren't to do this work, that they might be let go-which was the furthest from the truth. It was good that they spoke up to me about how they felt in that they felt comfortable in the atmosphere to speak to me because that tells me I need to get them onto another project. So that is one thing here, that culture. I think the policy of how we treat everybody the same is also another thing. We don't judge books by their cover. You know, everyone is treated the same, they go through the same training. They go through the same orientation. There's not ways we're treating people different. Everybody is included to do things.

I posed a follow-up statement of clarification to Participant E; there is an overarching culture that leaders established to make the work environment comfortable, to which he responded:

Right, we are sitting in a room right now, that we call a sensory room. If someone were to have sensory overload we have different things in here to help you get your mind off what's happening and relax a little bit. There are snacks being provided. There's encouragement to go take walks outside, we have a stepping up and up program on Sundays that motivates people to be more social with each other. So there are a lot of opportunities that are provided here to make people feel welcomed and wanted and needed.

When asked what policies, procedures, and workplace settings that leaders establish for supporting individuals with high-functioning autism, Participant I replied:

The number one thing is just an understanding environment where people feel that they can be accepted. On a vision and values level, having an understanding organization that recognizes the strengths and is willing to address the challenges. That's number one. Without that you can't have anything. Then you need to have written procedures, written guidelines, one and one when needed, and I think the counseling really helps not that everyone needs it but it's available when they need it and if our social workers isn't here it might be someone else. They might come to me or to [Project Manager] or to [Program Services Specialist]. Giving people hope, and that we value you, every employee needs to feel valued and accepted.

When I asked this same participant about the types of support to the physical environment they provide, he stated, "So I feel like they are really thinking about covering all the bases here of something that someone might need." Participant E had similar sentiments when she stated:

It's so important to create an environment where people are comfortable- everyone is comfortable- and sometimes that's not possible but in a lot of cases it is. If administrators are flexible and thoughtful and try and understand the people that are working for them and don't shy away from the idea of disability. The longer people have been here, the more understanding and supportive they are. As new staff come in they kind of increase in understanding and supportiveness- kind

of through osmosis almost...just picking up on all of that accepting and positive energy.

When asked what process determines whether an employee with high-functioning autism needs additional support or accommodation, Participant G replied:

From an organizational standpoint, it's just creating an environment where people are going to feel like its ok to say 'hey, this is something that's bothering me'... especially since here the whole structure is to support people on the autism structure, it doesn't seem like it's a necessary step to have anything too formal, because it's just implied that they're going to do what they can to make sure you have accommodations. Because of course they would.

The web content and participant statements above give credence to the leader's singular focus of creating a work environment that is conducive, supportive, and accommodating for employees with autism. As noted previously, this singular focus emanates from the organization's mission statement, "[Organization] empowers individuals on the autism spectrum to fulfill their potential through meaningful employment combined with social opportunity." This mission makes it possible for leaders to provide various accommodations to the physical work environment, which I discuss next.

### **Emergent Theme Five: Physical Accommodations**

Support and accommodation for employees of any ability or disability may be in the form of altering the physical aspects of the workplace to mitigate for the employee's deficiency (Stein et al., 2014). Certain aspects of the physical work environment such as



lighting, acoustics (López & Keenan, 2014; Richards, 2015), noise, smells, and proximity to coworkers (Kenyon, 2015; Richards, 2015) are barriers that can impede optimal performance and can cause an undue amount of stress (Kenyon, 2015), particularly for employees with autism where these physical factors directly relate to autism challenges, as described earlier. The present study confirms findings from López and Keenan (2014) which showed the importance of training employers and their staff to recognize various facets of disabilities, and to provide training related to acceptable accommodations for individual employees with autism. Leaders who engage in positive diversity management initiatives that are inclusive toward individuals with disabilities, create a work environment where employees gain feelings of inclusion and appreciation, and the organization benefits through ingenuity and increased productivity (Chrobot-Mason & Aramovich, 2013). This aligns with labor process theory in which management seeks to extract the highest possible effort from labor in return for benefits derived from labor, as stated by Braverman (1975).

As I continued analyzing the data, another major theme emerged, that of physical supports for employees with autism. As table 9 shows, there were 31 distinct codes associated with this theme. Analysis of the data indicated there were no discrepant cases to report associated with this theme. Each code represents important elements related to how leaders at the case study organization provide accommodations or alterations to the physical environment. However, my focus will be on the codes with the highest reference percentages or perhaps the most meaningful: (a) decompress room, (b) fidget toys, (c)

headphones, (d) individualized accommodation, (e) quiet break room, (f) social break room, and (g) the Tardis.

Table 9

## Occurrences for Physical Accommodations

Codes	Number of Sources	Number of References	% of Total Coverage
Art therapy	1	1	0.3%
Blanket, pillow, couch	6	11	3.7%
Casual dress code	1	2	0.7%
Customized job	1	1	0.3%
Decompress rooms	15	23	7.7%
Dim lights	7	11	3.7%
Ear plugs	1	1	0.3%
Exercise bike	3	4	1.3%
Fidget toys	13	23	7.7%
Food and snacks	3	5	1.7%
Foosball table	1	1	0.3%
Furniture	5	6	2.0%
Hammock	6	8	2.7%
Headphones	10	23	7.7%
Individualized accommodation	8	20	6.7%
Massagers	6	8	2.7%
Open areas	3	5	1.7%
Parking	1	1	0.3%
Quiet break room	11	25	8.3%
Quiet environment	3	6	2.0%
Quiet spaces	12	23	7.7%
Slack room	3	7	2.3%
Sleep mask	2	2	0.7%
Social break room	9	16	5.3%
Tardis	6	15	5.0%
Transportation	2	2	0.7%
Weighted vest and blanket	8	12	4.0%
Workspace area-cubicle	10	16	5.3%
Workspace area-private office	3	4	1.3%
Workspace area-open	8	10	3.3%
Workspace area-different types	6	8	2.7%
Total	48	300	100%

**Decompress rooms.**

Individuals with autism have difficulties managing anxiety, anger, and mood swings, and as such, require opportunities to decompress from those situations (Attwood, 2003). Leaders at the case study organization recognized these presenting symptoms in their autistic employees and made accommodations to mitigate for potential negative impacts. The organization's website provides insights as to the types of support it offers to employees with autism. One section in particular stated, "...our accommodating and understanding environment (including a sensory break-room, fidget cubes, etc.) is designed to help alleviate stress."

When asked about the procedures, policies, or workplace settings that leaders established to support employees, Participant C replied:

In terms of settings; having the actual physical space to accommodate those with certain sensory needs is really important. You just saw someone in here with headphones, because his back was hurting. His body is very sensitive. His physical body is very sensitive so we have a nice couch for them to sit on if it becomes too much.

When asked what types of support or accommodation to the physical environment the organization provides to employees with autism, Participant E replied, "We have rooms like this that offer sensory items that you wouldn't even think other offices would be conscious of the need for that." Participant I responded to the same question:

That's a lounge, a 'chilax' area, where people can, you know, this is, I mean, we did this in the beginning. It was in the first room with the blue covers on the lights, if you look at the training room, different chair types.

My personal observations of the physical work environment, as well as photographs of two decompression rooms, exemplify the organization's focus on modifying the physical environment to accommodate employees. The first decompression room is a private room that contains a couch, pillow, blanket, conference table, and various fidget toys and other sensory reduction items, such as a weighted vest, foot and body massagers, earplugs, and therapeutic putty. The second decompression room, which I will describe in more detail later, is the Tardis, a replica of the fictional time travel booth featured in the British Broadcasting Company's television series Doctor Who (Moffat, 2017). The Tardis features a small, unlit, freestanding booth with a soft chair and a stand to place a drink on. Employees who encounter stress, anxiety, or overstimulation can go into the Tardis to decompress and have some solitude. These rooms further exemplify the length to which leaders provide unusual accommodations to their employees. The next feature of the accommodations to the physical work environment is the provision of various fidget toys.

**Fidget toys.** Individuals with autism tend to experience sensory overloads in response to the myriad of sensory stimuli from the environment. The resulting behaviors when an autistic person reaches a level of overstimulation typically manifest themselves in irritability, outbursts, and difficulty communicating (Marsh Read, 2014). The introduction of fidget toys helps reduce overstimulation symptoms (Marsh Read, 2014).

Leaders within the case study organization recognized the importance of providing various types of fidget toys, because many of the autistic employees were accustomed to the use of such toys during childhood, and continued use brings a sense of comfort and ease.

When asked about policies, procedures, and workplace settings that leaders established for supporting individuals with autism, Participant A stated, “We have fidget toys, anything like that.” During my interview with Participant K, who self-disclosed as being on the autism spectrum, he stated:

There are a variety of things, like some of it is just like accepting harmless differences that might be considered unprofessional in other organizations, but aren't really like that. Like I have a fidget toy that I play with and I don't know-maybe that would be seen as unprofessional in some jobs but it really helps me concentrate.

During my observation of the physical work environment, I noticed a variety of fidgets in a box located in the private decompression room. Additionally, Participant H showed me her desk drawer, which was full of various types of fidget toys that any employee could request, as shown in Figure 2. Later, during my interview with Participant H, she stated, “We have a variety of what we call fidgets that are hand held balls or squeeze-y items that help people regulate and get out their anxiety.” Participant I stated, “We have bean bags...we have a lot of fidget materials. They are sitting right here,” referring to the private, decompression room. The support staff manual and a section of the organization's website also references “various fidgets” and “fidget

cubes...designed to help alleviate stress.” Participant C stated, “...we have all sorts of fidgets, a couple of those spinners, we have fidget cubes, we have squeeze things, all sorts of items to help with sensory stimuli and overload.” Participant E stated, “There are items to hold on to too squeeze and to shake.” It is common practice for employees to use fidget toys and accessories as needed to help relieve stress and to aid with or improve concentration. The use of fidget toys is not only tolerated, but also encouraged, and employees who use them regularly do not face any negative impacts from their superiors.



*Figure 2.* Fidget toy drawer.

Fidget toys and devices represent merely a portion of the accommodations that leaders within the case study organization provide and promote. Next, I discuss the use of

noise cancelling headphones that reduce ambient noise, and how employees benefit from wearing headphones.

**Headphones.** Excessive noise in the workplace can impede individuals with autism from performing at optimum levels and can cause an undue amount of stress (Kenyon, 2015). Noises of various types and sources, such as abrupt and sudden noises, high-pitched sounds, and various background sounds typical of work and social settings can severely hamper an autistic employee's performance, which can also lead to mental health issues and emotional disturbances (Richards, 2015). Acoustics in contemporary work environments often are not conducive to individuals with autism (López & Keenan, 2014). Abrupt, consistent, or even irregular noises can cause distractions for individuals with autism (Kenyon, 2015). Changing the work environment for employees with autism significantly diminishes the stressors that impede performance (Kenyon, 2015). To mitigate for what many would perceive as normal workplace noises, leaders of the case study organization not only provide noise-cancelling headphones, but also promote their constant use.

During my observation of the physical work environment and during my interviews with participants, I noted that many employees wear some type of headphones to help block out excessive ambient noise; a practice that leaders not only allow, but also strongly encourage. As I compiled field notes about the general atmosphere within the facility, I observed an overly quiet work environment. The only noise I would hear were the clicks on computer keyboards, doors opening and closing, and an occasional conversation between employees and their supervisors.

The support staff manual states, “In the office, we have several pieces of sensory equipment we acquired based on consultations with occupational therapists, most of which are located in the main break room...Earplugs and noise-cancelling headphones.” When asked about the types of support or accommodation to the physical environment the organization provides to employees with autism, Participant A stated, “We have lots of headphones available. Some people have their own noise cancelling headphones and we have some that are noise cancelling, however, they are not spectacular and they allow some noise to come through.”

When asked about policies, procedures, and workplace settings that leaders established for supporting individuals with high-functioning autism, Participant C stated, “Make it absolutely 100 percent fine for people to put on headphones, if they need to.” Participant D, who during the interview also self-disclosed as being on the autism spectrum noted, “But fortunately our management here, they hand out noise cancelling headphones to anybody that asks for a pair, so that’s useful provided I don’t have to interact with someone.” He went on to state:

So all of those things are very useful and they don’t necessarily even cost a lot.

The headphones are pricey because they are noise cancelling, but just in terms of that, not everybody needs a lounge chair, or something to be comfortable. So, there is a capital concern if you are going to invest in throw pillows, etc. But sometimes it doesn’t take very much to make a big difference.

Similarly, Participant E stated, “There are headphones in here that you can put on.” Participant F stated, “...they are provided with sound cancelling head phones.”



Participant H stated, “We encourage earphones if that’s helpful. It is very accepted here for people to wear earphones.” Participant K stated, “And there are things like people can wear noise cancelling headphones and those help them focus or things like that...if you want to wear noise cancelling headphones that’s fine.” While normal work environments would not approve of employees wearing headphones, leaders within the case study organization strongly promote and encourage their use. Next, I discuss the importance of individualized accommodations and how tailoring supports for the individual employee is critical to their success.

**Individualized accommodation.** Just as every able-bodied person is different, so too disabled individuals are different, and each disability requires specific and individualized supports or accommodations. This is particularly true for individuals with autism, because they often exhibit a variety of symptoms that require mitigation. Employers should tailor appropriate accommodations and supports to each individual’s needs to maximize their strengths while simultaneously minimizing their weaknesses (Warnier et al., 2013). Individualized work life balance plans are most effective when leaders tailor such programs to individual workers and their specific needs (Zheng et al., 2015).

During my interview with Participant I, I asked what preparations are necessary for frontline managers to accommodate the workplace needs of individuals with high-functioning autism, to which she replied, “Well first of all you have to educate [managers, frontline supervisors] about that every person is an individual; you see one

person with autism, you've seen one person with autism. However, here are some general things." The support staff manual states:

Also, please keep in mind that each employee at [Organization] is a unique person with their own unique strengths and challenges. Therefore, we take a highly individualized approach to working with them. It is crucial that we communicate with employees frequently and encourage them to provide us with feedback on how they are doing and ways we can better provide support. Our goal is not to change our employees, but to help them develop and reach their own goals.

When asked what process determines whether an employee with high-functioning autism needs additional support or accommodation, Participant D replied:

Again, I don't know if there is necessarily a formal step wise procedure in place because everybody is different and what works for one employee would likely not work for everybody so it's a lot of the time it's very personalized in terms of whatever a person needs for optimal function. It could be anything. I used to work with a fellow in a different test group. He was great, a great trouble shooter and tester and all but after about 4 hours he really, by his own admission, mentally he got fried. So, even though we would have loved to have used him 7 or 8 hours a day, he was only really good for 4 and at least he was honest about that.

Participant E stated, "Again it's kind of like this whole spectrum conversation it's not something that applies to everybody. Everybody is individually unique and you need to learn about that individual to discover what those needs are." Participant E went on to state:

I can think in my mind of an individual that was like that where they had to warm up to me to feel comfortable. But then there are people I have met that that's their nature to share anything that's uncomfortable to them with you. So it's really different for every single person. It's really interesting and having that open conversation is I think a need for everybody that could be applied that you have to have that. You have to have that. You have to find out about them and pry a little bit more.

Participant F, who during the interview self-disclosed as being on the autism spectrum, stated:

I actually have a desk in the corner so I can have a cubby hole underneath it if I need to be underneath a desk. I haven't used it since another employee commented on it but my physical determination in the office was actually determined by a request I had for sensory reasons. Well, it's kind of a sensory thing. If I'm feeling overwhelmed by just anxiety, having physical barriers on most sides is very comfortable. So as a child I would go underneath my desk –I would go underneath desks in other places if my classroom didn't have the space. I'd hide in my locker in middle school, so you know having a space like that in my work place- even if I don't use it- it's comforting.

Similarly, Participant G provided further insights into the need for, and importance of, individualized accommodations:

Realizing that the needs for each person is unique just because autism affects and expresses differently for each person. So understanding what sort of needs that

person is going to have. I think that a lot of it is also in realizing that any sort of behaviors that might seem eccentric or out of place there probably is just sort of some need for an accommodation there. So if somebody seems to get really moody for some reason but only when they're in a certain room. You may think 'oh that's really strange' but it might be that that room has florescent lights that are buzzing. A lot of the times you might not even be consciously aware of what it is that is causing the overstimulation. So it's just a matter of keying into things like that. If [an individual] is behaving in a way that's really strange, let's look and see what external contributing factors might be present.

Participant I, who is one of the top leaders and original founder of the organization stated, "You really have to know each of your employees. Really know them." Similarly, Participant J, who is the other top leader and co-founder of the organization, stated:

One of the things that [Executive Director] likes to quote is that 'you met one person on the spectrum, you met one person on the spectrum'. So, what accommodation that you can give is the fact that you need to be ready to absorb some insults. You need to be ready to deal with people with a melancholy and depression. And most of it some kind of physical [manifestations] whether its noise or sound or light, etc. It doesn't manifest itself all the time, that's another problem. So you need to give this kind of accommodation but it depends on the individual.

As the previous narratives show, individualized accommodations are the norm at the case study organization. Each employee is treated differently, and their individual deficiencies receive individual accommodations. In addition to individualized accommodations to employees, leaders of the case study organization provided additional accommodations. As will be discussed next, providing employees with a quiet, no talking allowed break room, provides another important piece of the accommodation puzzle.

**Quiet break room and social break room.** For individuals with cognitive disabilities, it is important for leaders to match that individual with a suitable job, and in general create appropriate organizational conditions that foster productivity and output (Zappella, 2015). Virtually all employees experience work related stress at one time or another (Beheshtifar & Nazarian, 2013). Mindfulness is a way to mitigate workplace stressors that might interfere with work-life balance and overall wellbeing (Michel et al., 2014). As Attwood (2003) explained in his definition of autism, such individuals have significant impairment within social settings. As such, the leaders of the case study organization established two separate break rooms for all employees; a social break room where talking is not only allowed, but encouraged, and another quiet break room where no talking is allowed. This creates yet another quiet space where employees can decompress if they are feeling anxious, overstimulated, or stressed out.

In a sample e-mail communication from a leader to managers and frontline supervisors, the leader stated the following:

We are taking a cue from the [A] train system that maintains a quiet car during rush hours on each train.

We are also trying to alleviate noise disruptions to staff that are at work. This is especially challenging on the “older” side of our office as the workspaces are more dense and are closer to the kitchen. Also, we cannot totally seal off the room as there is an opening above the door.

As our “rush hour” for lunch/breaks for staff spans almost our entire work day, we have designated one kitchen for conversation and one for peace and quiet for those needing an auditory break or for those who like to read or do a quiet activity on break.

To that end, we have posted signs in our two break rooms/kitchens that read:

#### Little Kitchen: Peace & Quiet Zone

This lunchroom has been designated as a spot for staff who choose to take a quiet snack or meal break. Please help by maintaining a low tone of voice and keeping your conversations to a minimum. If you seek to have a conversation/discussion with others, we ask that you kindly move to the other breakroom/kitchen. Thank you!

#### Big Kitchen: Conversation Spot

This lunchroom has been designated as a spot for staff who choose to take a snack or meal and want to have conversations with colleagues. The door should remain closed while people are eating to minimize noise and so that you may speak freely. If you are seeking some auditory rest, please use the other kitchen break room. Thanks!

When asked about what types of support or accommodation to the physical environment leaders provide to employees with autism, Participant B replied:

And we have 2 lunch rooms. We have the social lunchroom and we also have the quiet lunchroom. Because sometimes you just want to have a quiet lunch. So instead of having to worry about it, we just have one of each.

Participant C responded to the same question, stating, “We have a conversation lunchroom and a quiet lunchroom so people who don’t want to talk to anyone during lunch they can go into the quiet lunchroom. People who do want to talk can go into the conversation lunchroom.” Similarly, Participant E stated, “We have a social and non-social lunchroom. So if you don’t feel like talking you can go into a non-social one and if you feel like talking to people you can go to the social lunchroom.” Lastly, Participant I stated, “Having a noisy kitchen and a quiet kitchen just if you need to tune out everyone and play on your game and just decompress.”

As these sample narratives show, providing autistic employees with both quiet and conversational break rooms is critical to their workplace wellbeing. Stress and overstimulation can lead to attitude or behavioral issues, so leaders provide these separate rooms as a means to mitigate for those stressors. Next, I discuss the nature of one more quiet zone—the Tardis—and how it symbolizes all that is possible in terms of providing supports and accommodations to employees.

**The Tardis.** Certain aspects of an employment work environment produce excessive noise (Kenyon, 2015; Richards, 2015), which can become barriers that impede individuals with autism from performing at optimum levels and can cause an undue

amount of stress (Kenyon, 2015). Employees with autism often experience issues associated with managing anxiety, anger, and mood swings (Attwood, 2003). Employees who receive some form of accommodation to mitigate for their disorders experience a reduction in anxiety (Bolo et al., 2013). Well-proportioned and designed physical workspaces improve employee perceptions of the organizational support (Sadatsafavi et al., 2015).

Although employees within the case study organization do not use the Tardis on a regular basis, it stands as a beacon of what is possible, as a symbol of the leaders' vision for supporting and accommodating employees and all their individual needs and differences. It is unlikely that a more striking symbolism exists within the case study organization. Figure 3 are photographs I took of the Tardis during the time I facilitated observations of the physical environment.



*Figure 3.* The Tardis.



When asked about policies, procedures, and workplace settings that leaders established for supporting individuals with high-functioning autism, Participant A stated, “We have the Tardis which not very many people use but it’s dark, it’s quiet.” When asked about the types of support or accommodation to the physical environment that leaders provide to employees with high-functioning autism, the same Participant A stated:

It is meant to be a cool down room for anyone who may need it. If they are feeling a little overwhelmed they could go in there. There is a small light; they of course don’t have to turn it on. It really doesn’t get used very much. I think because people don’t want to be seen going into it. It does get used every once in a while. But it is really meant to be a very small quiet room. Some individuals on the spectrum, depending on the degree they are feeling overwhelmed [with symptoms of] tightness, they actually appreciate the Tardis.

I asked Participant C if she had ever seen anyone use the Tardis, to which she replied, “No, maybe one person? That is underused space and I don’t know why no one uses it. We are trying to set it up as an actual work station. Because right now it’s a really cool decoration.” This same Participant asked me if I went inside the Tardis, to which I replied I did not. She went on to state:

It’s great. I mean if you go in there, it’s not sound-proof but it’s dark, you’re enclosed, and there’s plenty of space. We do have one employee who regularly goes in there to do sort of meditative exercises. But we are trying to turn it into an alternative work space.

As the previous participant narratives show, accommodations within the physical environment encompass a variety of dimensions. No single facet applies universally to all employees, but each accommodation makes it possible for autistic employees to function at optimal levels, or at least function to the best of their abilities. Modifications to the physical environment emanate not only from the organization's mission statement, but also from their explicit policies, procedures, and means for funding various aspects of employee needs, as will be discussed next.

### **Emergent Theme Six: Policies, Procedures, and Funding**

The emergent view of disability is that of recognizing disability as another aspect of diversity in the workplace. Leaders need to focus on removing barriers toward employees with disabilities (Kalargyrou, 2014). Leaders' strategies for accommodating and supporting all employees should include organizational policies and practices that capitalize on employee strengths and minimize their weaknesses (Harter & Adkins, 2015; Warnier et al., 2013). Policies related to these strategies are comprised of recruitment, employment, accommodation, accessibility, retention, advancement, funding, pre-employment screenings, and case-by-case mechanisms that are necessary for accommodating employees (Erickson, 2013; Erickson et al., 2014). The present study confirms the findings from Erickson et al. (2014) which indicated that employers are concerned about the costs of accommodations, and that a percentage of employers have the requisite funds to provide necessary accommodations. These findings are based on established organizational policies and procedures related to supporting and accommodating employees with disabilities. Legislation does not adequately address the

needs of disabled individuals (Santuzzi et al., 2014). To maximize the impact of disability policies and procedures, leaders need to exude empathy, communicate their willingness to provide requisite support and accommodations, and recognize that individuals with disabilities face significant barriers at their places of employment (Baldrige & Swift, 2013).

In seeking to understand the strategies that leaders within the case study organization engaged in to support and accommodate employees with autism, I analyzed codes assigned to interview transcripts, internal communications, and document data. Analysis of the data indicated there were no discrepant cases to report associated with this theme. I noticed some recurring topics detailing specific policies and procedures as to specific supports and accommodations, and as to how the organization funds some of the supports. Internal e-mails and other documents also corroborated the interview data. This aligns with resource-based theory, in that leaders create policies and procedures that specifically help a rare resource, that is, employees with autism, as stated by Barney (1991) and Wernerfelt (1984). Table 10 depicts the sixth overarching theme related to policies, procedures, and funding associated with provisions for autistic employees. My focus will be on the codes with the highest occurrence percentages.

Table 10

## Occurrences for Policies, Procedures, and Funding

Codes	Number of Sources	Number of References	% of Total Coverage
Federal contracts	1	1	2.44%
Foundations and grants	1	3	7.32%
Management preparation	7	14	38%
Manual-an autistic view of employment	1	1	3%
Manual-fact sheets about autism	1	1	3%
Philanthropy	1	1	3%
Poster banner	1	1	3%
Resource allocation	1	1	3%
Retention	7	12	32%
Strategic planning	1	1	3%
Supports for managers	3	5	14%
Total	23	37	100%

**Foundations and grants.** The case study organization is not-for-profit, relying in part on revenues generated from their contract services to cover manager and employee salaries, and on external philanthropic funds acquired from various private sources, foundations, and grants to fund support personnel and various accommodations. All of the information related to funding came from one of the top leaders of the organization. When I asked Participant J about the types of support or accommodation to the physical environment the organization provides to employees with high-functioning autism, he stated:

[W]hen we started—luckily for us—the healthcare foundation of [city] gave us money to hire such a person [support personnel]. Not a full salary but a big chunk of it. Maybe close to 50%. Now at least one of the people that we support is being

financed by donation from a foundation. So it's very important that foundations will help companies by giving them the money to hire people that can help.

There isn't such a single one [autism] specialist, social worker or something to meet with the people, so if you hire two people, and he hires two people, and you cannot put the burden on the company alone. You need to educate the charitable foundations that there is a need for such a thing, and private companies and small ones already struggle with money. It's not [large tech company or large search engine company] or something. They need help for this.

When I asked about his role in providing support or accommodation to employees with high-functioning autism, he replied, "Before, I was in charge of everything. [Executive Director] used to do the work from home, just the money type stuff, and the foundation requests and the grant requests, etc." As the preceding narrative shows, funds obtained from foundations and grants are critical to the organization and leaders' ability to hire support personnel. Next, I discuss the importance of preparing managers and frontline supervisors for the challenges they face when supporting and accommodating employees with autism.

**Management preparation.** As Lancaster and Milia (2014) noted, it is important that leaders develop comprehensive training and learning programs that align with organizational mission, vision, and values as a means of supporting all employees. Leaders bear the responsibility of educating and training all employees, including management, on issues related to disability and inclusion in the workplace (Kalargyrou, 2014).

In an internal e-mail between support personnel, the job coach listed two books that he was required to read in preparation for his support role over employees with autism, which stated, “[Executive Director] recommended a few books, which I skimmed/read: Asperger’s on the Job (I read a lot of this book), The Hamburger Syndrome (skimmed through most of it).” When asked what preparations are necessary for frontline managers to accommodate the workplace needs of individuals with high-functioning autism, Participant F stated:

Definitely being prepared helps. The more organized. When we are training people on the [name] project, if they come in and you don’t know who’s doing the training and you don’t know what systems they are training on and you don’t have anything set up-it takes longer and the trainee gets frustrated. They ask a ton of questions that aren’t always answerable. The set-up takes a while-there’s criticism and frustration- it becomes a very difficult situation. Whereas, if people come in and things are organized and the questions can be answered, then it’s easier for everyone. So having that planning in place-that structure-is such a big deal, for trainees especially, but also for long term employees, just knowing and being able to tell someone where they are working that day, and what they are working on [is helpful].

When asked the same question, Participant G stated, “I think that a lot just in understanding what high-functioning autism is and how it works.” This illustrates the importance of teaching incoming manager or frontline supervisors about autism in general. Participant H stated:

I think if they haven't come from a place of some training and working with people on the spectrum than they need to read the materials that are prepared here or they need to school themselves with some readings that have been recommended by the managers. I think there's also those of us who have had that experience-we talk and support them-so I would say as far as preparations you definitely need to know some principles about working with people on the spectrum, but particularly those who are high functioning on the spectrum, is very helpful. So just knowing something about people on the spectrum and as they go along getting more and more training, I would say any manager would need to have either training or experience to support the people here.

Participant I, one of the top leaders in the organization, provide further insights related to necessary preparations:

Well first of all you have to educate them about that every person is an individual you see one person with autism, you've seen one person with autism. However, here are some general things. So when Job Coach joined as a Tech Specialist, Job Coach, we gave him a lot of information and books so that he could study and learn about the unique strengths, and also the challenges whether its communication, reading social cues, all those things, multi-tasking, trying to put things in writing. The other thing is we always tell them, spend a month and learn and watch. Don't feel like you have to jump in. Learn about the different people and what has already been done so far. What works? What doesn't? With [Job Coach] we had to do that.

Preparing managers and frontline supervisors for the challenges they will face is important. Unless a supervisor comes into the organization with direct experience in supporting and accommodating employees with autism, that individual will need to be open-minded and receive training. Next, I discuss how management addresses the issue of employee retention and the impact their approach has on the organization.

**Retention.** Another strategy that organizational leaders focus on when developing support and accommodations for employees with disabilities is retention. Employee retention is an important topic to organizational leaders (Balakrishnan & Vijayalakshmi, 2014). As noted previously in Chapter 1, a strategy that leaders engage in to improve employee retention is flexible work schedules (Idris, 2014). Improved support could lead to higher retention rates among the general population of employees that are not disabled (Konrad et al., 2013). Specific policies formulated by leaders may also lead to retention strategies (Erickson, 2013; Erickson et al., 2014), and improved retention rates (von Schrader et al., 2014).

During my interviews with leaders, managers, and frontline supervisors, and later as I analyzed the interview data, I was surprised to learn that retention of employees is not a central focus. The consensus among participants is that leaders are responsible for providing a safe and conducive work environment during employment. Leaders' overall objective is not to retain employees long-term, but to better prepare them for competitive employment opportunities, if employees choose to leave.

When I asked participants about the retention strategies that lead to establishing support for employees with high-functioning autism, the top leader stated, "We lose a lot



of our senior QA analyst because they move on. And that is part of our mission. It's hard." I inquired further and asked if retention of employees is even their focus, to which she replied:

It isn't. It's to help them get gainful and meaningful employment. For some, it's here. For others it's 'now I feel really good with my skills and I'm going to go out and get a corporate job where maybe I'll be paid more'.

When asked the same question about retention strategies, Participant A stated:

The one thing we probably do is we do try to pay competitively and more and more we are also focusing on how we can develop our analyst so that if they want to move on to competitive employment they would be in a position to do so. It's a little different because our ultimate goal isn't necessarily to retain. Our ultimate goal is to help the analyst be in a position to move on to competitive employment if that's what the analyst wants. We don't see that as like a bad thing. Anyone who has moved on to competitive employment we consider a success story. So I think our whole paradigm is a little different. We are welcoming someone back who used to work here but has been out in a competitive employment and has built his skill set a little bit more. than um... At the time he left, we were not necessarily able to offer him more because we didn't have the technical expertise but now he's coming back in a much higher position. So that's great, too. If somebody can do that and show, the potential for growth and development, that helps too. But we only want to retain people if they want to be here and if it's the

best thing for them so we don't really have that sort of business mindset you know, in the same way as other companies.

In a similar way, Participant D stated:

There have been people that work here that have gone on to other jobs somewhere at a traditional company and [Organization] is all about that. If you are in a position where you can make that kind of transition, that's great, and they've done their job so-to-speak.

I asked Participant D a follow-up question as to whether leaders try to keep employees here, to which he replied:

No, if you can find an opportunity outside of the company that you're excited about and ready for, than that's great. That's all part of the goal. If people can move on and up then by all means [go ahead]. But there hasn't been a lot of that. A lot of the people... I'm one of the newer employees although they have hired quite a few since I've started, but I haven't even been here a year. Several other folks here have been here 3 or 4 years. So I don't know if they even really have formal strategies in place or written down for that sort of thing.

When I posed the question of retention to Participant E, his response provided further insights into the organization's perspective:

That's a difficult question to answer because part of our mission is to help individuals on the autism spectrum find employment. And that does not mean to find employment with [this Company]. We want to help them find employment that is good employment. We had an employee here by the name of [name]. He

was a legend in our office. He didn't go to college. He came straight out of high school here. He knew a lot about technology like I did. He was kind of a nerdy guy. But the things that he was able to learn on his own here in this kind of melting pot atmosphere, you couldn't even imagine. And now he's working for a larger tech company out in [location] because he was ready to move on. We wanted him to move on into a competitive role. I would consider some of the individuals here maybe not eligible for competitive employment potentially-we are working on things. And I would say part of our retention strategy is there are many areas of coaching to go through to get someone ready for that next step. And there is a lot of motivation toward working on certain aspects of your role to be the best employee you could be in understanding what your next thing is. But I don't think retention of employees may be for our management is more a part of that and maybe some of the core individuals on our leadership team but I don't think we would ever want to retain someone from another opportunity if it was something that they wanted and it would benefit their life. We want to get them ready for that.

Participant G, who for the most part provided short answers to the questions, stated, "I think that here it has to do with having the policies for accommodations in place to make things easier, more predictable, and more routine and that sort of thing. I think that helps in making people stay." Participant J, who is the second top leader, stated:

In the future, yes, we want to retain them. In the beginning, I tried not to take people that didn't go through the 'meat grinder'. I wanted to bring people who

already fell in the neurotypical environment. So retaining these people is not difficult but we have a lot of people that left. All of them know that they can come back and we see that as a huge success. So we see it as a huge success that our people get experience here, experience of behavior in a company. So we do see it as a success but in the future we want to retain them and part of it is become able to pay them a lot more.

Leaders in the case study organization approach retention from two differing vantage points. First, they focus on ensuring employees receive the necessary training and support to be effective in their jobs as testers and analysts. Second, their goal is to prepare employees, focusing specifically on behavioral, social, and communication skills necessary in competitive employment. While this approach may seem counterintuitive to most organizational leaders, the underlying mission the top leader emphasized during her interview is that “[Organization] empowers individuals on the autism spectrum to fulfill their potential through meaningful employment combined with social opportunity.” The work that leaders, manager, and frontline supervisors engage in is very challenging and often times difficult. Besides providing the necessary support and accommodations for employees with autism, they also focus on supporting each other, as will be discussed next.

**Supports for managers.** As mentioned previously, at some point, all employees need additional supports or accommodations to perform at optimal levels (Schur et al., 2014). Employing and supporting the right employees is essential to attaining a competitive edge (Kalargyrou, 2014). Leaders can facilitate higher performance from

employees if the workplace climate is conducive, supportive, and positive (van Woerkom & Meyers, 2015). Leaders' strategies for accommodating and supporting all employees (those with or without disabilities) necessitate all-encompassing organizational policies and practices that capitalize on employee strengths and minimize their weaknesses (Harter & Adkins, 2015; Warnier et al., 2013), inclusive of the ranks of employees who serve as leaders, managers, or supervisors.

Within the case study organization, managers often face challenging and difficult situations that necessitate internal support mechanisms to help them cope with stress. As I coded and analyzed the data, this theme emerged as another vital aspect of organizational support. The support staff manual addressed this concern in a section dedicated to support personnel as they begin to undertake their tasks, which states:

Lastly, please know that you are part of a team that is here to support you. While we all have our own roles and areas we're focused on day-to-day, we strive to collaborate and keep our lines of communication open. One way we do this is by setting aside one to two hours each week for a meeting with management and support staff to discuss challenges and goals, which we call our Pulse meeting. In addition, please do not hesitate to reach out to [Executive Director], [Director of Operations], [Program Services Specialist] or [Senior Quality Assurance Manager] outside of the weekly meetings for additional support. It's also essential to take breaks and practice self-care, which is discussed in section 5.

The supportive work environment clearly applies to all employees, including those who serve in management. When asked what preparations are necessary for

frontline managers to accommodate the workplace needs of individuals with high-functioning autism, Participant C stated:

Also, we have a really great support staff here and I think also it's important for management to take care of their own needs and to go to managers. Like, I go to my manager sometimes. I go to the social worker sometimes, people come to me sometimes and say 'this person is doing something and I'm not sure how to deal with and it's really upsetting me'. It is important we do self-care. If everyone here came from a great background with a ton of support that would be one thing, but it's not the case. We have individuals with varying needs and ability levels and so that's going to be wearing on managers. It's going to be wearing on people who work with that. So I think it's important to take care of yourself and to really understand when I'm getting overwhelmed and I need to take a break, or I need to talk to somebody about this, I need to let it out, I need to do Yoga for 5 minutes. And that is encouraged here as well among the management team, if it gets to be a little too much.

Along that same line of thinking as to what preparations are necessary, Participant D replied:

Like if someone at the top [in upper level management] knows specifics, so there's a resource for frontline managers to go to if they have a concern or a confusion or something like that. So I don't think each of them themselves would have to be an expert.

As the preceding narrative illustrates, support and accommodations applies to all employees, including those in management or supervisory ranks, particularly since they deal with challenging individuals, and since some frontline supervisors are themselves on the autism spectrum. This approach of supporting everyone speaks to the idea that all employees need some type of support, as stated by Schur et al. (2014). To that end, to ensure employees with autism receive the requisite support and accommodations they need, leaders in the case study organization hired various support personnel, which is the seventh emergent theme that I discuss next.

### **Emergent Theme Seven: Support Personnel**

In addition to supporting internal managers and supervisors, organizational leaders also need to ensure an adequate number of support personnel are available. López and Keenan (2014) identified improved support services as a primary means for improving employment outcomes for autistic employees. The present study confirms findings of López and Keenan (2014). Specialized services require the engagement of specialized personnel who received training specific to employee needs. In the present case study organization, support personnel participate in ongoing training and development relative to supporting and accommodating autistic employees. Results of a study by Erickson et al. (2014) indicated common barriers for individuals with disabilities were lack of knowledge on the part of supervisors regarding the provision of accommodations. The present study confirms the findings from Erickson et al. (2014) in that all support personnel have direct knowledge or training associated with autism, thus removing a common barrier for employees with autism.

The importance of integrating specialized support personnel within the case study organization is evident by the number of individuals who serve in that capacity, or who through personal experience with autism, are better equipped to help autistic employees. This aligns with the conceptual framework from resource-based theory, as stated by Barney (1991) and Wernerfelt (1984), which taps into underused, unused, or rare resources. As Table 11 illustrates, a number of approaches to utilizing support personnel are necessary, including internal staff hired by the leaders, and external personnel that typically associate directly with individuals with autism and their families, such as therapists, counselors, psychologist, or psychiatrists. As I continued coding and analyzing the data, the emergent theme support personnel appeared as a central topic. Analysis of the data indicated there were no discrepant cases to report associated with this theme.

Table 11

## Occurrences for Support Personnel

Codes	Number of Sources	Number of References	% of Total Coverage
Autism specialist	2	3	20.0%
Community support	1	1	6.7%
External support	1	1	6.7%
Job coach and tech specialist	5	7	46.7%
Social worker	3	3	20.0%
Total	12	15	100%

While researching the case study organization's website, I came across a document that speaks to the specific problem the organization addresses. Through philanthropic and private giving, leaders are able to hire autism specialists who focus their efforts on:



- Autism specialists who provide:
  - o Job coaching
  - o Workplace accommodations
  - o Counseling and support
- Free vocational training program
- Resource and information services for the broader community
- Social activities through our Stepping Up and Out social enrichment program
- Staff workshops in team building, health and fitness, communication, art therapy, and more

The organization's website also states, "Our nonprofit status enables tax deductible contributions which support our training programs, autism specialists and accommodations to ensure the optimal performance of our Test Engineers," and assures high quality work by employing "neurotypical managers and autism specialists who make sure that the work proceeds efficiently."

In collaboration with various community organizations and members, leaders of the case study organization are able to host or participate in various community events, including lectures by a well-known author in the field of autism, collaboration with local universities that established centers for autism research, and attending various employment summits throughout the community. The organization's support staff manual states, "Having a strong community presence also benefits [Organization] by putting us on the radar of potential business clients, prospective employees, potential donors, and the media."

During my interview with Participant D, I asked what process determines whether an employee with high-functioning autism needs additional support or accommodation, to which he replied by providing information about external support personnel that often times accompany individual employees:

If an employee has a caseworker or something, I don't know exactly what their roles are. There are some employees here that have some outside person that comes in once in a while. I don't know if it's a social worker or if it's part of some work placement organization or governmental thing, but a lot of those kinds of people the management talk with them and meet with them on a fairly regular basis and so I suspect there's a lot of clarifying that happens there. Maybe the employee for whatever reason doesn't think to ask for something but they might mention it to their therapist or whatever and that person is in a position to report it to the management. So it's all over the place in terms of any kind of process.

While the role of external support personnel is not a central focus of this study, it is interesting to note that leaders not only allow their inclusion during interviews and training, but also collaborate with them as needed to identify specific support or accommodation needs of employees with autism.

During my interview with Participant E, I asked what his role was in providing support or accommodation to employees with high-functioning autism, to which he replied:

My role is I am a Job Coach and Technical Support Specialist at [company]. My role didn't exist before and I think there is a desperate need for job coaching in

this sort of atmosphere to help people provide confidence in what they are doing and direction and assurance that they are on the right path to accomplishing their goals. But as also there in a management role to insure that they are doing things appropriately, following the correct technical guidelines on some of the complicated work that we do. I essentially at the moment am helping lead a project by the codename of [name] which we use for one of our clients, There's 24 individuals who I'm helping manage who are all on the autism spectrum and I answer simple how to questions for troubleshooting technical issues with this client. I also get a little head start to learn about new items that we're learning about and maybe easily explain those things that may be a little bit complicated or lack directions that were created. I, by no means, am the main manager of anyone. I would consider 2 of my colleagues, who are on the autism spectrum to be the leaders of this project and I am more of a helping hand and guide to make sure that they're meeting their goals.

The role of the job coach is foundational to the success of autistic employees.

Whereas most employee function adequately within the confines of organizational parameters, employees with autism often face ongoing and unexpected issues, due in part to the fact that autism is not cured, but rather, mitigated for. When asked Participant E about the types of supports provided to employees with high-functioning autism, he stated, "We have a physical, on-site social worker here to assist with those needs or requests."

When I asked Participant I, the top leader in the organization, what process determines whether an employee with high-functioning autism needs additional support or accommodation, she replied:

It's been fantastic hiring [Job Coach]. We need more who does hands on helping them technically with their work, more than anyone else, and we probably will have more [Job Coaches] as we go along. So that's very helpful. First of all sometimes they say that they need help, some of them say they need more, they just have no self-sense of [what they need]. Some never ask for help. It's either because of communication they don't want to appear like they need help. So you really have to look at their work output, which [Job Coach] looks at. And [Senior QA Analyst] and [Project Manager] look at and then you see someone struggling or passing things that should have been failed, that they go and approach them. So the process we use is to divide the group up and [Social Worker] meet regularly with a group of high need, because she's the social worker. Program Services Specialist meets with the group. Project Manager used to meet with a group but now it's mostly Program Services Specialist and Project Manager. They meet regularly, at least monthly with each person so each person will share that they are struggling, the ones who can. So it's either they're actually telling you or you're observing behavior whether its behavior in their work-that they are not doing what they could do or should do- like someone who is passing tests that should fail, or they are saying that they are insecure. So I think those are processes. It's really being out there on the floor and watching them. And that's

why I think more job coaches are helpful. Even in our environment, it would be good to have one more [Job Coach]. A lot of times their peers will say ‘so and so is struggling’ ‘so and so is pounding on the desk again’, ‘so and so is raising their voice and I can’t focus’. So even if you don’t observe it, sometimes someone will come.

Participant A responded along the same lines, making special mention of various support personnel that leaders hire:

It’s mostly just observational. We have our Social Worker and Program Services Specialist and then my time right now is technically 25% on the support side depending upon the day, and it’s also for the managers if they are noticing something coming up. [Program Services Specialist] and [Social Worker, Counselor] meet regularly with each Analyst to talk about any things that are coming up.

As the preceding seven themes and narratives illustrate, the leaders within the case study organization provide a wide variety of support and accommodations, including having necessary support personnel who are central to mitigating for some of the challenges that employees with autism face in the workplace. In the next section, I will focus on the final emergent theme related to the unique skillset that employees with autism possess. The unique skillset is what sets the population of autistic employees apart from their neurotypical counterparts, and issues in a competitive advantage.

**Emergent Theme Eight: Unique Skillset**

Employees with autism face especially difficult workplace challenges and barriers that prevent them from engaging in competitive employment. Common stigmas and stereotypes diminish their potential to use their unique skillsets and abilities (Werner & Roth, 2014). Individuals with high-functioning autism offer unique skillsets that can serve as a competitive advantage, including keen detailed attention, ability to detect patterns, and excellent visual recognition skills (Nicholas et al., 2014). They are trustworthy, efficient, consistent, precise, and have outstanding visual processing, visual thinking, and excellent information processing skills (Baldwin et al., 2014). Leaders who capitalize on unique skillset of this population and create a work environment that is supportive and conducive, are able to capitalize on the unique skills and abilities of employees who have traditionally not been valued, creating a competitive advantage and increased organizational performance (Richards, 2015; SAP News, 2013). This concept aligns with the conceptual framework from resource-based theory, as stated by Barney (1991) and Wernerfelt (1984), which taps into underused, unused, or rare resources to create a competitive advantage. The present study confirms findings from Nicholas et al. (2014) which indicate that employees with autism possess unique skills that employers can capitalize on, if only leaders and manager will develop individualized plans to support and accommodate them in the workplace.

Throughout the coding and analysis process, interview participants spoke of the unique skillset that employees with autism possess. Additionally, various documents and artifacts obtained from managers in the case study organization point to the uniqueness of

skills that autistic employees bring to the workplace. These skillsets emerged as the eighth and final theme. Analysis of the data indicated there were no discrepant cases to report associated with this theme. Table 12 illustrates 20 unique skills that employees with autism tend to possess. While each skill is important and represents a potential competitive differentiation for organizations, I will focus primarily on the skills with the highest percentage of references, which includes, (a) affinity for repetitive tasks, (b) attention to detail, (c) detect subtle defects, (d) focus, (e) precision, and (f) technology skills. Leaders employ these unique skills in ways that create a competitive advantage.

Table 12

## Occurrences for Unique Skillset

Codes	Number of Sources	Number of References	% of Total Coverage
Affinity for repetitive tasks	2	8	11.3%
Analytical work	1	1	1.4%
Attention to detail	6	13	18.3%
Concentration	1	2	2.8%
Detect subtle defects	2	8	11.3%
Focus	7	13	18.3%
Intelligence	2	3	4.2%
Logical thinking	2	2	2.8%
Low turnover	1	1	1.4%
Loyalty and devotion	2	2	2.8%
Memory	1	1	1.4%
Patience	1	1	1.4%
Precision	2	3	4.2%
Problem solving skills	1	1	1.4%
Quick and efficient	1	2	2.8%
Quick learners	1	1	1.4%
Restricted interests	1	1	1.4%
Technology skills	1	5	7.0%
Unique perspective	1	1	1.4%
Visual processing	2	2	2.8%
Total	38	71	100%

As I perused through the case study organization's website, I acquired, coded, and analyzed content that spoke to the unique skillset their employees bring to the workplace. One section of the website stated, [We harness] "the strengths of people with high functioning autism – attention to detail, precision, an affinity for repetitive tasks, outstanding technology skills – and providing our Test Engineers with a combination of intensive training, structure, and support to mitigate potential workplace challenges." Another section of the website states, "[Organization] provides high quality, competitively-priced, domestic software testing and other quality assurance (QA) services. We do this by harnessing the strengths of people with high functioning autism – attention to detail, precision, an affinity for repetitive tasks, outstanding technology skills." [Organization's] "Test Engineers learn quickly, are experienced in testing a diverse array of technologies."

The awareness of the unique skillset does not merely reside within the organization itself. A testimonial from one of their client companies states:

[Client Company]'s partnership with [northern Illinois] based nonprofit [Organization] seamlessly merges proficiency, creativity and corporate social responsibility. By harnessing the strengths of adults with high functioning autism – attention to detail, precision, an affinity for repetitive tasks and outstanding technology skills – [Organization] is providing high quality domestic software testing and other quality assurance services to [Client Company].

The website also contains detailed qualifications of applicants who wish to seek employment with the organization, as follows:



- Intellectual curiosity and the ability to approach problems creatively and think “outside the box”
- Strong analytical and problem-solving skills
- Well acquainted with, and an avid user of technology
- Dedication to continuous learning, quality work, self-development and providing best-in-class service to [Organization] clients
- Ability to communicate effectively in writing
- Strong observational skills, an attention to detail and the ability to maintain focus
- Ability to work both individually and as part of a team

The support staff manual states, [they] “...have incredible strengths, including a high level of intelligence, strong attention to detail, ability to focus intensely on tasks they are interested in, and a unique way of seeing the world and solving problems.”

Furthermore, the internal document that speaks to the specific problem the organization addresses states, “While you’d think that close attention to detail, an affinity for logical thinking, strong visual processing and intensity of focus would be desirable attributes, too many companies overlook the strengths of individuals on the autism spectrum.”

During my interview with Participant B, I asked what competitive advantages leaders obtain by supporting individuals with autism, to which he replied:

When it comes to the nature of repetitive tasks, a person who has high-functioning autism is different than a person without high-functioning autism in regards to their threshold of tolerating repetitive tasks. It also varies amongst people with

high-functioning autism. In general, when it comes to repetitive tasks and repeating those tasks, whether it is a series of tests, or executing a series of similar test steps over and over, there's a point where a person with high-functioning autism has an advantage. There is a competitive advantage to having a person who will not tune out. As an example, when a person does the task and you actually do the task vs. when you do the task and you kind of sort of half way do the task because this is the 5th time you've done this, and I don't think it's going to change-so I'm just going to half do it whereas the individual with high-functioning autism will absolutely do the task even though it's the 5th time.

[They engage in their work and focus at every step, every time, even though it is repetitive. Someone else who does not have high-functioning autism may tune out by the 5th time.]

Similarly, Participants A, D, and H noted that "attention to detail" was one key skill that autistic employees possess.

Web content also noted that autistic employees possess a keen "ability to detect subtle defects," "detected a large number of issues in the program which helped shape subsequent development efforts," "superior ability to spot irregularities," "fresh perspective on potential defects that may not be as apparent to the development team or written in the test scripts," and "correctly identify defects that otherwise were undiscovered."

When I asked Participant A what competitive advantages leaders obtain by supporting individuals with high-functioning autism, she replied:

I think you get a very unique perspective on things. With our particular type of work, the attention to detail, the ability to find those defects and errors within a [computer software] program is considerably above a neurotypical individual just because things seem to pop out more to people that are on the Spectrum. There are also competitive advantages in terms of loyalty to [Organization]. We don't have any really significant turnover at all. Those seem to be the main ones.

Participant D provided further details in his statement, "...by and large people on the spectrum have the capacity for a much more intense, sort of all exclusive kind of focus on a project." He went on to state, "So things like proof reading, spelling, punctuation, following very specific directions, very exactly, those things all come very naturally to people on the spectrum, so it's not really in general."

When asked what competitive advantages leaders obtain by supporting individuals with high-functioning autism, Participant A replied:

Well, if you look into our mission statement and our history –high functioning people on the autism spectrum bring a degree of focus, and eye for detail, to this QA work that's sometimes other populations do not. Of course, that's a stereotype- but stereotypes are usually born on somewhat of a factual basis, so I would say for our most successful analysts they do bring the advantage of having an eye for detail, and [the ability] to be able to focus for long periods of time on this type of work.

Participant J, who serves as the second top leader in the organization stated, “The work that we do here is very, very difficult. It’s very difficult not physically, but mentally because it requires tremendous amount of focus for longer period of time.”

These unique skillsets offer the case study organization a significant competitive advantage. As the preceding narrative shows, employees with autism possess extraordinary skills that will exceed neurotypical employees, if only leaders would harness those skills by providing adequate workplace support and accommodations. As Austin and Pisano (2017) observed, individuals with autism, also known as neurodiverse, face significant workplace challenges, particularly because of social and behavioral issues that do not conform to traditional employment and hiring practices. To capitalize on the unique skillset and talent that neurodiverse individuals possess, organizations need to alter their human resources recruitment and hiring practices.

As Shields (2017) noted, the condition known as autism in contemporary times has undergone a variety of name changes, including “Childhood Schizophrenia (1952, 1968); Infantile Autism (1980, 1987); Autism, Asperger’s Disorder (1994); and Autism Spectrum Disorders (2015)” (p. 4). Changes in names brought about increased understanding of the condition, yet the prevalence of autism continues to increase and the underlying causes remain largely unknown. The CDC (2016) reported the prevalence of autism in school-aged children is now 1 in 68. As such, organizational leaders need to be prepared for the influx of individuals with autism entering the labor pool.

The need for understanding and compassion for the population of neurodiverse employees is increasing. As Sutherland (2016) noted, organizational leaders need to

establish flexible jobs to optimize the strengths of autism. To accommodate neurodiverse employees, managers and staff need to receive training and guidance as to peculiarities and nuances that commonly appear in this population of employees. As more neurodiverse employees enter the workforce, managers need to alter performance appraisals to mitigate for weaknesses while capitalizing on strengths. By building in flexibility whereby all employees benefit, leaders may create a competitive advantage (Sutherland, 2016).

In a qualitative survey study involving 59 Australian organizations that hired individuals with autism, Scott et al. (2017) sought to understand the financial impact on organizations associated with this practice. Results of the study indicate no increased cost associated with hiring individuals with autism, compared to costs tied to hiring any employee. Not surprisingly, employees with autism outperformed their counterparts, specifically related to key skillsets such as being detail-oriented, their hard-working nature and high quality work (Scott et al., 2017, p. 11). In other measures, employees with autism performed equally as well as their neurotypical counterparts. Surprisingly, however, is that larger organizations seemed to have favorable opinions about hiring individuals with autism, compared to smaller organizations. Lastly, employees with autism had a positive effect on overall organizational culture particularly related to their creativity, as well as increased cognizance of the benefits associated with autism and creating a more inclusive workplace. My study exemplifies one attempt to fill the gap in literature and draw attention to strategies that organizational leaders can implement to tap into this underused pool of talent. Next, I discuss discrepant and nonconforming data.

### **Discrepant Cases and Nonconforming Data**

As I mentioned earlier in Chapter 4, there were no specific discrepant cases. However, during the interviews with three frontline supervisors, they self-disclosed as being on the autism spectrum. Additionally, two participants provided brief answers to interview questions. While I can only guess as to why that transpired, it appears their input may have been hampered by autistic characteristics, and their minimal involvement in developing, implementing, and enforcing policies or procedures related to supporting or accommodating employees with autism. One participant in particular seemed rushed and less engaged in the interview process, although his brevity still provided useful insights. Another participant had visible challenges in communicating during the early part of the interview. I attribute that in part to his being on the autism spectrum, but also due to general nervousness associated with the interview questions. Prior to the interview, he asked for a list of the interview questions. This aligns with the perspective that individuals with autism tend to have difficulties with verbal communications.

### **Summary**

The overarching research question was: What strategies do organizational leaders and managers use to support and accommodate the workplace needs of employees with specific needs while building on their strengths? The results of the study show that leaders at the case study organization implemented a wide range of support and accommodations for their autistic employees. Just as the literature showed various dimensions or vantage points for supporting all employees (able-bodied and disabled), so also leaders in the case study organization employ a variety of approaches to ensure

autistic employees receive the necessary support and accommodations to maximize their unique skillset, while mitigating for their weaknesses. I associated the study results with labor process theory (Braverman, 1975) and resource-based theory (Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984). In Chapter 5, I review the interpretation of findings, limitations of the study, recommendations for the field of management, recommendations for future research and implications of the study on positive social change.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative, descriptive single case study was to explore the strategies that leaders, managers and frontline supervisors used to support and accommodate employees with specific needs while capitalizing on their strengths. The objectives of this study were (a) to uncover how and why organizational leaders provide support and accommodations to employees with high-functioning autism, (b) to fill a gap in literature as to how and why organizational leaders provide support and accommodations to employees with high-functioning autism, and (c) to examine one case where leaders developed a mission-driven organization focused on supporting and accommodating employees with high-functioning autism.

To identify potential participants for this study, I used purposive sampling and selected 13 participants who met the criteria of leader, manager and frontline supervisor within one organization in northern Illinois. The nature of the study involved using an interview protocol that contained 11 semistructured interview questions. The advantage of asking semistructured questions is that it allowed me to probe with additional questions to gain more insights or seek clarification. I interviewed two leaders, four managers and five frontline supervisors who had varying levels of responsibility related to strategy, policy formulation, or oversight of employees with high-functioning autism.

I acquired and reviewed other forms of data, such as organizational documents (written policies, memoranda, e-mail communications, support staff manual), artifacts (web content), direct observations of the physical work environment and took photographs of the work environment (facilities, workstations, amenities) to demonstrate



within-methods methodological triangulation of the data, ensuring validity of data results and evidence of corroboration amongst the data. The overarching research question was: What strategies do organizational leaders and managers use to support and accommodate the workplace needs of employees with specific needs while building on their strengths?

After analyzing the data, I identified strategies that leaders in the case study organization engaged in to support and accommodate the workplace needs of employees with autism while building on their unique strengths. Strategies for supporting employees included the following: (a) creating a conducive work environment that fosters employee's ability to advocate for others and themselves; (b) establishing an overarching mission that encompasses values, vision, and social responsibility related to supporting and accommodating employees with high-functioning autism; (c) understanding and mitigating for the autism challenges; (d) providing supports of a nonphysical nature to enhance productivity and mitigate for deficiencies; (e) providing physical accommodations within the work environment to offset weaknesses or limitations; (f) formulating appropriate policies, procedures and funding necessary to support and accommodate employees with high-functioning autism; (g) providing appropriate support personnel who can assist employees with high-functioning autism with mitigating for their weaknesses; and (h) identifying and capitalizing on the unique skillset that employees with high-functioning autism bring to the workplace.

Scholars in the field of management have focused on the broader topic of disability in the workplace, the accompanying mandates to provide support and accommodations and approaches to making such provisions to all individuals, regardless

of ability or disability. The present study addressed a lack of research providing insights regarding one organization's comprehensive strategies for supporting and accommodating employees with high-functioning autism while building on their strengths. Organizational leaders may find this study useful in developing their own strategies for supporting and accommodating employees with autism or any other population of employees who have specific needs.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

Organizational leaders who develop strategies to support and accommodate employees with specific needs while building on their strengths provide a means for each employee to be fully productive. When leaders provide necessary support and accommodations to able-bodied or disabled employees, they unleash each employee's maximum potential contribution (Baldrige & Swift, 2013). For this study, the specific group of individuals that fall into this category are individuals with high-functioning autism who have specific needs for support and accommodations and yield specific strengths to the organization (Richards, 2015; SAP News, 2013).

### **The Literature**

The body of literature I discussed in Chapter 2 did not indicate a singular approach to supporting and accommodating the workplace needs of employees with specific needs. Rather, the literature indicated a multi-faceted approach that encompassed a variety of vantage points that influenced leaders in their decisions to support and accommodate employees. These vantage points span a variety of topics, including cultural, religious, economic, legal, legislative, organizational and social facets of leader

and manager perspectives (Agovino & Rapposelli, 2014; Erickson, 2013; Erickson et al., 2014; Gotsis & Kortezi, 2013; Gröschl, 2013; Idris, 2014; Kulkarni, 2013; Lancaster & Milia, 2014; Lindsay et al., 2013; Samnani et al., 2013; Theodorakopoulos & Budhwar, 2015). Each of these vantage points influences how organizational leaders establish a workplace that is supportive and accommodating to all employee populations, including those with disabilities. The impetus for putting these vantage points into practice varies between leaders. Some employ these vantage points based on the popularity of diversity topics in contemporary organizational settings and literature, out of compulsion and adherence to legal mandates, or on purposeful and strategic alignment with core organizational mission, vision and values (Oswick & Noon, 2014).

### **Overarching Themes**

The overarching themes I uncovered as a result of the coding and analysis process stated in Chapter 4 are as follows: (a) advocating for self and others; (b) mission, vision, values and social responsibility; (c) autism challenges; (d) nonphysical supports; (e) physical accommodations; (f) policies, procedures and funding; (g) support personnel; and (h) unique skillset. These themes point to strategies that leaders in the case study organization used to support and accommodate employees with autism, which helped fill the gap in research.

Findings from advocating for self and other emergent themes revealed that all participants in the case study organization believe that leaders need to create a work environment that fosters employee's ability to advocate for themselves and others. There is general reluctance among disabled employees to disclose the full nature of their

disability and the accommodations they need in the workplace (Baldrige & Swift, 2013). Employees with disabilities need to disclose their conditions to supervisors to determine what support or accommodations are appropriate or feasible. Individuals with disabilities are required to disclose their disability based on ADA and ADAA regulations (Carpenter & Paetzold, 2013), yet many disabled employees are reluctant to disclose the full nature of their disability (Bacon & Hoque, 2015; Baldrige & Swift, 2013). Self-advocacy remains an important facet of obtaining appropriate supports or accommodations necessary to maximize productivity (Shaw et al., 2013). Interviews with participants in the present study, as well as other internal documents, confirm the findings from Baldrige and Swift (2013); when leaders create a work environment that is accepting and supportive of individuals with disabilities, employees will not only advocate for themselves and disclose the nature of their disability but will also advocate for fellow employees who may still be reluctant to self-advocate.

An organization's mission must encompass overarching values, vision and social responsibility related to supporting and accommodating employees with autism. Findings from the present study revealed an organization's mission must be the driving force through which employees of all abilities receive support and accommodations. For employees to appreciate the driving mission, leaders need to align corporate strategy with training, which supports the findings in Lancaster and Milia (2014). Leaders need to incorporate the population of employees with disabilities into their corporate social responsibility initiatives (Dhanda, 2013).

Findings from the theme of understanding and mitigating for autism challenges revealed that organizational leaders learned about autism and accompanying presenting symptoms to ensure employees have access to appropriate support and accommodations. Learning occurs because of collaborative efforts between and among leaders and employees (Margaryan et al., 2013). Training and learning should align with organizational mission, vision and values as a means of supporting all employees (Lancaster & Milia, 2014). Organizational leaders can extract higher output from each employee by focusing on employee strengths and capitalizing on their key abilities and reduce the focus on weaknesses or deficiencies (Brook, 2013). Common stigmas and stereotypes of employees with autism diminish their potential to apply their unique skillsets and abilities (Werner & Roth, 2014). The present study confirms results of a study by Baldwin and Costley (2016) that highlights the importance of understanding the population of individuals with high-functioning autism and providing necessary support and accommodations in the workplace.

Findings from the present study also revealed that leaders provided support and accommodations of a physical as well as nonphysical nature to mitigate for deficiencies, weaknesses, or limitations to enhance productivity and help employees reach maximum productivity. Newly hired employees need assistance with acculturation and navigating through the new workplace (Kulkarni, 2013) and more tenured employees require ongoing leader support for learning (Lancaster & Milia, 2014). The present study confirms Zappella's (2015) findings that leaders need to match an individual with a cognitive disability to a specific job, make necessary changes to a standardized job to

ensure the disabled individual is able to reach his or her maximum potential and in general create appropriate organizational conditions that foster productivity and output. The present study also confirms findings from Shaw et al. (2014) in that supervisors were willing to provide accommodations for employees who experienced lower back pain or injury. Accommodations to the physical work environment are often necessary for an employee to function at maximum capacity. The present study confirms the findings from López and Keenan (2014), noting the importance of training employers and their staff to recognize various facets of disabilities and to provide training related to acceptable accommodations and supports for individual employees.

To capitalize on employee strengths, organizational leaders need to formulate appropriate policies, procedures and funding necessary to support and accommodate employees with autism, which is another emergent theme from the present study. The results indicated that leaders developed all-encompassing organizational policies and practices that capitalized on employee strengths and minimized their weaknesses, as stated by Harter and Adkins (2015) and Warnier et al. (2013). Policies related to support and accommodation strategies include recruitment, employment, accommodation, accessibility, retention, advancement, funding, pre-employment screenings and case-by-case mechanisms that are necessary for accommodating employees (Erickson, 2013; Erickson et al., 2014).

Funding is also an important component for providing necessary support and accommodations to employees with autism. The present study confirms results from Erickson et al. (2014), which indicated one fifth of participants had funds available to

accommodate disabled employees. The present study also confirms findings from Bolo et al. (2013) that provided modifications to tasks, decreasing workloads and instituting flexible schedules. Costs associated with providing accommodations were minimal and leaders benefitted by seeing a reduction in sick leave and lost productivity (Bolo et al., 2013). The present study disconfirms findings from Scott et al. (2017) in that leaders in the present case study organization acquired external funding and resources to expand the variety of support and accommodations their employees needed. Revenues generated from contract services are not sufficient to provide a wide variety of support and accommodations.

One of the key facets to determining what types of support and accommodations to provide to autistic employees is embedding appropriate support personnel who can assist employees with mitigating for their weaknesses, which represents another emergent theme. Similar to findings in López and Keenan (2014), findings in the present study revealed the importance of training employer stakeholders (support personnel) to recognize various facets of disabilities and to provide training related to acceptable support and accommodations for individual employees. Erickson et al. (2014) indicated a lack of knowledge on the part of supervisors regarding the provision of accommodations was a common barrier for individuals with disabilities. Findings in the present study also confirms findings from Erickson et al. (2014) in that all support personnel have direct knowledge or training related to autism. In the case study organization, leaders integrated specialized support personnel and equipped them to help autistic employees.

The final theme was that leaders focused on identifying and capitalizing on the skillset that employees with autism bring to the workplace. Due to presenting symptoms, employees with autism face workplace challenges and barriers that lead to high unemployment or underemployment. Stigmas and stereotypes associated with autism diminish the ability of employees with autism to use their unique skillsets and abilities (Werner & Roth, 2014). Leaders in the case study organization understand that individuals with autism offer skillsets that can serve as a competitive advantage, including keen detailed attention, ability to detect patterns and excellent visual recognition skills (Nicholas et al., 2014). They are trustworthy, efficient, consistent, precise and have outstanding visual processing, visual thinking and excellent information processing skills (Baldwin et al., 2014). To create a competitive advantage and increased organizational performance, leaders need to capitalize on the unique skillset of employees with autism and create a work environment that is supportive and conducive (Richards, 2015; SAP News, 2013). The present study confirms findings from Baldwin and Costley (2016), which highlighted the importance of understanding the population of individuals with autism and providing necessary support and accommodations in the workplace.

In a 2-year quantitative pilot study correlating a two-phase intervention with 27 adolescent participants, Dudley (2017) observed that participants who received an intervention directed at improving executive function skills (the ability to organize and plan) may be better equipped for entering adulthood and subsequent employment. Results of the study showed that executive function plays an important role in job-related performance. This study supports the notion in the present study that to capitalize on the



strengths that employees with autism bring to the workplace, leaders need to provide a variety of support and accommodation mechanisms to mitigate for weaknesses generally associated with autism. The transition years between adolescence and adulthood are particularly challenging as most mandated services and supports come to an end at the transition from adolescence to adulthood.

### **Confirmation and Disconfirmation from Emergent Themes**

The preceding emergent themes both confirm and disconfirm the conceptual framework of labor process theory (Braverman, 1975), which represents a fundamental conflict between management and employees related to the division of labor, possibilities for deskilling and the separation of conception and execution (Richards, 2012, 2015; Sawchuk et al., 2006). Disconfirmation occurred in that labor process theory espouses an adversarial, conflicting relationship between management and labor as management manipulates employees to gain benefits derived from labor, while labor in turn resists management controls. Leaders in the case study organization espoused a positive, supportive, and collaborative relationship with their employees, focusing primarily on the individual employee to help them perform at optimal levels. Although I did not directly observe employees, they seem to likewise share in the positive and collaborative relationship with leaders and managers. The case study organization's website and monthly e-mails showed employee testimonials that speak to the collaborative and supportive work environment. Confirmation of labor process theory (Braverman, 1975) occurred in that leaders in the case study organization release the power achieved from labor while simultaneously securing the rewards from labor. Labor process theory helps

uncover new methods of management control through the utilization of rare and unique resources, that of individuals with autism.

The preceding emergent themes fully confirm the secondary conceptual framework, resource-based theory (Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984) which posits that organizations can gain a competitive advantage and improve overall profitability by tapping into scarce, underused, or unused resources. Leaders in the case study organization released the power of a unique, scarce, and underused labor force and benefitted from labor by creating a competitive advantage that is difficult to replicate. Leaders in the case study organization do not focus exclusively on benefits derived from the competitive advantage; rather, they emphasize the importance of fully engaging the rare, underused, and unique skillset of individuals with autism, recognizing their place in society and helping them reach their full potential. While the prevalence of autism is high and may not represent a rare resource in itself, the unemployment or underemployment of individuals with autism exemplifies the rare and scarce engagement of this population of employees in employment.

### **Limitations of the Study**

In Chapter 1, I identified several possible limitations to the study. By applying the principles of purposive sampling, I limited the study to merely the organizational leaders, managers and frontline supervisors within the case study organization. The chosen geographic location in northern Illinois limited the study to one geographic region of the United States, whereas the prevalence of autism is a worldwide phenomenon. The results of the study might not apply to organizations in other regions of the United States nor

across the world. I facilitated this study in the organization's natural setting which may be difficult to replicate exactly in other organizations that hire and support employees with autism. Participant responses were specific to the case study organization, which may not reflect the views or perspectives of leaders or managers in other organizations.

Although these limitations existed, I still subjected the qualitative, descriptive case study to rigorous standards toward achieving a high level of trustworthiness. In addition to the preceding limitations, the study did not include other organizational members, such as members of the board of directors, members of the advisory board and frontline employees. A final limitation to the study was my own bias since I was the sole research instrument, which I mitigated for by collecting various types of data to establish within-method methodological triangulation, as stated by (Denzin, 1970, 2009). Despite these limitations, I was able to gain a clear understanding as to what strategies leaders in the case study organization engaged in to support and accommodate employees with autism while building on their strengths. In terms of how researchers might transfer this study to other settings, the reader determines the transferability of case study research (Merriam, 2009). Transferability also entails ensuring the sample population varies in terms of demographics such as gender, age and length of service (Merriam, 2009). In my study, I achieved an appropriate level of variation among participants to the extent that I included leaders, managers, and frontline supervisors who represent varying genders, ages, titles and length of service.

## **Recommendations**

As I discussed in Chapter 1, there is a general lack of workplace support for individuals with autism because managers in general are not well informed regarding the challenges that autistic employees face in the workplace, as stated by Nicholas et al. (2015). Individuals with autism face innumerable difficulties and obstacles when seeking competitive employment because of the presenting characteristics and symptoms associated with autism (Scott et al., 2017). Yet the prevalence of autism continues to increase and the underlying causes remain largely unknown. The CDC (2016) reported the prevalence of autism in school-aged children is 1 in 68. As such, organizational leaders need to be prepared for the *autism tsunami* (Maynard, 2015, as cited by Marsack & Samuel, 2017) that will attempt to enter the workforce in search of supportive and accommodating work environments that capitalize on their strengths while mitigating for their weaknesses.

### **Future Descriptive Case Studies**

I propose several approaches for future research that may help fill the gap in literature, add to the literature, or advance the study of how leaders support and accommodate employees with autism. A natural progression and recommendation for future research that arose from my study would be to facilitate additional descriptive qualitative case studies with other members of the case study organization. First, a descriptive case could be facilitated with the board of directors comprised of 13 individuals who are responsible for oversight of the case study organization. Spanning a variety of work disciplines, board member representation includes a social worker,

psychiatrist and business manager, investment advisor, retired business executive, registered nurse, retired corporate engineer, self-employed trader, software development manager, vice president of an organization, IT leader and consultant, director of a pharmaceutical organization, senior leader in the case study organization, and a parent, most of whom have children with autism or Asperger's syndrome. Insights from these individuals would be invaluable as they might provide unique perspectives on supporting and accommodating employees with autism.

Second, a descriptive case study could be conducted with members of the advisory board made up of eight individuals consisting of a renowned actor, licensed clinical social worker, psychiatrist, webmaster, chief financial officer, juris doctor, business co-founder and a research professor. Most of these individuals are intimately connected to the field of autism either personally or through a loved one. Members of the advisory board may also provide unique insights as to support and accommodations for employees with autism.

Lastly, a descriptive case study with frontline employees who receive workplace support and accommodations could be conducted. Perspectives gained from employees would be beneficial in practical ways as to whether the support and accommodations they receive capitalizes on their strengths, mitigates for their weaknesses and improves productivity. An additional research component could include a longitudinal study with frontline employees in the case study organization to document their lived experiences working within an organization that values and supports them. Perspectives gained from these additional population samples may provide a well-rounded understanding as to all

strategies that leaders within the case study organization engage in to support and accommodate employees with specific needs while building on their strengths.

### **Future Research Design and Structure**

For future case studies, I would structure them differently for each of those participant populations. For the board of directors and advisory board members, semistructured interviews would be appropriate, as they most likely would adequately articulate verbal responses and respond well to follow-up questions or comments. However, for the population of frontline employees, most of who are on the autism spectrum, I would facilitate and distribute pre-written questionnaires to garner written responses, because one of the presenting symptoms of autism is difficulty with verbal communication. This approach is consistent with findings from the present study in which leaders articulate written policies and procedures and use written communication systems, to mitigate for challenges employees with autism face with verbal communication. Case study approaches are best suited for situations where little is known about a particular situation, environment, or phenomenon and where little is known as to current knowledge or conceptual framework (Yin, 2012, 2014). While results of the current study provided insights as to how leaders go about supporting and accommodating employees with autism, little is known as to the perspectives of members of board of directors and advisory boards relative to strategies for supporting and accommodating employees with autism. Additionally, little is known as to the perspectives of frontline employees with autism as to their lived experience in a

supportive and accommodating work environment that capitalizes on their unique talents and skills.

### **Research Recommendations from the Literature**

While the present study and opportunities for future studies focused on inclusionary practices for employees with autism, Richards (2012) sought to understand the exclusionary practices of employers toward individuals with Asperger's syndrome, which is a subset of autism spectrum disorder. First, Richards (2012) facilitated a study based on secondary data sets and suggested facilitating a direct study with individuals associated with exclusionary practices. Richards (2015) suggested future research should focus on positive organizational practices related to employing individuals with Asperger's syndrome associated with reducing the instances of employment discrimination against this population. Vogeley et al. (2013) recommended future research focus on employment programs geared toward individuals with autism, in addition to longitudinal studies spanning the lives of autistic individual from birth through adulthood. Baldwin and Costley (2016) noted that, due to the higher instance of autism among males, there is a need for further research as to the experiences of adult females with autism and the fact that a majority of research focuses on the instance of autism in childhood. Neely and Hunter (2014) noted that industrial and organizational psychologists might contribute to the field by examining how leaders can support and accommodate individuals with autism.

Second, facilitate descriptive case studies within other organizations in the United States that hire, support and accommodate employees with autism. During the proposal

development of my research topic, I discovered that several large organizations embarked on varying approaches to dealing with the prevalence of high unemployment or underemployment of individuals with high-functioning autism, by establishing varying hiring, support and accommodation practices. These organizations include Freddie Mac, Microsoft, SAP and Walgreens (Erbentraut, 2015). In 2011, Freddie Mac began hiring college interns who were on the autism spectrum, leading to their first full-time hire of an employee with autism. In 2015, Microsoft in collaboration with Specialiserne, launched a pilot program to hire individuals with autism. In 2012, SAP, a global software company based in Germany, launched a pilot program in India to hire individuals with autism. Walgreens also embarked on an initiative to hire individuals with autism at their corporate distribution center located in South Carolina. In most of these organizations, autistic employees work in software-related positions.

Third, whereas the current study focused on one organization in a specific geographic region of the United States, similar studies should be facilitate not only throughout other regions of the United States, but in other countries as well. Recent work on the subject of autism in the workplace in India (Kulkarni & Rodrigues, 2014), Germany (Vogeley et al., 2013), Australia (Baldwin et al., 2014; Zheng et al., 2015) and the United Kingdom (Silcox, 2014) indicates the potential for expanded global interest in furthering the study of autism. As autism is not associated with a single geographic region, understanding how it plays out in organizations around the world may offer unique perspectives within varying cultures as to strategies that leaders in other countries engage in to support and accommodate employees with autism.



Fourth, within the broader context of diversity and inclusion, as described by Derven (2014), future studies on autism in the workplace should consider policy changes and approaches for facilitating and creating inclusive, supportive and accommodating work environments for individuals with autism. As Richards (2012) noted in his research, individuals with Asperger's syndrome experienced exclusion from mainstream employment practices and settings. Richards (2015) also focused on the inclusion of individuals with Asperger's syndrome within the context of theoretical frameworks and present-day employment practices.

Fifth, future research should focus on theoretical foundations to help explain an autism-related phenomenon. The theory of work adjustment (as cited by Sadatsafavi et al., 2015) states the work environment needs to be suitable for employees to perform their tasks. Future studies could focus on specific workplace adjustments that foster improved employee performance. Schur et al. (2014) drew on the human resource theory to help explain employee requests for accommodations, both for employees with and without disabilities. Facilitating a similar study might lead to a greater understanding as to the likelihood of employees with autism requesting specific support or accommodations in the workplace.

Sixth, as organizational leaders begin assimilating individuals with autism in the workplace and providing them with necessary support and accommodations, researchers need to consider the perceptions of coworkers of employees with autism. For employees who do not have a disability, do they exhibit resentment or ill feelings regarding the support and accommodations that employees with autism receive? Do they have access to

similar accommodations such as flex schedules, frequent breaks, or opportunities to decompress? Are managers supportive of able-bodied employees who face depression, anxiety, or obsessive-compulsive disorder? These questions and others will likely surface as the population of employees with autism increases and leaders assess the implications of supporting all employees.

### **Implications**

The implication of my study to practice is consistent with the view that organizational leaders bear the primary responsibility for planning, organizing, leading and controlling all facets of their respective organizations, including strategizing ways to assimilate and accommodate the population of individuals with autism into the workplace. This population of employees has been underserved and underrepresented in employment, and as such, represents a potential unexplored workforce that bears tremendous potential, if only leaders will unleash that potential by providing necessary support and accommodations whereby the unique skillset of individuals with autism is released and their weaknesses mitigated for.

The interpretations drawn from the results of this study indicates that to properly support and accommodate employees with autism, leaders need to develop an underlying foundation based on the organization's mission from which flows all supportive endeavors. Although findings from the eight overarching themes revealed that leaders engaged in various options to create a supportive and accommodating work environment, perhaps the most critical finding revealed that the case study organization's mission embodies leaders' perspective as to how and why they support and accommodate

employees with autism. Findings from the present study have implications for positive social change, management practice and management theory.

### **Significance to Positive Social Change**

According to Stephan, Patterson, Kelly, and Mair (2016), organizations play an important role in creating and advancing social well-being within societies. The present qualitative, descriptive case study exemplifies one such opportunity to advance positive social change. Results from my study may advance the interest of organizational leaders to create work environments that are conducive and supportive of employees with autism. The potential for positive social change begins with organizational leaders who have the authority and power to establish and enact policies and procedures that favor the underserved population of individuals with autism. Individuals with autism face a variety of stigmas and stereotypes that diminish their potential to use their unique skillsets and abilities (Werner & Roth, 2014). Leaders may use findings from the present study to make significant changes to their mission, vision, and values statements, and establish foundational concepts whereby organizational members learn to work with and assimilate the population of employees with autism.

As I discussed in Chapter 1, some organizations have biased policies against individuals who need various support or accommodations, which essentially excludes certain members of the population from obtaining jobs (Stein et al., 2014). The present study may influence leaders of such organizations to reconsider their diversity and inclusion policies. To extract the greatest capacity from every employee and create a competitive advantage, leaders need to develop strategies to ensure the workplace is

inclusive and free of barriers that impede performance (Kalargyrou & Volis, 2014; Nicholas et al., 2014). Positive social change may result from this study in the form of inclusive practices that integrate persons with disabilities whereby innovation, creative ideas, competitive advantage, improved customer service and satisfaction and improved company image lead to improved organizational performance, as stated by (Kalargyrou & Volis, 2014).

Individuals with disabilities experience a higher sense of wellbeing and productivity in the workplace when their talents are fully used (Konrad, Moore, Ng, Doherty, & Breward, 2013). Results from the present study may have a positive social impact on any employee with a disability. As I described in Chapter 2, there are a variety of vantage points that organizational leaders used to support and accommodate employees, regardless of ability and disability. At some point, all employees require changes to their jobs or the work environment to be effective (Durand et al., 2014; Lidh, 2013; Schur et al., 2014). There are additional positive social benefits to families of individuals with autism as their overall wellbeing in the workplace improves (Zheng et al., 2015). The results of this study could have implications for other disabled populations in the workplace, or for employees that are not disabled but have special issues that arise at different times in their employment. The results of this study may reduce the burden on taxpayers if the population of individuals with autism obtains opportunities for sustained employment that leads to self-sufficiency.

Lastly, this study may have significant positive social impact on employees with autism as they seek bona fide employment that leads to lives of productivity, self-

sufficiency and dignity. Justice and fairness are illusive to the population of individuals with autism. As such, organizational leaders and society bear the responsibility to rectify these injustices and pave the way toward capitalizing on autism skills in the workplace.

### **Significance to Management Practice**

As employee demographics change in the coming years and leaders strategize on how to assimilate varying populations of workers into the workplace (Fujimoto et al., 2014), results from the present study may provide leaders with additional insights as to how to create work environments that fully support and accommodate employees with any disability or specific need, including autism. The results of the present study may prompt leaders to create all-encompassing organizational policies and practices that capitalize on employee strengths and minimize their weaknesses, as recommended by Harter and Adkins (2015) and Warnier et al. (2013). Such policies, as revealed in the findings of my study, may lead managers to establish appropriate funding to support and accommodate individuals with autism.

Organizational leaders may become more familiar with the specific needs of employees with autism because of this study. Understanding how to better support individuals with autism is important in ensuring the workplace is conducive to their employment contribution, presenting a significant opportunity for management practice related to the population of individuals with autism, as well as for the unique and gifted skill sets that this population can provide to the companies that support them. Despite an increased understanding of autism within the fields of neuroscience, psychology, health

and education (Johnson & Joshi, 2016; Richards, 2015), little attention has been given within the field of management.

### **Significance to Management Theory**

As there is no singular strategy for supporting and accommodating employees with autism, no single theory from the fields of neuroscience, psychology, health, sociology and education lead to an exact explanation as to how best to support and accommodate the population of employees with autism. Findings from the present study related to labor process theory, as discussed by Braverman (1975) only partially explain the reasons leaders establish necessary support or accommodations for this population of employees. On the other hand, resource-based theory (Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984), as revealed through the findings in the present study, significantly improves the understanding as to how and why organizational leaders support and accommodate employees with rare or scarce skills. My study helps fill the gap in research, yet raises more questions as to the application of other theories to similar business scenarios.

### **Conclusions**

Organizational leaders lack strategies for supporting and accommodating employees with autism. The implications for managers who work with the adult autistic population, disabled population, or any employee with special needs is that at some point, all employees need additional support or accommodations to perform at optimal levels. Managers need to create a workplace climate that is conducive, supportive and positive to achieve higher performance from employees, capitalizing on employee strengths while

mitigating for their weaknesses and unleashing the unrealized potential from underserved and underrepresented populations of employees.

The findings for managers are important to individuals with autism, or any disability, who seek improved justice, fairness, and viable employment opportunities that lead to a life of independence, self-sufficiency and dignity. Individuals with autism seek opportunities to lead normal, productive and meaningful lives. Securing competitive employment within an organization that values, supports and accommodates them leads to feelings of being ‘at home.’ In light of the rally cry from the #IWantToWork (2016) movement advocating for young disabled citizens of Pennsylvania, the population of young individuals with disabilities eagerly wishes to find sustainable and long-term integrated employment. Young people with disabilities are a potential source of talent that leaders need to capitalize on, which may result in a competitive advantage and prosperity.

The findings are important to advancing the broader body of management knowledge as to how and why organizational leaders support and accommodate employees of various abilities and disabilities, but more specifically the population of employees with autism, while simultaneously building on their strengths, which may lead to improved organizational effectiveness and efficiency. Despite the increased prevalence of autism on a global scale, potential exists for organizational leaders to improve employee productivity by creating a better standard of living for individuals with autism.

The study contributes to social change in terms of providing evidence that business can prosper with disabled employees, if leaders will provide adequate support or

accommodations to capitalize on employee strengths. The findings create awareness that social change can occur as attitudes toward the disabled and/or the aged change, seeing these employees as productive members of society, rather than a burden. This awareness can help businesses tap another pool of productive employees, give people with disabilities a feeling of self-worth, independence, and dignity and reduce the burden on taxpayers. As scholar-practitioners, academicians and organizational leaders advance the topic of support and accommodations for able-bodied and disabled employees, they will positively impact society. The overall conclusion of the study is that organizational leaders need to develop and implement inclusive, supportive and accommodating policies and practices that capitalize on autism skills at work.



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Appendix A: Observation Guide  
Observation of the Physical Work Environment

The purpose of this observation guide is to provide a step action table (job aide, checklist) to stay focused on the data and other details observed in the setting. I will write a comprehensive description of the setting following the table below. Using the table, I will note the approximate timeframes that observations are made along with notes describing what is observed and any other details considered important. After the observation, I will review notes and begin to identify key points (concepts and ideas) that may help in the data analysis.

Table A1

*Observation Guide*

<b>Tentative Schedule</b>	(i.e., M,W,F, 8:00am-4:00pm)
<b>Date:</b>	
<p><b>The Background:</b> Physical setting (describe in thick rich detail what it looks like, sounds like, and any other details. Record what you know about the work environment). What do the physical surroundings look like? Is the work area noisy or quiet?</p>	
<p><b>The General Work Environment:</b> What visible changes or alterations to the physical work environment exist? What type of lighting is in the workplace? What soundproofing materials are evident? Where are workstations located?</p>	
<p><b>The Individual Workspace:</b> How are workstations arranged in the office space? Are there any differences to individual workstations?</p>	
<b>Time:</b>	<b>Observation:</b>



## Appendix B: Semistructured Interview Questions

### Interview Questions

1. What is your age, gender, race, years of service in this position, years of service to this organization?
2. What competitive advantages do leaders obtain by supporting individuals with high-functioning autism?
3. What policies, procedures, and workplace settings do leaders within your organization need to establish for supporting individuals with high-functioning autism?
4. What retention strategies of managers lead to establishing support mechanisms for individuals with high-functioning autism?
5. What preparations are necessary for frontline managers to accommodate the workplace needs of individuals with high-functioning autism?
6. What process determines whether an employee with high-functioning autism needs additional support or accommodation?
7. What types of support or accommodation to the physical environment does your organization provide to employees with high-functioning autism?
8. What other types of support are offered to employees with high-functioning autism?
9. What is your role in providing support or accommodation to employees with high-functioning autism?
10. How does leadership promote support or accommodation to employees with high-functioning autism?
11. How does the organizational mission align with providing support or accommodation to employees with high-functioning autism?

Appendix C: E-mail Invitation to Organizational Leaders, Managers, Frontline  
Supervisors

Dear (insert participant name),

My name is Jonathan Pierce, and I am a doctoral student at Walden University pursuing a Ph.D. in Management. The reason I am writing you is to invite you to participate in a research study. I obtained your name from your senior leader. You were identified as a potential participant for this study on strategies that organizational leaders engage in to support and accommodate employees with high-functioning autism. There will be no compensation for participating in this study. Upon your agreement to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

- Participate in face-to-face interviews with the researcher and answer approximately 10 semistructured questions that will be audio-recorded, related to your strategies for supporting and accommodating employees with high-functioning autism. The interview will be held at a private location of your choice, and will last between 30 to 60 minutes.
- Participate in member checking the resulting data, which entails ensuring your opinions in the initial findings and interpretations are accurate.

I anticipate the research may contribute to positive social change by understanding how to better support and accommodate individuals with high-functioning autism, ensuring the workplace is conducive to their employment, and utilizing the unique and gifted skill sets that this population can provide to the companies that support them.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please reply to this e-mail indicating your preferred interview location and time, and feel free to ask any questions you may have.

Best regards,

Jonathan Pierce  
Doctoral candidate: Ph.D. in Management

#### Appendix D: In-Person Interview Protocol

Prior to the start of the interview, participants who agree to participate in the study will provide a signed copy of the informed consent agreement. The outline of statements below provides the configuration and process associated with the 11 participant interviews:

1. Through e-mail correspondence, arrange with participants to meet on a specific date, location, and time to interview each participant.
2. Assign a pseudonym to each participant who agrees to be part of the study.
3. Present a copy of the consent form to participant and review the contents.
4. Ask the participant if s/he has any questions about the informed consent form, allow the participant to ask questions, and ask if they agree to continue participating in the study.
5. Have participant sign two copies of the informed consent form, provide one copy to the participant, and retain the second copy for my records.
6. Prior to starting the interview, ask participants for permission to record their interviews using a digital recording device.
7. Once the participant agrees to be recorded, turn on the recording device, identify the participant's pseudonym, and the date and time of the interview.
8. Welcome the participant and thank them for their willingness to participate in the study.

9. Begin the interview by gathering demographic data about each participant, noting their gender and race, and then asking their age, years in this position, and years of service to this organization.
10. Begin by asking the first interview question and proceed through each question to the final question.
11. During each interview, take field notes to assist in proper interpretation of participant answers.
12. Conclude the interview and thank each participant for his or her willingness to participate in the study.
13. Ask participants if they are satisfied with their answers and provide them an opportunity to add to, clarify their answers.
14. Thank each participant for answering the questions.
15. Turn off the digital recorder and verify the interview recorded successfully.
16. Discuss the next phases that include transcription, coding, and assignment of emerging themes.
17. Discuss member checking and accurate interpretation of each participant's interview.
18. Notify participants that I will e-mail them a copy of the transcribed interpretation of the recorded interview.
19. Ask participants to review the interpretation for accuracy and note any corrections or modifications they deem necessary.

20. Ask participants to return the transcription via e-mail to my Walden e-mail address, and provide them with my contact information including e-mail and cell phone number.
21. Thank each participant for participating in the study.
22. End of interview protocol.

## Appendix E: Categories, Themes and Codes

Table E1

## Emergent Categories, Themes and Codes

Categories	Themes	Codes
	Advocating for self and others	Advocating for others Self-advocating
Power obtained from labor	Mission, vision, values, social responsibility	Mission Social responsibility Values and vision
	Autism challenges	Anxiety and moods Behavioral issues Drawback to physical accommodation Executive functioning Legal mandates end Mental disorders Prevalence of autism Sensory processing Social cues Underemployment and unemployment
	Nonphysical supports	Assessing needs Behavioral support Breaks Check-in meetings Coaching Communication system Counseling support Flex time Gender neutral restrooms Interviewing, onboarding, and training Life skills and hygiene Morale Noise disruptions Opportunities for advancement and growth Patience Recognition and pay Social activities Structure Support Supportive culture Talking is minimal

*(table continues)*

Categories	Themes	Codes
		Art therapy
		Blanket, pillow, and couch
		Casual dress code
		Decompression room
		Dim lights
		Ear plugs
		Exercise bike
		Fidget toys
		Food and snacks
		Foosball table
		Furniture
		Hammock
		Headphones
		Individualized accommodations
Benefits derived from labor	Physical accommodations	Massagers
		Open areas
		Parking
		Quiet break room
		Quiet environment
		Quiet spaces
		Slack room
		Sleep mask
		Social break room
		The Tardis
		Weighted vest and blanket
		Workspace area – cubicle
		Workspace area – private office
		Workspace area – open
		Workspaces of different types
		Federal contracts
		Foundations and grants
		Management preparation
		Manual – an autistic view of employment
		Manual – fact sheets about autism
Competitive advantage	Policies, procedures, funding	Philanthropy
		Posters and banners
		Resource allocation
		Retention
		Strategic planning
		Supports for managers

(table continues)

Categories	Themes	Codes
Tapping into underused or unused resources	Support personnel	Autism specialist Community support External support personnel Job coach and tech specialist Social worker
	Unique skillset	Affinity for repetitive tasks Analytical work Attention to detail Concentration Detect subtle defects Focus Intelligence Logical thinking Low turnover Loyalty and devotion Memory Patience Precision Problem solving skills Quick and efficient Quick learners Restricted interests Strengths Technology skills Unique perspectives Visual processing
Total	4	8 105