

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Conditions and Limitations of Internet-based Information Sharing on Autistic Spectrum Disorders at Regional Youth Support Stations

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## ABSTRACT

Recent research has reported that the number of unemployed youth with autistic spectrum disorders (ASDs) or suspected of ASDs is increasing. Moreover, problems faced by youth with ASDs in remaining employed have been focused. In this study, we accessed websites of regional youth support stations and analyzed information provided by these websites, in order to understand the contemporary situation related to the provision of information by these stations. Information about the provision of support in previous cases, institutional cooperation, upcoming events and the style of consultation, among others were summarized. Results indicated that information on available consultation methods at the stations was displayed on all websites. Of the stations, 18.8% required users to visit stations for consultations. However, characteristics of potential users indicated that email, telephone consultations, and home-visits were more suitable and desirable for them. Other issues including the frequency of updating the websites and information about events for interacting with similar others were also investigated. Based on the results, we have discussed the roles of regional youth support stations in meeting social needs.

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## I . Problem and Purpose

### 1. NEETs and Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASDs)

In recent years, people with ASDs are often identified among those that are not in education, employment or training (NEETs). In general, personal factors, such as lack of autonomy, endurance, and communication skills, immature volition to work, as well as socioeconomic factors including decreasing employment opportunities for young adults after the end of the so called economic bubble in the early 1990s are recognized as key causal factors in NEETs. According to Kitao, Sugimoto & Sonoi et al. (2005), "Japan will face a serious decrease in population to approximately 100,000,000 people by 2050. Therefore, ensuring that the workforce can increase its productivity is important for developing the economy. The, increase in the number of NEETs entails that potential human resources are not fully utilized and that people fail to receive training, or gain experience through work, both of which can result in reduced economic growth. Therefore, the issue of NEETs is more than just about jobless youth; and is a serious national concern with implications for economic development.

After decreasing to 630,000 in 2009, the number of jobless youth has generally remained unchanged at over 600 thousand since 2002. However, the youth population aged 15-34 years has shrunk from 34.25 million in 2009 to 29.29 million in 2009. This indicates that the ratio of jobless people among the young population has actually increased by 0.3%, indicating that there has been no improvement in the youth employment situation. The Japan Student Services Organization (2012) in a survey of post-secondary educational institutions reported that 33 of 124 alumni with a diagnosis of ASD found employment in 2012. The employment rate for alumni with no difficulties, or disorders, was 60.9% (total 580 thousand people), whereas it was 49.9% for handicapped alumni (total 1370 people). These data imply that finding employment remains difficult for youth with ASDs. Moreover, according to a survey conducted by an institution supporting NEETs, 36 of 155 users of the institution (23.2%) were suspected of ASDs (National Institute of Vocational Rehabilitation, 2008). Furthermore, another survey conducted by the Japan Productivity Center in 2007 suggest that approximately half the participants was socially withdrawn (49.5%), had a history of psychiatric treatment (49.5%), or had experienced being bullied in the past (over 50%).

Recently, problems related to working opportunities for people with ASD have been discussed more actively than in the past. Nevertheless, requirements for employment support can differ based on ASD characteristics of each person (Kim, 2012). Following the legislation of support provision for people with ASDs in 2005, employment support for such people has been focused in Japan, and the importance of developing systems for providing support from the time of diagnosis has been emphasized (Ministry of Health Labor and Welfare, 2008). However, despite the increased attention given to developing support systems, achieving the goal of adequate support for people with ASDs remains

difficult.

## **2. History of Government Activities**

Since 2003, when the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, the Ministry of Health Labor and Welfare (MHLW), the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry and the Cabinet Office released the “Youth Independence and Challenge Plan,” the Japanese government has implemented a range of measures, such as career education, industry-collaborated education, and reforms of related laws to improve youth-unemployment problems. Six months after the release of the above plan, the “Action Plan for Youth Independence and Challenges” was launched to increase its efficiency. Following these activities, the government realized that more than mere employment support was needed for youth without jobs, and as a result, an expansive support policy has been conducted since 2006, which included the establishment of regional youth support stations.

Unemployment became a significant social issue during the economic depression following the collapse of Lehman Brothers in 2008. As a result, employment development projects designed to increase jobs for people of all age groups have been implemented to facilitate job creation and reemployment. Moreover, after the recognition that some jobless youth were suffering, or suspected of ASDs, a law for supporting the independence of persons with ASDs was enforced in 2005. Furthermore, the need for career education was stipulated in the general provision of high school curriculum guidelines for special needs education, which facilitated career education in all schools including those for special needs education. The national institute of special needs education (2011) defined career education as encouragement and development of motivation, attitudes, and skills for students’ careers. The foremost among employment support projects currently implemented in Japan has been conducted by “Hello Work,” which is the national agency for job seekers. Employment support centers and local vocational centers for persons with disabilities are available to support people with difficulties, such as ASDs. However, these centers have limited their accessibility through provisions stipulating that only people diagnosed with ASDs are eligible to use the centers, thereby making them unavailable to a number of jobless youth that are suspected, but have never been diagnosed with ASDs. Therefore, such public services by themselves are inadequate solutions to the problem. As described above, the discrepancy between public policy and reality is gradually disappearing, nevertheless, new problems and issues are constantly developing, which over the years has led to high number of youth being jobless.

## **3. Overview of Regional Youth Support Stations**

In 2006, there was a major shift from employment support to exclusive and continuous support for jobless youth, and as a result, the government expanded the Regional Youth Support Station Project that was a part of the “Action Plan for Youth Independence and

Challenge" (2005), which was included in the "Youth Independence and Challenge Plan." Interestingly, the actual discussion on developing this plan was conducted by a different organization, the conference for strategy of inclusive independence support for youth, based on an analysis of the "survey of social independence of young people" conducted by the cabinet office of Japan. In the report submitted in June 2006, the concept of this project was tentatively cited as "Youth Support Centers." Regional youth support stations provide employment support for young people aged between 15 and 39 years. The actual support includes consultations with career consultants, communication skills training, and workplace experience programs in companies that cooperate with the program. Government-sanctioned NPO groups and companies across the country have participated in implementing this project. Originally the project welcomed any unemployed person, without regard to ASDs. However, as the understanding about youth unemployment increased, meeting the needs of unemployed youth with ASDs was considered an important goal. In fact, this understanding has resulted in professionalism in providing support for people with ASDs. However, the content of these services are not standardized and they depend heavily on operators of each support station. As a result, certain training programs are not suitable for people with difficulties. Users typically visit the support station that is closest to their home on a regular basis and rarely consider changing the station. As a result, standards are required in all the stations, in order to provide the same quality of services for all users.

#### **4. Purpose of this study**

We accessed websites of Regional Youth Support Stations in different regions of Japan and examined the content of information provided in their websites. On the basis of the results, we discussed the system of Regional Youth Support Stations in light of future social need for this service.

## **II. Method**

### **1. Subjects**

Websites of 160 Regional Youth Support Stations across Japan were analyzed, by examining all webpages of each website.

### **2. Period of analysis**

November to December, 2014.

### **3. Procedures**

#### **1) Having a website**

We used the webpage of MHLW, which shows a list of Regional Youth Support Stations,

and searched the URL of each station. We also searched stations that are not included in the list by using search engines such as Yahoo, and Google.

## 2) Assessing information on websites

There are no standardized scales or evaluation methods available for assessing the information that is provided through websites of Regional Youth Support Stations. Therefore, we developed an original scale and evaluation criteria, based on the Regional Youth Support Station Project of 2013 (MHLW, 2013), which includes information on career consulting, station-school links and intensive training for unemployed young people (Table 1).

<Table 1> Overview of the analysis

- Having a website
- Information on websites
  - Staff licensing and certification
- Disclosure of personal information about staff
  - None
  - Without a face photo
  - With a face photo
- Information on past cases
- Information on institutional cooperation
  - None
  - Only Companies
  - Only Schools
  - Both companies and schools
- Opportunities to interact with similar others
- Frequency of updating website (days since the last update)
- Announcements of upcoming events
  - (Out-of-date information was not analyzed in this study)
- Information on methods of consultation
- Using the expression, “developmental disorders”
  - (Instances in which “developmental disorders” are clearly mentioned)

## III. Result

### 1. Having a website

All 160 Stations had a website

### 2. Information on websites

#### 1) Number of full-time staff

##### a. Staff licensing and certification

Of all support stations, 56 (97.5%) displayed the number of full-time staff on their

websites. The remaining websites had no information about their staff. The largest number of full-time staff in any one station was 27, whereas the smallest number was only three. The average number of full-time staff members in a station was 8.4.

#### b. Staff licensing and certification

Of all support stations, 152 (95.0%) displayed information about staff certification on their websites. The total number of staff members with a professional license, including those with multiple qualifications was 995. The details of licenses and qualifications are shown in Table 2. It can be seen that the most common license was career consultant's license, which was held by 261 staff members. This was followed by clinical psychologist's license, which was held by 143, and industrial counselor's license, held by 115 staff members.

<Table 2> Staff licensing and certification

Licenses / certificates	Number of holders as shown on websites
Career consultant	261
Clinical psychologist	143
Industrial counselor	115
Teaching credentials (including high schools, junior high schools, primary schools, special needs schools)	104
Career counselor	84
Psychiatric social worker	41
Social worker	34
Career consulting specialist	24
Psychological counselor	23
Others	166

#### c. Disclosure of personal information about staff

The disclosure of personal information about staff is shown in Table 3. It can be seen that websites of 130 stations (81.2%) did not show any pictures of their staff, whereas the websites of 23 stations' (14.4%) had some illustration of staff or greetings that reflected the personality and interests of staff members. Only 7 stations (4.4%) had pictures of their staff.

&lt;Table 3&gt; Disclosure of personal information about staff

Level of disclosure	Number of Stations	(%)
No disclosure at all	130	81.3
Illustrations and greeting words only	18	14.4
Facial pictures of staff	7	4.4
n	160	100.0

**2) Information on past cases**

More than half of all stations (98 stations, 61.3%) displayed some information about their previous cases on their websites. Examples of cases are shown in Table 4. It can be seen that some websites contained pictures of their past cases, whereas others posted the information on their blog, or on pages of Social Networking Services, (SNS) such as Facebook.

&lt;Table 4&gt; Examples of past cases

- Case information given only in words, without pictures, or images
- Detailed case explanations with pictures, and images
- Work reports with pictures, and images posted on blogs run by the station
- Reports released via SNS including Facebook and Twitter

**3) Information on institutional cooperation**

Of all support stations, 124 (77.5%) displayed information about cooperating institutions. As can be seen in Table 5 and by examples of cases sorted by cooperating institutions shown in Table 6., support for school refusing children and school dropouts were mainly provided through links between the stations and school projects, as well as cooperation with supporting companies through various internship programs and company tours.

&lt;Table 5&gt; Institutional cooperation

Institution	Number of Stations	(%)
Companies	74	46.3
Schools	18	11.3
Companies & schools	32	20.0
N/A	36	22.5
n	160	100.0

&lt;Table 6&gt; Case examples sorted by cooperating institutions

Schools	Companies
• Support for students graduating without career plans	• Linking youth and institutions based on needs
• Individual guidance for school refusing students	• Providing opportunities for youth to talk to working adults
• Visiting homes of high school, and university dropouts	• Providing work experience for long term unemployed youth
• Preventive support for those expected to have difficulties in social life after graduation	• Workplace visits by youth to get an idea about working

**4) Opportunities to interact with similar others**

We investigated whether unemployed youth had opportunities to talk and interact with other people in a similar situation. Results indicated that 59 of the 160 stations (36.9%) provided such opportunities for their users. (see Table 7 for some examples).

&lt;Table 7&gt; Examples of events for promoting interactions

- Seminars conducted by former users of stations that have graduated and are currently employed. Their actual experiences are introduced to develop ideas about working in unemployed youth
- “Mingle saloons” and “Free spaces” without staff members being present to maximize communication between participants
- Mingling events for women
- Events in which participants communicate while cooking and eating
- Recreational events including yoga and sports to facilitate communication among participants
- Interactions with users of other support stations in the same area

**5) Frequency of updating website**

We calculated the number of days from the last update of a support station website blogs, and SNS, to the day we retrieved information from the website. Of all support stations 10 (6.3%) updated their website on the day we viewed their website. Over 70% of all stations (123 stations) had updated their information within the month. The mean number of days before a website was updated was 28.3 days ( $SD=82.2$ ), with a maximum of 766 days and a minimum of 0 days. These results indicate that the frequency of updating websites was very different for different stations.

**6) Announcements of upcoming events**

Announcements of events including seminars and camps conducted by support stations were shown on the website of 149 stations (93.1%). Most introduced computer training seminars, resume writing lectures and short-term camps for training in skills needed for social independence. Examples of such events are shown in Table 8.

&lt;Table 8&gt; Examples of lectures, seminars, and camps.

- Lectures on resume writing
- Lectures on job interview techniques
- Lectures on communication based on an training program for actors.
- Lectures on business manners
- Seminars discussing solutions for social problems related to youth unemployment
- Lectures on computer skills training
- Camps for improving daily rhythm and social independence

**7) Information on methods of consultation**

All 160 support stations provided information regarding available consultation styles at their station on their websites. Of the stations, 66 (41.3%) provided consultations through telephone, email, and home visits, 39 stations provided only telephone and email consultations, whereas 25 (15.6%) provided only home visit consultations. Moreover, 30 stations (18.8%) provided consultation only to those that visited the station (Table 9).

&lt;Table 9&gt; Consultation methods

Consultation style	Number of Stations available	(%)
Telephone, Email, and home visits	66	41.3
Telephone and email only	39	24.4
Home visit only	25	15.6
None of the above consultation styles	30	18.8
n	160	100.0

**8) Using the term, “developmental disorders”**

Of the stations, 12 (7.5%) used the words, “developmental disorders” on their websites, or shared information about consultations and/or seminars on “developmental disorders” with parents, rather than using indirect references, such as trouble with communicating with others,” or “providing support based on the needs of each user.

## IV. Discussion

### 1. Having a website

All 160 support stations had websites for providing information to the public. This suggests that Regional Youth Support Stations recognize the Internet is a powerful and effective tool for the provision of information. Providing information through websites is highly appropriate considering the circumstances of users, because it allows users to access necessary information from any place and at any time.

### 2. Information on websites

#### 1) Staff licensing and certification

Over 90% of websites contained information on the qualifications of full-time staff members. This information indicated that 262 workers held career consultant's certificate, which was the most common in this study, followed by clinical psychologist's certificate held by 143 staff members and industrial counselor's certificate held by 115 workers. This implies that psychological and vocational support based on user characteristics has been highly emphasized as necessary for supporting young people. However, 166 staff members only held private certificates that were not nationally recognized. Although private certificates have the advantage of flexibly corresponding to social needs, the recognition and reliability of these certificates can differ, because different organizations have different qualification standards. As suggested by these results, closer examination of youth support center staff certification should be undertaken in the future. It is suggested that the disclosure of information on websites about staff working at stations is inadequate, with over 80% of the stations showing little or no information about their staff. When potential users plan to use services provided by a station, images of the station and its staff seen beforehand would make it easier to actually visit the station.

#### 2) Information on past cases

Over 60% of stations displayed information about cases that they supported in the past, however, the format of such information was different between stations, with some stations including photos, whereas others used only text, or SNS such as Facebook and Twitter. It is suggested that understanding the process involved in using the services would help possible users to imagine their future, which in turn would encourage youth to take action to improve their condition.

#### 3) Information on institutional cooperation

Information on institutional cooperation was displayed on over 70% of websites. However, less than 30% of websites provided information about programs linking the stations with schools, conducted by the MLHW as a part of Regional Youth Support

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Station Project of 2013. The provision of information on issues related to schools, such as informing young people that dropping out of school would result in long-term unemployment, could be improved if the cooperation between stations and schools were more effective. It is also suggested that developing strong bonds between the stations, educational institutions, and parents, as well as information sharing between them would prevent isolating NEETs from society.

#### **4) Opportunities to interact with similar others**

No more than 40% of stations provided information about interactive events. The number of stations having interactive events on a regular basis was limited, however, they provided a wide variety of events. It is known that unemployed youth have difficulties in building relationships, and therefore, such events have been designed to improve communication skills of such young people. Some stations also held seminar events, in which former users of the station that were successfully employed, talked about their own experiences to encourage young people. In addition to such events, it is suggested that more casual events allowing reciprocal interactions between past and current users would be more helpful for young people. During such events, former users can act as role models, as well as peer supporters for current users, which in turn would contribute to lowering hurdles against using the stations by unemployed youth.

#### **5) Frequency of updating website**

All support stations with the exception of three stations, clearly displayed updated information on their websites and on SNS that included activity reports, information on seminars, and notifications about schedules. Even though the style and content of updates differed from station to station, the newness of information itself was a significant criterion that provided users with a good indication of the reliability of the station. However, a few websites rarely updated information, whereas others provided almost daily updates. It is suggested that the lack of updates over a long period of time would lead to the loss of reliability of the station and to the possibility of disconnecting potential unemployed, young users from the station. Conducting regular updates of information on websites is considered important for maintaining and improving the effectiveness and reliability of stations.

#### **6) Announcements of upcoming events**

Over 90% of stations provided information about upcoming seminars and lectures on their websites. Computer skills trainings and resumé writing lectures were the most common events. However, some stations organized original events, such as NEETs-prevention seminars, seminars on better understanding of common disorders including ASDs, and drama-style communication skills seminars. The only limitation was that more than half of those events required participants to be registered as users of

the stations. It is suggested that events that are open for anyone should be increased in the future.

#### **7) Information on methods of consultation**

All the Stations provided information on their websites about available consultation methods. However, 18.8% of the stations provide consultations only for people that actually visited the stations. Taking the situation and characteristics of potential users into consideration, it is suggested that indirect and outreach types of consultation should be provided by all the stations. More full-time staff and effective job assignment in the same region would be needed in order to improve this situation in the future.

#### **8) Using the term, “developmental disorders”**

Only about 10% of the stations clearly used the term, “developmental disorders” on their websites, however, over half the websites explained characteristics of this disorder, without using the actual term. This suggests that the stations considered youth with ASDs were potential users of their facilities. Avoiding the use of this term could be appropriate as some of the possible users could have no diagnosis of ASD. Therefore, indirect explanations of the difficulties faced by unemployed youth could more closely connect these youth with the stations, regardless of their diagnosis. In the future, it is suggested that closer links should be forged between users and institutions on the basis of users’ needs and desires. Moreover, forging closer interactions between stations and users, as well as with users’ parents would be desirable. It is also suggested that details of these links should be provided through the websites, in order to effectively inform those needing the services of the stations. We also believe that improving the specialization and professionalism of staff members, as well as information sharing about disorders on station websites while avoiding direct mention of diagnostic terms, is desirable.

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