

# KIRA

*Employment support for people with autism*



Initiative:

Dr. Leo Kannerhuis, Centrum voor Autisme (Doorwerth)

in cooperation with

RMPI (Barendrecht)

Rijngest Groep, Centrum Autisme (Leiden)

De Grote Rivieren, De Steiger (Dordrecht)

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# Preface

People with autism are entitled to employment opportunities specifically adapted to their abilities. The run-up to this kind of employment opportunity is not without problems. Reintegration is problematic and very little support is available in order to maintain the workplace. The KIRA project provides an operating method whereby opportunities are created for people with autism to enter the employment market and make a motivated contribution to the labour process.

The KIRA method has been written for people working in the employment support field. Elements from existing employment support methods have been used as a starting point in support of day-to-day practice and, where necessary, adapted to the target group. This scheme has been generated with financial assistance from the ESF-EQUAL fund of the European Union. Various institutions and their employees have contributed their time, know how, work experience and mutual exchanges. The following institutions, all based in the Netherlands, were actively involved:

- Dr. Leo Kannerhuis, Centre for Autism, Doorwerth
- De Grote Rivieren, 'De Steiger' Department, Dordrecht
- RMPI, Barendrecht
- Rijngest Group, Autism Centre, Leiden
- Central RINO Group, Utrecht

The following text is a summary of the method content developed during the project. What are the basic principles of this method and who plays an important part? The various components of the support process are detailed in stages. The operating matrix in this website is of particular importance. The matrix is the basis of the method, whereby background information and ready to use forms for the support process are easily accessible to the implementing job coach/ project counsellor of a client suffering from autism.

# Method

## Introduction

The objective of the KIRA method is to assist people with ASD to find a suitable workplace by developing an employment identity, so that they can make a valuable contribution to the employment process. KIRA is an integrated method of employment support for people with autism, developed by professionals who operate in the field of employment support (members of a working party) for professionals in the employment support field. Integrated reflects the fact that elements of existing general employment support methods have been incorporated in the KIRA method and, where necessary, adapted to the target group.

The result is a practical operating method (on enclosed CD-ROM) in which background information (ranging from information on autism to legislation/regulations with respect to personal support) and work documents are clearly organised, easy to find and easy to use by colleagues in the employment support field.

## 1.1 Core concepts

The method is based on the principle that clients (wanting) to participate in an employment support project all have individual backgrounds. One could be a school leaver who fully accepts his autism and is aware of his limitations; another may not be able to find suitable work after having left school and may be confronted with a diagnosis of autism for the first time. For these people the acceptance of their handicap, and the fact that they have to forsake future expectations, are paramount. Every client comes with an individual request for support in finding suitable employment.

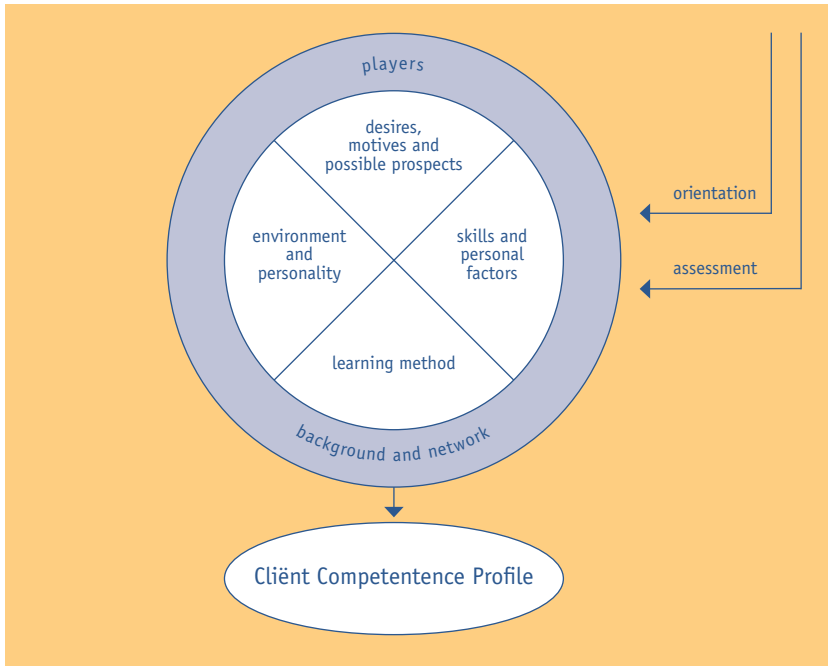
When the specific nature of the request for support/assistance becomes clear, we can define which means, in support of the client's abilities, can be applied in order to find a suitable workplace. Employment support projects are focused on finding answers to the following two questions:

- What contribution can I make to society with my labour?
- What can I gain from society via my labour?

During an employment support project the job coach will help the client to find answers to these questions. Employment support is aimed at helping people, who are distanced from the labour market, to find a suitable workplace. This requires a staged approach with respect to assessment, job finding, job creation, function and task adjustment where necessary, and support at the workplace. From the client's point of view this support in finding suitable employment is based on assistance with the selection, acquisition and maintenance of an appropriate workplace. In many cases this also involves learning to abandon a disagreeable or stressful work situation, or even forsaking cognitive skills that cannot be applied in practice.

From a professional point of view this type of support can be described as the process that aims to develop, reinstate, maintain and expand an individual's employment possibilities. During this process methods focused on the individual, such as employment orientation, training, mediation and job coaching, are combined with strategies focused on the environment, such as the creation of, or impact on, a future work situation. This description implies a dual task, i.e. on the one hand working on individual work skills, on the other hand using, or creating, auxiliary sources in the (employment) environment.

The starting point for the development of an employment project is the client's actual situation and his desires, motives, skills and possible prospects. The dimension of social networks and backgrounds in the KIRA method has been developed from the perspective of the parties (players) involved in the employment support project, i.e. the client, job coach, personal and professional network. Information received from, and on, these players and the four other dimensions result in the creation of a Client Competency Profile (CCP).



### Client Competency Profile

## 1.2 Employment support stages

This paragraph provides brief descriptions of the different stages of the overall employment support process. There are four stages, i.e. intake, assessment, support and coaching or aftercare. The specific objective, operating method and targeted results, as well as points of particular interest, are described for each stage.

### 1.2.1 Intake

The intake stage aims to clarify each individual request for assistance. What is the exact individual request of support in finding suitable employment? Does the client ask for support (whose interests are promoted with this request?).

## **Operating method and results**

The intake stage generates an initial representation of the client's actual prospects in the employment market. A preliminary project plan is set up and a decision is made on which tools to apply. Work orientation is decided depending on the client's professional knowledge and skills. Finally, a rough estimate is made of the duration of the project.

## **Points of particular interest**

From the outset it is important to ensure that the client has a clear picture of the locations, times, structure and progress of the discussions and the roles of the people involved. The client will perceive the first meeting as rather stressful – in a new environment with new people. It is important to be alert to mutual understanding. After the initial meeting the client will receive concise information on employment support and, after subsequent meetings, copies of agreements in writing. Subsequent meetings will always start with a recap of the previous meeting. It may be useful to use flip charts during meetings in order to visualise the items under discussion.

The involvement of the network is of vital importance to obtain additional information and evaluate the support options from the network throughout the project. It is important, therefore, in particular during the initial discussions to invite parents, partners or counsellors etc. to (actively) participate in the process, obviously with agreement from the client. The collation of information should also include data on the use of medication and its side effects (to include instructions for use). Relevant information on the treatment period is also required. This information should preferably be brought in by the client.

### **1.2.2 Assessment and orientation**

The objective of the assessment stage is to investigate the client's skills (and personal network) with respect to employment and the way in which support/coaching towards the objective is geared to the client's requirements.

The following will be investigated and charted:

- Desires, motives and prospects
- Skills and personal factors
- Client's learning method
- Client's social background and professional/natural networks
- Environment and personality

We will then look at possibilities to expand these skills and set up a project on the basis of the above data.

### **Operating method and results**

This stage generates a relevant employment picture of the client and its significance for the learning development process or support. The elements needed for the project have now become clear and include operations, employment conditions, skills on offer, development options, support, network and environment in and around a workplace. The image of the participant that needs to be transmitted to the counsellor at the learning/development place is also known. This will include descriptions of motivation, qualities, limitations and prospects. The objective of the support is clearly formulated in conjunction with the client (development project).

As this stage progresses an in-depth and detailed insight into the client will emerge, on the basis of which specific topics, on which the project can be based, can be formulated. For people with autism this assessment needs to take place in an actual work situation (orientation).

### **Points of particular interest**

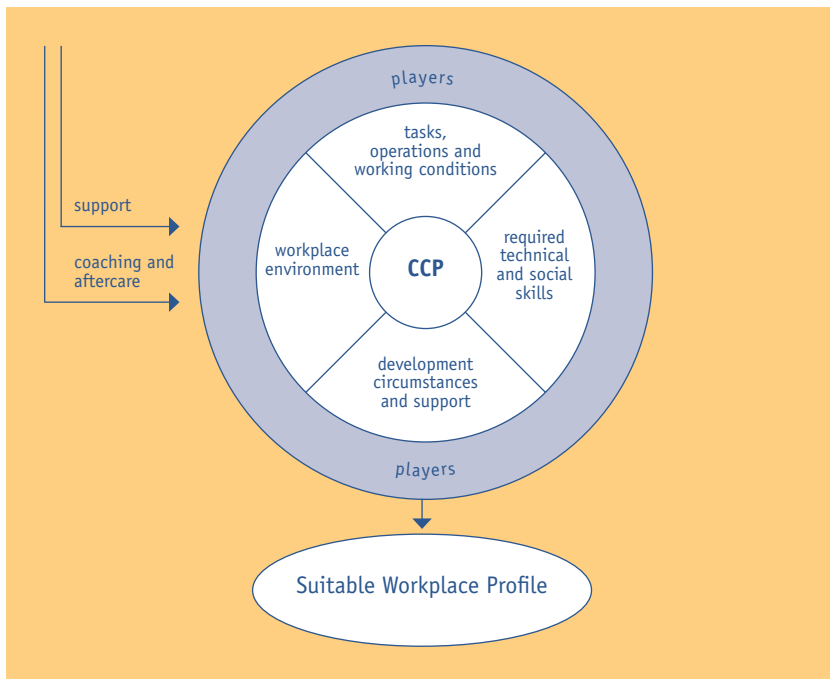
It is now possible to estimate the number of hours the client could work on the basis of physical and mental stress capabilities. It is important to pay extra attention to the travelling distance (and travelling mode) that the client could cope with. All those involved should be aware where, when and how the job coach can be reached.

### 1.2.3 Support

The Client Competency Profile (CCP) was completed on the basis of the assessment and orientation results. This means that a picture is available of the client's work intensity and an indication of a potentially suitable workplace in accordance with his abilities. The objective of the support project is to provide employment related skills/competency training and to look for a suitable work experience place in line with these skills (matching).

#### Operating method and results

This stage initiates the job coach plan and request for personal support. Support is focused on those areas where the Client Competency Profile deviates from the Suitable Workplace Profile.



#### Suitable Workplace Profile

The actual support process is based on three stages. First of all we will look for suitable companies. A choice is then made in conjunction with the client. Once the client has completed some work experience a more direct search can be initiated.

This stage aims to provide answers to the following five interrelated questions:

- What kind of network does to work placement or workplace offer?
- Which operations are on offer and/or tasks to be completed?
- Which skills are required to complete these operations?
- Which development options does the workplace offer and how is this reflected in the support?
- What typifies the environment of the work placement or workplace?

During the next stage initial work experience is acquired through external work placements. Expectations are tested and agreements adjusted on the basis of practical experience. This stage devotes a lot of attention, not only to learning methods, but also to additional instruction and training (over and above learning methods). The training objective is to expand/‘tailor’ the client’s skills, linked to the job. This increases the actual prospects. Training in actual learning and social skills is preferably given at the workplace to promote context based thinking. This should be achieved in consultation with the home front (parents, counsellors) where possible.

The final stage revolves around work mediation. In consultation with institutions such as UWV (Industrial Insurance Administration Office), the job coach arranges contracts, arrangements, paperwork, salaries, wage dispensation etc. The job coach explains everything to the client and prepares him for these activities. It is important not to quote excessive/surplus data. One specific aspect does, however stand out, i.e. reading, signing and dating the contract together.

### **Points of particular attention**

Employers often have non-explicit and non-expressed expectations with respect to tasks to be completed, for example, a ‘client friendly’ approach. The job coach will have to clarify this to the client (dress code, attitude/physical stance).

### **1.2.4 Coaching and aftercare**

The objective of the coaching and aftercare stage is to find a suitable workplace. The client, and other people at the workplace, are coached to safeguard the working relationship between employer and employee.

## **Operating method and results**

The way in which, and to what extent, aftercare is given also depends on the client's individual situation and residential status. Clients who reside in a treatment centre or institution, and who will move to a different region following their treatment or residential period, will have to be guided towards a transfer at an early stage. The aim is to achieve a painless transfer, suitably prepared well in advance. Sudden changes in, for example, home or working environment, personal approach and treatment can lead to considerable insecurity in ASD clients. Clarity about, knowledge of and familiarity with the new situation will minimise the level of lost ground/stagnation during the client's further development.

With a paid function a job coach (if the job coach is paid) will also have to cover the client's career development. It is important to relate this to the client's desires and possibilities in order to maintain the client's interest in the job. Back up during placement is also important. This mainly involves arrangements with respect to contracts and salaries, employer subsidies etc. The request for personal support linked to legal requirements on content and the input of support hours also plays a part.

## **Points of particular interest**

With clients with ASD it is important that the coaching is tailor made, and in line with, the process. When the client has passed through these stages he has developed a work identity, i.e. is aware of his employment qualities and understands how to apply them at a suitable workplace.

### **1.3 Players and elements involved in the method**

The method structure is focused on providing sufficient balance and coherence between the content of the activities and the input of the various people involved in this process.

#### **1.3.1 Players**

The 'Intake' and 'Assessment and Orientation' stages of the client's support process explore the client's abilities and personal network and define how support/coaching (need for support) can be applied in the development of a work identity and suitable workplace.

The support process does not just involve the job coach. The term 'players' is used for other parties involved, such as parents or other close individuals (personal network), professionals providing treatment and people from the work environment (professional network). The three main, interacting players are the client, his immediate environment and the organisation (job coach) which sets up the project. The development of the employment support project is the result of a process of interaction between these three players. The client will have specific ideas and desires with respect to his project, but awareness will dominate any rational arguments for the client and his personal network. Prior to the start of the project, work and school experiences have led to the conclusion that the client needs help in finding suitable employment.

The organisation involved in setting up the project, and its immediate environment, also develop activities whereby all parties involved promote their own interests. The organisation responsible for support may benefit from the success of the project for various reasons, i.e. from the point of view of treatment or reintegration depending on the original objective of the project. It will have to evaluate from a critical distance and within its own range, linked to available means (such as time and finance), how the project can, or must, be implemented.

The government and its policies are also part of the surrounding environment. On the one hand these policies are focused on care and assistance for people with autism. On the other hand, however, they are focused on government interests, such as getting as many people as possible in work (regulations and legislation on integration).

### **1.3.2 Method elements**

The method is structured around a number of core concepts. This paragraph includes a summary of these elements. The classification is the basis for the method of operation detailed in the enclosed CD-ROM. The first part is entitled 'What to do', the second part 'How to proceed'.

#### **'What to do'**

The first five components ('What to do') are the core of the method of operation and result in the Client Competency Profile.

## **Desires, motivation and actual prospects**

This section deals with desires and the way in which the client indicates that he would like to work. If applicable, this also covers the more specific desire for a particular kind of work and/or profession. Motivation refers to the intention behind the desire. The basic principle is that clients with ASD should receive equal treatment where possible. Verbally strong clients in particular will appreciate involvement in the thinking and decision making process for the project.

Finally, actual prospects include a general evaluation of the client's abilities, in combination with a general evaluation of the options these abilities generate in the employment market. Clients, who have chosen a (professional) direction, need to gain an insight into whether this choice is feasible and/or whether it offers actual prospects in the employment market. If a client does not have sufficient insight, it is up to the job coach to clarify the situation. This may mean that the client needs training or a work experience placement, which could provide more clarity with respect to the feasibility of the chosen professional option.

## **Skills**

This term covers the client's social and technical skills and attitude towards work. The essence of the handicap is a social inadequacy. This implies that it is necessary to find out to which degree skills can be acquired or compensated for. The opportunity to develop abilities in clients with ASD can be diverse. It is up to the job coach to investigate whether the client has the right abilities for a specific profession. The client should also be capable of developing those skills required to execute the chosen profession to optimum effect.

The job coach will be in position to highlight skills that can be developed, provide the necessary tools and monitor the development process.

## **Learning method**

Autism has a major impact on lifestyle. It is important to gain an insight into the best learning method for a specific client. Factors resulting from autism can affect 'normal' learning methods, i.e. not being able to think symbolically, not being able to imagine something, not being able to process more than one task at a time or not being able to generalise skills. Clients often need auxiliary tools, such as the visualisation of instructions or specifically adapted instructions.

## **Environment and personality**

The various disorders, and their behavioural and cognitive style characteristics, will have an effect on the approach of each individual client. The time of diagnosis and degree of acceptance of the handicap, by both the client and his personal network, also play an important part. The degree of acceptance will be influenced by various earlier experiences, values and beliefs.

## **Client Competency Profile / Client's need for support**

This profile provides an overview of the client's abilities and way in which he can, and needs, to be supported in order to achieve specific objectives (need for support).

Participation in an employment project can be stressful for the client. This can be the result of the fact that change is involved or because of a confrontation with social inadequacies. Stressful situations in other areas can also affect the progress of the project. The client's behaviour may also have to be explained and his personal network given some pointers, so that employers, colleagues and people in the immediate environment know how to deal with this behaviour. The intensity of the support should be geared to this. Clients who indicate that they no longer need support, should clarify their motivation for this. It is advisable to continue monitoring the situation, in particular with respect to communication problems. Clients who overestimate themselves, or are not capable of putting their problems in to words, run the risk of accumulating a range of non-visible problems. This could result in unnecessary escalation or a temporary relapse or breakdown.

## **'How to proceed'**

The following elements ('How to proceed') are mainly focused on the way in which the various actions in the employment support process can be implemented.

## **Attitude job coach**

The project is completed in conjunction with the client. During contacts with the client it is important that the aspects described in the method concerning attitude are taken into account in order to promote successful cooperation. For example, an appropriate (physical) distance should be maintained during contacts. Clients with ASD will typically have problems with the evaluation and expression of their own feelings and will not always be able to evaluate and interpret other people's feelings correctly.

Too much personal involvement from, or the physical closeness of, the job coach could cause resistance, which could have an adverse effect on cooperation with the client. On the other hand, a client could demand too much personal involvement or physical closeness, whereas the client would benefit more from a professional work attitude in a successful work relationship with third parties. The drawback is that the client would become too dependent on the job coach and cannot work towards independence. It is of the utmost importance, therefore, that the job coach highlights and evaluates these attitude aspects, so that the information can be incorporated in the support plan. The aim is to achieve a pattern of behaviour within society that is 'as normal as possible', whereby the client's individual limitations in this area will most definitely be taken into account.

## **Procedures**

Procedures are based on a selection from actual input and the use of specific means in the support process such as the provision of information, holding discussions, etc. This is based on the following:

- Procedures (discussion or activity) and work principles (guideline for the use of method or technique, clarity with respect to information transmission)
- Process stages: when does what take place and how? (assessment, definition of objective, planning, implementation and evaluation)
- Auxiliary tools: (e.g. brochures, computer, flip charts)

The aim is that the client should learn to become, and remain, independent within his abilities and possibilities. For clients with ASD this means in practical terms that, where necessary, clarity and insight in the own functioning process are provided and that suitable tools are gradually introduced in order to help the client to learn to deal with these limitations. It is eminently advisable to use the client's solutions/strategies and/or to strive to enhance his problem solving capacities. On the one hand this keeps the client actively involved in the process, on the other hand it offers him the option to increase his work skills and orientation. The job coach will supplement and adjust where necessary.

### **Provision of information**

The provision of information can be seen as a procedure. This component is highlighted separately because the way in which information is transmitted to clients with ASD requires extra attention. One of the typical characteristics of autism is a malfunction in information processing. This implies that information should always be adjusted and transmitted in correct doses.

#### **a) Transmitting information**

The client receives information not only about the objective and possibilities of the project, but also meets new people, a new environment and enters a new phase in his life. Clients with ASD may perceive so much information as excessive, which can result in panic or fear. It is important, therefore, to provide the right information from the beginning. This means that a written invitation to a meeting should include details on the location, time, duration and content of the discussion, as well as the names and positions of the participants. A note should be included to confirm that the client can bring along someone from his own environment. At the start of the discussion it is important to check that the client is familiar with the objective of the meeting. Key topics from previous meetings should always be reiterated at subsequent meetings.

The use of flip charts during discussions could be very useful as new environments can cause stress and concentration problems. Any agreements can be submitted in writing at the end of the meeting.

In the event of job coaching for people with ASD sufficient intake data should be available in order to define where the project starts. Clarity and predictability are essential for people in this target group. The intake data will also provide guidelines to structure and direct the project the client intends to follow. In order to achieve a fitting and unequivocal support approach, the client needs to give (written) permission for the exchange of relevant information on his performance/interaction with respect to education, work experience and employment with his personal and professional network.

## **b) Obtaining information**

The job coach will obtain information from various sources:

- By reference: clients are often referred on and information is available right from the start. It is important to tell the client right from the start where the information came from and what it is used for, and to establish what the client would like to change or supplement.
- From the client: on the basis of structured discussions and via forms. It is important to verify that the client has understood the questions, by running through them together and asking the client how he arrived at a particular reply. Clients with ASD may attribute a different meaning to questions than that intended by the interviewer.
- Via third parties: these could include various parties such as family, partner or counsellor, as well as therapists, teachers, work counsellors or employment integration companies.

This information can only be included following consultation with, and written approval from, the client. The importance of this information lies in the fact that it may refer to useful, earlier experiences.

## **Success factors**

The main principle is that clients with ASD should be approached on an equal footing where possible, to give them the opportunity to manage their lives independently. Involvement in the thinking and decision making process is particularly appreciated by clients with strong verbal skills. Clients with a more expectant and aloof attitude will benefit from a more direct or controlled approach. The job coach will provide the options and associated tools, but leaves the client to decide. Interests and/or preoccupations may provide a lead to work orientation, but in many cases will not lead to actual employment prospects. It is advisable to focus on these interests or preoccupations in one of the existence spheres, as they are often very important to the client . If they are ignored, this could be a limiting factor in the project. This will make it clear to the client that his desire can probably not be realised professionally and will create more scope to focus on alternative employment options. This approach demonstrates to the client that the job coach is taking him seriously and is providing an insight into what is, and what is not, feasible.

## **Pitfalls**

If the client lacks, or has insufficient, self knowledge and does not recognise the limitations imposed by ASD, it is necessary to clarify this. The success of the project relies on the fact that the client accepts his autism and the associated limitations. The client needs to have a realistic self image in order to arrive at a degree of self development and integration in the employment process. The job coach should be aware of the possible limitations with respect to perception, the process of generalisation, the ability to change, communication and visualization. The job coach needs to recognise and highlight them, put them up for discussion and provide the means to promote the client's abilities. A typical example is the indication and training of the difference between words and deeds. It is also important to recognise the concept level. For example, a client may not want to work outside because he once walked into a garden fork. This data is immediately associated with working outside and thus limits the exploration of employment possibilities.

Finally, the matrix includes a description of the various stages of the employment support project, the players involved in the process, the input and use of tools, the attitude of the job coach in this process, the do's and don'ts (success factors and pitfalls). This makes the matrix into a guide book for the employment support process to help people with autism find suitable employment.

## 1.4 Procedure matrix

Illustration of the KIRA procedure matrix that accompanies this text.



First page of the KIRA matrix