

Autism and Employment: An Opportunity for “Blue sky thinking”?

Positive discourse over inclusion seems not to trickle down into specific policy areas. Take employment for example, currently between 80 and 90 percent of autistics are unemployed¹. This has lifelong consequences for individuals and families and costs circa £32 Billion per annum². What is most startling about that statistic is that many of these individuals are simply brilliant people—highly educated, highly capable, detail-oriented, yet unemployed. This article will examine why autistic individuals struggle to find employment and what can be done to improve the situation, before going on to draw conclusions on the way forward.

There are three key areas of concern when it comes to autistic individuals finding employment: misconceptions by poorly trained staff; a lack of understanding by autistic applicants of their rights and by employers of their responsibilities under equality law; and the application procedure itself.

Speaking from personal experience, misconceptions among employment support staff are rife. As I had little success securing employment, I approached an employment support worker for support. Despite having higher education qualifications, the staff member indicated that because of my autism I would be more suited to low skilled work. The fact that low skilled work was all I was considered suitable for was insulting. Would they have looked at a neurotypical graduate the same way? I think not. This lack of understanding of autism and the benefits an autistic employee could bring to an employer’s organisation is shameful especially from an employment support worker whose job it is to support autistic individuals. I also approached them to support me in obtaining work experience in order to better my chances of finding employment. This was met with scorn, thus leaving me in the unfortunate catch-22 of being unable to secure employment without experience and unable to get experience without employment.

The Equality Act (2010) places a responsibility on employers to anticipate and prevent discrimination, including against autistic individuals. What concerns me is the misunderstanding of provisions in The Equality Act (2010). There are two main forms of discrimination that autistic applicants struggle with: discrimination arising from disability; and indirect disability.

Discrimination arising from disability occurs when a disabled person is treated unfavourably because of something connected with their disability and the unfavourable treatment cannot be justified³. For example, organisations unwillingness to alter environmental conditions to accommodate autistic individuals’ sensory needs.

Indirect disability discrimination happens when there are policies which particularly disadvantage autistic individuals⁴. For example, standardised interviews play to autistic weaknesses rather than strengths. Employers are often reluctant to alter the interview process citing fairness to neurotypical applicants. In my opinion this can be viewed as indirect discrimination.⁵

¹ The National Autistic Society, (2021)

² MacKay, et al., (2018)

³ The Equality Act 2010 s.15(1)(a)

⁴ The Equality Act 2010 s. 19(2)(a) + (b)

⁵ The Equality Act 2010 s. 39(1)(a)

Autism manifests itself in many different forms; no two autistic individuals face the same challenges. During recruitment, many employers use competency-based questions and situational judgement tests. With the well documented concerns over social imagination issues among autistics, this can be extremely problematic and result in autistic individuals failing said tests. Interviews can be particularly problematic: autistic candidates may experience over stimulation and thus anxiety leading to poor interview performance; thus preventing the autistic individual's skills and attributes from shining through. Resulting in them being unsuccessful.

These challenges may explain high unemployment rates. However, much can be done to alleviate concerns with underemployment.

Currently, employment support services take a one sizes fits all approach that does not take account of autistic individuals' unique talents. I would suggest thinking outside the box and employing individuals who have the necessary skills and experience along with requisite understanding of autism. This will require an increase in budgets, to afford compensation commensurate with the staff members' skills and experience. Also, I would suggest that skilled work experience roles are increased so autistics can gain valuable experience. Personally, I have benefitted from such a programme, having done an internship with Autism Network Scotland (ANS), from which I was contracted as consultant because of the skills and attributes they saw in me.

Reasonable adjustments are required wherever autistic individuals would be disadvantaged.⁶ Employers cannot charge for reasonable adjustments, but the issue is that autistic individuals are not always aware of their rights and employers might be concerned that reasonable adjustments can be costly. However, if we were to disseminate information to autistic applicants on their rights and to employers on the misconception over cost of reasonable adjustments, we could see an increase in employment for autistic individuals.

Currently autism awareness training breaks down into four distinct levels: informed; knowledgeable; skilled; and expert. Currently levels of awareness among employers is generally at the informed level. I believe this is unacceptable. An increase in provision of skilled level training would alleviate this and thus enable employers to better understand autistic applicants/employees. This training should also include information on the benefits of employing autistic individuals.

JPMorgan Chase is a success story for autistic employment. Blue sky thinking led them to understand the unique talents of autistic individuals and thus they created the Autism at Work program to enable autistics to show off their unique skills in a workplace environment. Some people on the spectrum simply are not given a chance to shine through conventional means and this program enables them to. Through partnerships with organisations that have experience in working with individuals with ASD, such as ANS, JP Morgan is learning to look beyond the traditional interview process and it is paying off: Autism at Work employees are 48 percent faster and as much as 92 percent more productive compared to their peers⁷.

In conclusion we can see that while there are challenges for autistic individuals, much can and is being done: JP Morgan are blue sky thinking and investing in autistic individuals and reaping the rewards.

⁶ The Equality Act 2010 S. 20(3)

⁷ News & Stories, (2021)

This confirms that autistic individuals' skill sets simply require an environment in which to contribute and thrive. This will help us achieve the goal of 'investing to save'⁸. Currently circa £32 billion in public funds go to supporting autism and circa £15 billion to employment. If 4% of those with Asperger's were given appropriate support into work this would ultimately mean that those individuals may not require services and could contribute to the economy thus reducing the burden on the public purse by circa £750 million⁹.

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⁸ The Scottish Strategy for Autism (2011) recommendation 5 p77

⁹ MacKay, et al., 2018