An internship for autistic graduates at Deutsche Bank UK

“Sometimes you just need someone to take a chance on you”

In 2016, Deutsche Bank UK launched a unique internship programme aimed specifically at autistic graduates. The programme is extremely timely. Employment rates in autism are remarkably poor: only 32% of autistic individuals are in any type of paid work, compared to 47% of other disability groups. There is also growing awareness that autistic people have a unique offering in the workplace; an offering that businesses should embrace – not as a charitable act, but for their own corporate success.

There is, however, very little research done on how to promote autistic employment. The few existing studies suggest that work placements and internships might be a key step in the process. Yet we know little about the experiences of all those involved. To address this issue, the Centre for Research in Autism and Education (CRAE) conducted research alongside the Deutsche Bank internship to better understand the challenges and successes of schemes such as these.

How it began

Deutsche Bank (DB) is Germany’s leading bank, with a strong presence in Europe and beyond. In the UK, they employ 9,000-10,000 people across a number of sites nationwide. The internship itself arose from a partnership with Autistica, a UK autism research charity. The internship was devised and implemented by a few key individuals within DB who have a passion for promoting diversity and inclusion, one of whom also has personal experience of autism. The scheme offered eight autistic graduates the opportunity to work at DB for three months, across a variety of roles (including finance, operations, risk and technology). They were based across five DB offices in Central London, with one subsequently moving to a regional office (to reduce his travel time). Interns were paid a salary equivalent to that received by those on the general graduate scheme.

Aims
Our study sought to:

1. understand the experiences of all those involved in the internship programme, focusing particularly on their prior expectations, and triumphs and difficulties during the scheme
2. highlight strategies adopted to overcome any challenges, and make recommendations for how future experiences might be improved.

Method

Our research used semi-structured interviews to understand the views of the eight interns, their hiring managers, team members and buddies (a mentor who was assigned to each intern from outside their own team). Two researchers from CRAE spoke to interns and their managers before the scheme began (September 2016) and to the interns, managers, buddies and team members as the scheme ended (December 2016). Each interview lasted around 30 minutes (up to 1 hour in some cases) and were conducted either face-to-face or over the phone, depending on people’s preferences. Interviews asked about expectations and concerns, challenges and triumphs.

Outcomes

Both the interns, and the staff with whom they worked, felt that the autistic interns made meaningful contributions to their teams, and left a lasting legacy at the firm. In fact, five of the eight interns had their contracts extended at the end of the scheme. As one intern explained: “The most useful thing that I’ve learned is that I am very able and it’s made me realise that I can do anything”.

Though the programme was very successful, those involved also highlighted areas of difficulty. One of these centred on (mis)communication between interns and managers: “Actually I wasn’t all that great with people, the contradictions anyway. It was like, ‘don’t tell people what you feel like’, and then ‘tell people what you feel like’. [Intern]

Another area of concern was interns’ anxiety – an issue that affects a disproportionate number of autistic people. One manager remarked that the experience was “not just acutely daunting for [intern], but also that anxiety affected him slightly more and certainly differently to how it would affect other people in the team”.

Future areas of potential development

Our findings suggested a number of ways in which future schemes might maximise success:

1. Maintain clarity and always be committed

It is important for employers to provide clear expectations about the programme, use straightforward language and be sincere in what they offer. Wherever possible, promises should be kept, deadlines met, and offers fulfilled.

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2. **Remember all individuals are different**

Autism varies widely from person to person so it is important to avoid making assumptions. As the saying goes, “If you’ve met one person on the autism spectrum, you’ve met one person on the autism spectrum…”

3. **Provide training on autism as widely as possible**

We recommend more widespread training to help equip all staff with a knowledge of autism, and suggest that ongoing support is needed for staff involved in the internship, for example a helpline or regular meeting with a job coach with expertise in autism to allow managers or colleagues to seek guidance when necessary.

4. **Create a point-person for autistic interns and their managers**

It would be beneficial to have a neutral person to help with communicating concerns, and to facilitate discussion between different parties in the event of a disagreement.

Encouragingly, based on the success of the 2016 programme, Deutsche Bank announced that the scheme will run again in London and Birmingham this September. It’s clear that internships such as this are a very promising strategy to turn around autistic people’s exclusion from the labour market. They offer a competitive advantage to the firms involved, while giving candidates of untapped talent the opportunities that they deserve.

**References**


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