Supporting the recruitment and retention of autistic employees

Autistic adults are particularly disadvantaged in terms of employment with only 16% in full-time employment compared to 47% of people with other disabilities. Despite many having the ability and desire to work, and the presence of many employment initiatives, employment rates remain stubbornly low.

Employment of autistic people is not only important for their well-being (Roux et al. 2015) but also benefits the government in terms of savings on financial support. It also benefits organisations - indeed research shows that autistic employees have low absence rates and produce high quality work (Hendricks, 2010; Scott et al., 2017). So why is it so difficult for autistic people to find and maintain employment?

Research shows that autistic adults find it difficult to hold down a job and switch jobs often (Howlin et al, 2013; Migliore & Zalewska, 2012). To find out why this is the case, in 2014 we conducted two consultation exercises in collaboration with the Autism Research Policy and Practice Hub (Wales Autism Research Centre) and Hampshire County Council.

The results showed that carers, practitioners and autistic people alike identified failure to make minor adjustments and low autism awareness as one of the main barriers to employment. These findings inspired us to develop an employment programme focused on supporting employers to make adjustments tailored to their employees, and to also set up the Autism Centre for Research on Employment (ACRE).

Our research

One of the reasons employers find it difficult to make adjustments is that, as our research and that of others shows, there is high variability in the cognitive profiles of autistic people (Kargas et al, 2015; Valla & Belmonte, 2013). This makes it difficult for employers to know what
adjustments to make as each person has different requirements. Assessments of individual needs are often costly and not always evidence-based.

So our first target was to develop a set of employment-specific, online assessment tools - the Individual Employment Profile (IEP) - to enable the identification of individual employability and cognitive profiles of autistic adults. The tools were developed to support decisions about career choices and also to help employers to design effective workplace support plans tailored to the individual needs of the employee.

Secondly, we developed an employment programme to evaluate the effectiveness of the tools, consisting of 8-week unpaid work placements for 18 adults without learning disabilities, supported by volunteer mentors. The placements were with four local authorities (Southampton, Portsmouth, Isle of Wight and Hampshire), a local charity (Autism Hampshire) and the University of Portsmouth.

Finally, we conducted an evaluation of the programme outcomes.

**Evaluation of the Individual Employment Profile**

One of the main costs of running an employment programme is the provision of mentoring and support. The originality of our programme was that it aimed to help employers to become mentors themselves. The success of this approach was clear. By week three, mentors provided on average only one hour of support per week and yet people were highly satisfied with the work placement (employers: 100%; employees: 91%).

This suggests that it is possible to substantially reduce the cost of delivering employment programmes. More importantly, it suggests that comprehensive assessment of needs and person-centred training for the employer is crucial for the success of a work programme. Almost all the employees (81%) reported that the employer had made the right adjustments. The work placement scheme also had a significant positive impact on the self-esteem and well-being of the employees.

Qualitative feedback supported these figures. For instance, one employee said:

“*I’ve had self-doubt as to whether or not I would be able to work again so this has proven to me that I am still good enough, that I can still give something back to society and I can feel worthy again.*” (aged 54).

Feedback from employers also showed that the programme was successful in changing employers’ attitudes:
“I would be more than willing to have this experience again. [...] Yes, I would 100% recommend it to all employers.”

Despite these outcomes, 50% of employers who took part in the study said they would be unlikely to employ an autistic person in the future. So there is still a lot we need to find out about what makes employers reluctant to employ autistic people.

**Further research**

Research into the barriers and enablers to employment for autistic people has shown that various HR practices are not suitable, such as standardised recruitment practices or certain workplace processes and practices. This would suggest that employers’ understanding of autism and of the needs of the individual is still poor. In addition, very little is known about the attitudes of employers towards autistic employees.

One of the authors of this article, Kim Ruefenacht, a doctoral researcher at ACRE, is investigating the attitudes of employers towards hiring autistic people. This work will explore:

- the extent to which organisations are willing to hire autistic people
- perceived barriers and enablers to the employment of autistic people
- general awareness of employers regarding the abilities and needs of autistic people.

Once this has been identified, further recommendations can be made to encourage organisations to hire autistic people.

**Further information**

The IEP assessment tools have now undergone a thorough review and will be available free of charge by the end of 2018. We hope that by making them free, employers will be encouraged to make the necessary adjustments for their employees. The tools can also be used to support employment choices for those seeking employment. If you would like to receive more information, please email us at acre@port.ac.uk.

**References**


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