

Autistica Action Briefing: Employment

AUTISTICA

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Autistica is the UK's autism research charity. This briefing summarises the most important scientific findings about employment in the autistic community. It was developed in collaboration with leading researchers and autistic people as an insight into the latest evidence.

We strongly urge the Government, public research funders and public, private and third sector employers to act on this information. Employers are missing out on a vast talent pool. Many autistic people want to work but don't experience a level playing field. There's been a lot of discussion around employment and autism; we must now build an evidence base about what works in helping talented autistic people to flourish.

www.autistica.org.uk/AutismStrategy

"I don't apply for jobs because I'm scared." ¹

What we know

"The current interview system tends to discriminate against autistic people, as it calls for skills of communication, relating to people, and thinking on the spot that are often difficult for us." ¹

- **Unemployment rates are exceptionally high amongst autistic people, even compared to other disability groups.** ^{2,3,4,5,6} Although most autistic people want to work, ^{3,7} and make positive contributions to the workplace when they do, ⁸ autistic people with and without learning disabilities frequently struggle to find work. ^{2,5,9}
- **Autistic people also face high rates of underemployment.** For those who do find work, it is disproportionately part-time, temporary, casual, or roles for which they are overqualified. ^{3,4,10,11}
- **Typical recruitment processes may be inaccessible for many autistic people.** Unclear application forms, abstract questions, unsuitable sensory environments and the fact that interviews often operate as a test of social ability can disadvantage autistic people and make it harder for them to demonstrate their suitability for a role. ^{1,3,12,13}
- **Autistic people in work face a range of barriers to maintaining employment and reaching their potential.** Autistic people can face extra challenges in navigating the sensory environment of an office, handling the social aspects of the workplace, dealing with unstructured working practices, managing anxieties at work and maintaining good mental health more generally. ^{1,2,3,8,11,13,14,15} These barriers are compounded further for autistic people with learning disabilities, who may require continuous support in the workplace and have difficulty finding suitable employment opportunities to match their skills as well as transferring learning from one setting to another. ^{6,7,9}
- **It is likely that medium-to-large employers already have autistic people within their workforce.** Autistic people are more likely to have strengths in areas such as attention to detail, focus and information processing which can be useful in various sectors. ^{6,16,17,18} However, like the rest of the population, autistic people's skills vary and they may find employment in a wide range of fields. ¹⁰ Autistic people's employment outcomes improve when they are matched with jobs that fit their skills and interests. ⁶ Most autistic adults are undiagnosed ^{19,20,21,22} and some do not disclose their diagnosis to their employer for fear of discrimination. ^{1,3}
- **There are known links between unemployment, health and wellbeing,** ²³ and high unemployment amongst autistic people could further entrench health inequalities. ^{24,25} In particular, unemployment is a risk factor for suicide, ²⁶ one of the leading causes of early death for autistic people. ^{27,28} Employment can positively affect the quality of life and wellbeing of autistic people as well as improving productivity. ^{8,18,29,30}

What we need to find out

"Despite feeling extremely stressed, the fear of judgements, stigma and discrimination prevents me from being open about being autistic, however I wish I could be." ¹

Supporting autistic people to maximise their potential in the workplace is one of the top research priorities for the autism community. ³¹ Despite this, there is still little research on the best way to attract and retain autistic employees. ⁶ Autistica and University College London (UCL) have recently launched Discover Autism Research & Employment (DARE), the only national evidence-gathering employment programme for autistic people. ³² Vital things to find out include:

- How can we develop standardised measures to assess employment outcomes for autistic people, taking into account the diversity in what individuals perceive to be successful outcomes?^{16,33}
- What does meaningful employment look like for autistic people with learning disabilities? How can we improve employment opportunities for autistic people with learning disabilities?
- What are the experiences of autistic people in leaving employment? Are autistic people more likely to leave employment through dismissal, redundancy or burnout? What are the factors associated with each of these?¹⁶
- What is the role of environmental supports in maintaining employment for autistic people?⁶
- How effective are existing workplace assessment initiatives in supporting adjustments for autistic people? How can workplace assessments be improved for autistic people?^{34,35}
- What factors are associated with autistic people successfully maintaining employment? How is this affected by important life transitions and other challenging periods?
- Is peer mentoring effective in maintaining employment for autistic people?
- What strengths have been useful in enabling autistic people to become entrepreneurs? What support would be beneficial to autistic people seeking to become self-employed?
- How can we improve opportunities for autistic people to work at senior levels? What barriers do people in these roles face in disclosing an autism diagnosis?

What we should do now

“Meltdowns have resulted in losing jobs and making my employment history patchy.”¹

- The “*priority challenges for action*” underpinning the most recent Adult Autism Strategy in 2014³⁶ included: “*I want support to get a job and support from my employer to help me keep it.*”³⁷ The Government has also committed to get one million disabled people into work,³⁸ which could include many autistic people who want to work but cannot find employment.³

The Government’s next Autism Strategy³⁹ should commit to finding out what will work in ensuring that unemployed or underemployed autistic adults can succeed in their careers. To achieve this, the Department for Work and Pensions’ Work and Health Programme should partner with autistic people to explore what supports will help them find and secure suitable employment.

- Autistica and University College London have launched DARE, an initiative to gather evidence and improve best practice for employing autistic people across all industries.³² The NHS Long Term Plan included a promising commitment to offer more supported internships and paid employment opportunities to autistic people.⁴⁰

Public sector bodies like NHS England should consider participating in the DARE initiative to ensure they are securing the benefits of a neurodivergent workforce and that they are contributing to the continual learning about the most effective ways to support autistic people in employment.

- Autistica and UCL have recently opened a Neurodiversity Employment Survey to understand the employment experience of neurodivergent people and identify evidence gaps.⁴¹ The survey is open to everyone, in order to compare neurodivergent experiences with each other and against the experiences of neurotypical people.

Individuals should consider taking the survey, and public, private and third sector organisations should promote the survey across their networks, to ensure the full range of experiences are represented.

- At present, no information is collected regularly on the employment of autistic people.

The Department of Work and Pensions should explicitly include autism in the Labour Force Survey’s questions and statistics on disability.⁴²

- It is likely that most large employers already have neurodivergent people within their workforce.

Public sector bodies should develop a Neurodiversity Strategy or incorporate neurodiversity into their existing Diversity & Inclusion Strategy.

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