



**Business
Disability
Forum**

**Building
disability-smart
organisations**

Square holes for square pegs:

**Current practice in employment
and autism**

By Daniel Wiles, Disability Consultant



Square holes for square pegs: current practice in employment and autism

People with autism think and behave differently to others and employers must recognise the need to make them feel comfortable. In essence, employers need to be prepared to make adjustments for employees with autism, instead of attempting to force a 'square peg into a round hole'.

It is possible to create a square hole for a square peg: a workplace willing to shape itself around a person will enable the person to be productive. Workplaces are shaped by the working environment, organisational culture and open communication. Workplaces that accept difference, such as the difference presented by autism, can benefit hugely from adapting to allow people to fit in.

Contents:

Executive summary 4

Background 4

Definition of words used in this report 5

Introduction 6

Findings 7

Conclusions 16

Appendix one – Methodology 17

Appendix two – Organisations involved in the research 18

Accessibility statement 19

Our Partners Back page

Contact us Back page

Executive summary

This report examined current practice in the employment of people with autism amongst Business Disability Forum's (BDF) membership. We spoke to a range of organisations from different sectors, autism and employment specialists and individuals with autism to establish current good practice and challenges.

The research draws attention to the need for autism awareness based on an understanding of removing barriers for individuals with autism. Barriers are created for people with autism by the way neurotypical people communicate, organise work and create the sensory environment in the workplace. The research also discusses the various adjustments that can be made during the recruitment process, at onboarding and throughout employment for people with autism, which can allow them to thrive in the workplace.

Further investigation reveals the importance of translation between employer and employee. It is best practice to ensure employees have support from their line managers and the organisation. Not surprisingly, the research found that allowing employees to be themselves and fit in at work will in turn lead to increased job satisfaction and better performance in their role.

This report recommends the development of further guidance for employers based on the findings, which will enable BDF to continue supporting employers in the recruitment and retention of people with autism.

Background

At BDF, our work with over 300 employers across the UK tells us that employers have an increasing interest in autism. We often receive calls to our Advice Service from our members that relate to autism, which prompted this research into current practice regarding autism and employment.

While there are no detailed statistics about the number of people with autism that are in employment, we have anecdotal evidence that employers are recruiting and retaining people with autism in various roles.

Over recent years, employers have become more confident in making adjustments for people with non-visible disabilities. This is particularly evident in the approach of many organisations toward mental health in the workplace. BDF has seen a development in the understanding of mental health conditions in the workplace and the level of support offered by organisations to employees experiencing mental health issues.

While mental health conditions are fluctuating in nature, autism is a difference in the human condition that does not fluctuate. There is a unique difference in the ways that people with autism think, understand and process information, which in turn affects their behaviour.

Best practice and the understanding of autism in the workplace is developing. This research will draw upon the knowledge and experience of employers in our membership to share and understand best practice.

Definition of words used in this report

Autism is a difference in the human condition that can affect the way someone communicates, understands and interacts with other people and the world around them. It is a spectrum condition, meaning people can share some ranging linked conditions, but the individual is unique.

Autism is not fully understood. There are different names, definitions and debated ways of talking about autism. People with autism self-identify differently. Common wording includes autism spectrum condition (ASC), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), being autistic, having high or low functioning autism, having Asperger's or Asperger syndrome and being an Aspi.

Describing a person as being **neurodiverse** means that they belong to a group of people that have a condition relating to the way the brain functions.

Neurodiversity includes conditions like autism, dyslexia and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

Neurotypical is a term used by those interviewed to describe anyone that does not have autism.

This report will talk about 'autism' and people 'with autism' for ease of understanding and as this was used during the research by interviewees. It will also use 'neurodiversity' to talk about matters that may relate to a group of people and 'neurotypical' to describe people that do not have autism.

Introduction

It is suggested that only 15% of adults diagnosed with autism are in paid full time employment (NAS 2014¹).

In Think Autism (2014), the government set out an update on the strategy for adults with autism that followed the Autism Act (2009) and the Autism Strategy (2010). The update outlined fifteen priority challenges for action that government departments should take to improve the lives of people with autism. One of these priority challenges was: 'I want support to get a job and support from my employer to help me keep it'. The strategy identified many next steps to achieving this priority challenge, including the Disability Confident campaign and a Disability & Health Employment strategy to provide tailored employment support to disabled people.

As the government continues to increase its commitment to improving employment opportunities for people with autism, employers also appear to have an increasing interest in hiring people with autism.

Recent reports in the media suggest that many organisations are trying to harness an advantage by recruiting people with high-functioning autism. For example, Microsoft launched a programme to hire people with autism in 2015². Microsoft's Corporate Vice President of Worldwide Operations Mary Ellen Smith said: "Microsoft is stronger when we expand opportunity and we have a diverse workforce that represents our customers. People with autism bring strengths that we need."

At BDF, our work with employers has found that some organisations specifically target the recruitment of neurodiverse people, as they recognise the potential advantages of having a neurodiverse workforce. Other organisations will find out that they have recruited people with autism after they are employed.

We understand that many organisations are confident in recruiting and making adjustments for neurodiverse people. The current challenge for these organisations appears to be how to retain people when there are difficulties, for example, with performance, relationships, behaviour or communication. For other organisations, the challenges are likely to occur much earlier during recruitment and the adjustment making process.

With over twenty years experience of working with business and employers, the aim of this research was to find out about the good practice and challenges amongst our membership. Through having conversations with employers, employees with autism and autism specialists, we aimed to capture an understanding of autism in the workplace and identify forms of support BDF could provide.

Twelve people from ten different companies, from different sectors, provided information during this research. A full methodology can be found in Appendix one.

1 National Autistic Society Untapped Talent 2014
http://www.hao2.eu/sites/default/files/Untapped_Talent_-_English.pdf

2 Microsoft announces pilot programme to hire people with autism
<http://blogs.microsoft.com/on-the-issues/2015/04/03/microsoft-announces-pilot-program-to-hire-people-with-autism>

Findings

Autism awareness

Key findings:

- Employer's awareness of autism should be based on understanding and removing barriers in the workplace.

Awareness was commonly cited by interviewees as being key to recruiting and retaining people with autism. The meaning of awareness in relation to autism and employment varied between interviewees. Interviewees thought it could mean an understanding of the condition from a medical perspective, or a line manager's ability to identifying an individual may have a condition, or awareness based on identifying and removing barriers and disadvantages. These findings suggest it is important that line managers and those responsible for making adjustments are trained in autism awareness based on removing barriers.

Having a medical understanding of autism is not necessary for employers or line managers. The condition is complex and the effects vary from person to person. However, some interviewees suggested that employers may have an interest in understanding the condition better and could be directed to autism charities that provide information. An interviewee with autism explained that they could face unconscious bias in the workplace, as autism is a non-visible disability. In their experience it would be better if generally neurotypical people understood the day-to-day difficulties encountered by people with autism. This point was also made by each of the autism and employment specialists.

Importantly employers should understand barriers and disadvantages and should seek to remove these by making adjustments. Common barriers faced by people with autism stem from the way neurotypical people socialise and communicate. Other disadvantages may be caused by sensory stimulus, time structures, routines and changes. Employers that have awareness based on removing barriers and who are willing to make adjustments are more likely to succeed in retaining and gaining the most from employees with autism.

The business case for employing people with autism

Key findings:

- Employers and specialists spoke about an advantage that can be gained by recruiting and retaining people with autism.

Employers said the business case for recruiting people with autism was to save money by employing highly skilled people, to keep up with their competitors, and to recognise the advantage in, and push for, a neurodiverse workforce. Specialists said that because of the way autism manifests, some people are exceptional at process driven tasks and possess excellent attention to detail, making them more productive than neurotypical people in roles that rely on these specific skills.

A specialist said that when line managers gain a personal understanding of autism through interacting with people with autism, rather than a perception of the condition, they become "inspired". They say this can be transformative and lead to the manager to "make it their mission" to recruit, retain and remove barriers for the person with autism.

There is no published research that says that people with autism perform better than neurotypical employees. The condition may mean that people with autism are particularly interested in certain industries or roles. However, it should not be assumed that people with autism are best suited

to specific jobs. Our Advice Service hears about people with autism successfully working in very different roles in different industries. In any recruitment situation the best person for a role may be neurodiverse or neurotypical. Employers should ensure that they do not discriminate against disabled people, including people with autism, by removing barriers and making adjustments.

Recruitment

Key findings:

- The use of language and the way people communicate can lead to disadvantages during recruitment. Other barriers include employers understanding of autism, the need for qualifications, outsourced recruitment and unconscious bias.
- Specialists can provide an adjustment by translating between applicant with autism and the employer at interview.
- Work trials can be invaluable to recruiting people with autism.

Applying for jobs

Job descriptions and adverts are cited as often including irrelevant language or information, such as the person needing to be “a good communicator” when that is often not a core element of the role. The difficulty is that people with autism can take what they read in a job description very literally and because of this they will not apply for roles. This unnecessarily reduces the talent pool for recruiters.

Many employers use the language of “welcoming” disabled applicants. If you consider literally what being welcomed means – it is a way of greeting someone in a friendly manner. In this way employers do not “welcome” disabled applicants in any more of a “welcoming” way than non-disabled people. What employers are actually trying to convey when using “welcome” is that they “encourage” disabled applicants. If someone with autism thought that they would literally be welcomed when they applied for a role they may imagine a whole line of people ready to shake their hand and greet them at interview. This may create a barrier. As an example it shows how commonly used simple wording can mean something different to what is intended.

Many talented people on the spectrum may not have qualifications but they could be very capable in a role. This may be due to barriers experienced in education or in previous roles. Recruiters should consider aptitude and specialists recommended putting a greater weight on what could be achieved by the person rather than irrelevant qualifications.

Interviews

Interviews for people with autism were said to be one of the biggest barriers to employment. Interviews can be stressful for neurotypical people but people with autism can experience heightened anxiety when meeting new people or visiting new places with distracting stimulus. Interviews can involve things that some people with autism can find more stressful than neurotypical people. For example, shaking hands, making eye contact and traveling to an unknown place.

Communication during an interview can create a disadvantage for an applicant with autism. Some people with autism may give monosyllabic answers to questions or not realise when they are being asked to talk about something in detail. Employers need to ask specific and direct questions in a logical order. For example candidates are unlikely to show themselves in a good light if they are given an open-ended question like “tell us what you did in your last job?” A likely response is one that is memorable to the candidate, which may also be negative, like “I made this mistake...” Or a question like “tell me about yourself?” is so broad it could invite any form of response. If questions include different parts these should be asked in a logical order to avoid creating confusion.

Competency based questions should be concrete rather than abstract. For example, if someone with autism was asked what they would do in a difficult hypothetical situation, they may not be able to answer the question. This could be because they do not have a point of reference from which to answer the question. If they were instead asked what they did when a difficult situation arose in the past they may have a basis for answering the question. Both questions aim to establish how an applicant would respond to difficulties but the second version allows the person to give an answer. Asking concrete questions will also mean the candidate can answer any proceeding questions on the same topic as well.

A candidate with autism may need more time to process information than other people. An interview panel that do not understand this may find the situation unnerving and proceed to ask more questions. This may further confuse the candidate. In this situation the panel require judgement to allow a candidate time for processing. If an answer does not come within a minute they may need to give an appropriate prompt.

Challenges

A challenge during the recruitment process can be an employer's lack of understanding or misunderstanding of autism. Recruiters may find the way a person interacts or communicates strange. This may lead them to have a negative opinion. If recruiters know that some people may be hesitant, not make much eye contact or need a little more time to process information, it will lead to a positive interaction. However, an interviewer may not know that they are going to interview someone with autism. For this reason it is important that applicants are given necessary information about the interview in advance. They should also be asked if they require any reasonable adjustments. Having disability-smart training will benefit recruiters and help ensure barriers are removed for disabled applicants.

Autism recruitment specialists often recommend to candidates that they do not initially say that they have autism due to unconscious discrimination. A challenge they have encountered is that when recruiters see that someone has autism they will think that the person needs a role that is "exactly right" for them and that the vacant position is "not quite the right one" for them. The difficulty is that any position may "not quite" be that right fit. One specialist suggested that, rather than a recruiter directly choosing not to employ someone because of a condition, this is often the real nature of discrimination. Once someone has been offered an interview the recruitment specialists then recommend the applicant says they have a condition and asks for adjustments to be made. The specialists suggest that once the employer realises that the adjustments are simple changes to process, they generally do not cost anything or take up time, they then happily make them.

Specialist support can help bridge the gap of communication between applicant and interviewer. A specialist can facilitate the conversation by acting as a translator. This is an adjustment that employers may need to make. It does not mean that the applicant would necessarily need communication support once they are employed in a role.

Other wider challenges include the use of recruitment companies that may not put forward a diverse list of candidates. When an organisation uses a recruitment company to supply their workforce they should be clear about the business aspirations and challenge the recruitment company on what they are looking for, such as a diverse longlist of candidates. If the recruitment provider fails in this, they should be supported to improve or they could be replaced. Organisations should try supporting a recruitment company to improve by working with the company directly or by involving a specialist to facilitate a plan and actions between the two companies.

Solutions – the third sector and work trials

To improve neurodiverse recruitment practice, specialists suggest the key is identifying third sector companies to ensure there is a wide reach into diverse communities, coupled with training for recruiters to be disability confident. Using the third sector and internships is key as, for example, these do not filter out people who did not receive certain grades or qualifications, which would include some neurodiverse people.

The autism and employment specialists all suggested that work trials are essential to successfully recruiting people with autism. These do not necessarily need to be paid trials but an opportunity for the person to show their ability. These help the employer to understand the person as an individual.

Some companies have piloted trials where people are simply given a task. A subject matter expert reviews this and they are then judged only on the quality of the work. Interviews that follow work trials can be socially easier as the applicant and interviewer may better understand each other and the way the other communicates and interacts. Some anxiety may also be reduced for the applicant, as they will be talking to people that they are familiar with in a familiar environment. However, it should be stressed that employers do not have to rely solely on using work trials or recruitment programmes to recruit people with autism. Doing so may needlessly create barriers to employment or lead to discrimination.

Onboarding

Key findings:

- Onboarding should be planned to allow an individual with autism to integrate into the team and company. Support can aid this process.
- Managers and the wider team may need a briefing to ensure the employee is not unfairly judged on first impressions.

Onboarding and meeting new people can be a challenge for any new employee. Autism specialists said that communication and socialising could initially be particularly difficult for people with autism in the workplace. Some specialists provide support with communication, initially translating between the employee and their colleagues. They then withdraw support once people better understand the way the other communicates.

If a neurotypical colleague is not aware that their new colleague has autism they may be surprised that the person initially does not engage with them or seemingly ignores them. They may then have a feeling that the person is not going to “fit in” at the organisation. However, the colleague could be told that for the first few days the new employee is not going to talk to them, as they are shy and that they should give them a bit of time and space. They could then be told that after a few days it is okay to start talking to them. This will mean everyone can start off “on the right foot”. One specialist suggested being aware of the need for such a process is not based on a complex understanding of autism or a scientific approach. They suggest it is a simple approach and one that can mean a vast difference to someone with autism and their colleagues when acclimatising to each other.

Another specialist recommends that prior to onboarding, if the person with autism agrees to it, the specialist can meet with the line manager and team. They could talk about autism awareness in the workplace and give specific examples of the way the person may behave and what that means. For example, the new recruit may wear noise-cancelling headphones throughout the day, but this does not mean colleagues cannot talk to them. The headphones may simply cut out background noise that makes it difficult for them to concentrate. Specialists will also advise line managers on adjustments prior to them beginning work. These interventions can help remove challenges in the workplace when

the person begins work and during onboarding.

The people with autism who were interviewed said that starting in a new role could be very difficult for them as they are adapting to new people and a new environment. One person suggested line managers should initially find out what “makes them tick”. They suggested there are different drivers for people’s desire to work and for people with autism it can be because they are very interested in the subject matter of the work. A manager may not normally consider asking someone about what an employee may find annoying but someone with autism may, for example, find a certain fabric on a chair to be extremely annoying and this could be changed. Making a small change can allow the employee to do the job that they are fascinated by and enjoy. Finding what drives the person is good practice for line managers of people that are disabled or non-disabled.

Line management

Key findings:

- Good line managers will know how to make adjustments, be flexible, tolerant and understanding.
- Poor line management can lead to challenges and difficulties retaining people with autism.
- There can be benefits for line managers who learn new skills from managing people with autism.

Good line management

Good line managers do not need a comprehensive knowledge of autism. It is useful if they have an understanding of how the condition can be difficult to manage for the individual in the workplace and how tiring it can be.

A good line manager will understand that the employee can learn strategies to manage in the workplace but that there may always be underlying problems with them understanding different perspectives. There is no cure for autism – it is a difference in the human condition. Working will improve a person’s confidence and self esteem, whereas anxiety can lead to other behaviours or challenges. A good line manager will be tolerant if someone with autism behaves in a way that others find odd or different.

Some people with autism will start each day with a set amount of tolerance for managing stress throughout the day. That tolerance may reduce through the day as the person encounters stressors. If the stressors become too much the person may struggle to continue to engage with others and need space and time to recover. Managers need to understand an employee may be internally trying to manage this and how they can provide support to them. Similarly over the course of a year if the employee has not taken a holiday, they may need to prompt them to take it appropriately and not risk burning out.

Sensory stimulation differs for individuals. A good line manager will understand that, for example, when a person fiddles with a rubber band in their hands it relaxes them. The line manager will understand that a person has heightened or a reduced sensory experience that can relate to heat, light, balance or any other sense. Allowing the person to fiddle with the band to help with a sensory overload is to be flexible and it could be considered to be an adjustment.

One autism and employment specialist said that some of the best practice they have seen was by a line manager who did not have any experience or knowledge of autism. They simply asked how the autism affected the person. The employee said that they struggled to retain verbal information so the line manager wrote down tasks for the person to complete. This line manager was willing to be open with the employee and the employee benefitted from them being honest and direct. Similarly, if an employee was to come into work five days in a row wearing the same shirt they may need a line

manager to be clear and direct explaining that it is not appropriate.

One employee with autism said that they do not want their line managers to “tiptoe around them” but to encourage and push them to develop in a safe way. They also said that their best line managers have helped them reflect on their own workplace behaviour, in a non-judgemental way, so that they can develop.

Line management challenges

The challenges discussed with employers regarding the line management of people with autism were the opposite of the suggested good practice. Difficulties arise when line managers are not flexible and they are not willing to make adjustments. These managers will need support to understand communication, interactions and how environments will create barriers.

Challenges arise when line managers treat neurodiverse people in the same way as their neurotypical colleagues. Line managers need to understand that to treat people fairly you may have to treat them differently. For example, a challenge arose in a team when a line manager refused to let a colleague make a personal telephone call relating to their condition in private. This led to additional anxiety for the employee and meant they felt harassed and unable to work.

It was suggested that naturally some line managers might be more comfortable making adjustments for people that they like. Due to the nature of autism, some line managers may struggle to find it easy to engage or communicate with a person with autism. A natural reaction may be for the line manager to do less for this person. The line manager needs to recognise this and make adjustments for people that remove the barriers that they face. Unconscious bias can be particularly relevant towards people that have communication difficulties.

Developing line managers

Another finding was that line managers can learn new skills from managing employees with autism. Managing someone that is neurodiverse means that a line manager is going to gain experience that benefits their ability to manage neurotypical people. An example would be the way in which line manager communicate with employees. If a line manager is often vague or ambiguous, the person with autism may struggle to complete work. If a line manager learns to be clearer and set timeframes this will not only benefit the employee with autism but neurotypical employees will also better understand expectations and requirements.

Employers want to keep up with their competitors and to develop their own line managers. Some private sector companies now reward their managers for retaining a diverse workforce that includes specific targets around the employment of people with autism. Other line managers in the same sector are appraised based on the integration of employees that have autism in their teams.

For managers that are competent and have worked in a role for a long time, but do not experience a high level of engagement with the role, introducing a neurodiverse person to the team may mean they develop their management skills. This can lead to a higher level of job satisfaction for the manager. One specialist explained that private sector companies are putting employees with autism into teams as an engagement tool for middle managers.

Adjustments

Key findings:

- Common adjustments include ensuring communication is accessible, giving clear plans and changing the physical environment.
- Workplace coaching can benefit employees and employers.

All interviewees discussed adjustments. Making adjustments is key to removing barriers for people with autism in the workplace and allows them to perform as well as others. Neurodiverse people will experience barriers that are caused by the behaviour of neurotypical people around them. Barriers can be caused by communication, sensory stimulus and the way that neurotypical people organise things.

Employers suggested that adjustments that have been useful for employees include making changes to the way people socialise and communicate. For example, employers not using inferred meaning or unnecessary metaphors but instead giving clear and simple instructions. Employees may need support prioritising their work or for neurotypical people to define expectations rather than assuming that they are known.

Other soft adjustments may be made for the way tasks are completed. People with autism can enjoy focusing on and completing tasks. Specialists suggest employers need to be judged on task outcomes rather than on behaviour they find odd or the way in which a task is completed.

Adjustments for people with autism involve ensuring the person is in a setting where they can thrive. This means the physical circumstances and sensory impact should be considered. For example, noise level or visual stimulus can be distracting. Changes can be made to these to allow the person to focus on their work. What happens in the environment should also be reviewed. For example, a busy space may cause distractions and room dividers could be used to create a calmer environment. One of the interviewees with autism said that having a place to withdraw and be alone to work is vital for some people.

Coaching for employers on these points was identified as an adjustment that improves employee retention. However, employers should ensure that they make adjustments for the individual based on their needs. Placing people in roles that in time, and with adjustments, they can manage will lead to people becoming increasingly confident in the workplace.

Challenges in the workplace

Key findings:

- Challenges in the workplace are created by assumptions, a lack of understanding, difficulties with communication and clarity.
- Adjustments need to be made for individuals.

The interviewees discussed various challenges that are created in the workplace. These include managing expectations, managing workload and workplace arrangements.

Managing expectations

Unwritten rules may be difficult for a person with autism to know about or understand. For example, neurotypical people may assume that the person knows that when someone in a senior position requests something it should take precedence over their other commitments. One person with autism said that internal politics were never clear to them, which led to difficulties. It will depend on the culture of the organisation but the line manager may need to explain what is appropriate to the person with autism.

Neurotypical people may not understand certain behaviour. For example, approaching someone from behind could lead to a person with autism becoming anxious and mean that they constantly look behind themselves. A misunderstanding of behaviour can effect social interactions between employees.

Managing workload

Removing or changing plans or giving ambiguous directions may lead to challenges. This may mean the person struggles to complete a task. An adjustment may be to ensure an employee has a clear plan of what they need to do and by when. They could have this written down or work could be coded using colour to ensure there is a clear process.

A lack of clarity may lead to an employee focusing all of their attention on one piece of work unnecessarily or it may mean an employee gets distracted and spends a lot of their time exploring one element of their work. When there is a lack of clarity it can lead to a disadvantage for the employee. Employers should not assume that an employee understands things that have not been clearly explained, for example, working times, when to take breaks or when to leave at the end of the working day.

It is important that employers explain to employees what is expected of them regarding performance. If there is a performance issue and it has not been made clear to the employee what is required then it is unreasonable to expect them to have performed to the required standard. However, if the employer has made adjustments and there remains a performance issue, then it is unlikely to be a disability issue but a performance management one. This requires line managers to be confident when talking to employees and making adjustments.

Workplace arrangements

If the employer has explained expected performance and adjustments have been made, when challenges then occur specialists suggest it is likely either to be due to a change in line manager or something that has happened outside of work in the employee's personal life. Stability and structure can be important to people with autism. In these situations further help may be needed to stabilise the situation.

Agile working was suggested as another possible challenge for some people with autism. Hot-desking can lead to additional stress, as the person does not know which colleagues they will be working near or where a space will be free. There is also a danger that working from home will prove difficult if the person struggles to either transfer work habits into the home environment or they do not properly disengage from work. One person with autism noted that technology allowing ready access to emails means that this is a challenge for neurotypical and neurodiverse people anyway.

Communication and translation

Key findings:

- Translating information between employer and employee can aid understanding, remove challenges and help retain employees.

The key to resolving communication issues between a neurotypical person and someone with autism is to understand the translation between the two. People with autism can understand language very literally and neurotypical people can be very vague or ambiguous. Neurotypical people can remove disadvantages by being clear, precise and “up-front” in the way they communicate.

One autism specialist suggests that the main factor to determine the retention of people with autism is having an intermediary that can support with translation between employer and employee. They

said the crucial communication between the two is that the employer understands the barriers faced by the person with autism and the person with autism has had the expectations and requirements of their role clearly explained to them.

The function of translation can be key to resolving challenges. A neurotypical person may need behaviour or barriers explained to them. The employee with autism may need to be told why requests made of them are not unreasonable and that employers do not have to make unreasonable adjustments.

Levels of support and specialist support in the workplace

Key findings:

- Specialists can help with recruitment and onboarding,
- Levels of support can be built within an organisation.
- Specialists can help resolve workplace difficulties.

Specialist support can help with recruiting neurodiverse people. They can also provide ongoing support until an individual is integrated into the workplace. This may include training the employee, line manager or wider team and helping to translate work assignments from the line manager to the employee. The specialists can help during the onboarding process to resolve difficulties. They may have experience of seeing the signs of stress or discomfort and will know how to resolve issues quickly. Specialist support could then be removed as the team and employee settles.

Some specialists recommend building different levels of support within organisations who employ a number of neurodiverse people. The first level of support suggested would be a “buddy” who could provide support or guidance to the employee and line manager. Typically this person would have autism experience and have skills in coaching or mentoring. The second level of support would be an external job coach that could work with the organisation if there are difficulties. The third level would be someone that can provide clinical support when there are serious concerns. Using a tiered system would incur additional costs for an organisation but may be valuable to a company that employs a large amount of neurodiverse people.

Unexpected issues may arise during an individual’s employment. When workplace difficulties escalate they may reach a point where specialist support is required. This may mean resolving issues between line managers and employees or facilitating a conversation between them. In some cases specialists explained they have had to recommend that people be moved into different teams.

Conclusions

This report has uncovered many important factors in the recruitment and retention of people with autism, such as:

- the value of using work trials;
- the benefits line managers can gain from managing people with autism;
- the importance of translation in communication between employee and employer; and
- the importance of autism awareness based on removing barriers and making adjustments in the workplace.

The research has also revealed key topics on which employers may require further guidance to support them in recruiting and retaining people with autism. These topics include the use of language at interview stage and throughout a person's employment, managing the onboarding process, making adjustments and resolving challenges.

It is clear that there are a range of challenges currently facing employers when recruiting and retaining people with autism in the UK. However, there is also a wealth of good practice. Where some companies set neurodiverse targets and design roles specifically for the recruitment and retention of individuals with autism, others have a much more limited understanding of autism in the workplace. This means companies have various needs in the recruitment and retention of people with autism, which range from support in identifying and making adjustments, to investing in lengthy work trials for numerous neurodiverse applicants.

As companies will vary in their need for support, it is rational that any initial guidance conveys general best practice principles of recruiting and retaining individuals with autism. More detailed and complex guidance for larger autism related employment projects is likely to require bespoke support.

The established themes and insights relevant to autism and employment presented in this report might serve as a suitable basis for a resource for employers. The interviewees gave many real life examples of challenges and good practice. These can be used as the foundation of case studies to help share information with employers in the resource. The resource might include practical guidance for line managers and those involved in recruitment, which can be used to both raise awareness and as a point of reference. Situations will arise in a workplace that cannot be resolved by referring to a written document, meaning the resource will additionally need to guide the employer on how to access further support.

Although this report has identified themes that can be useful in creating a resource for employers, there are limitations on the research. It would have been useful to interview a larger sample of employers, from a wider range of industries who have experience of recruiting and retaining people with autism. It may also have been useful to interview more people that have autism who face differing barriers in differing sectors to abstract further information about their employment experiences.

The diverse nature of autism, people and situations means that the findings identified will not be relevant in all circumstances. There is no "one size fits all" solution that can be recommended. However, the themes identified in this report and the guidance that will be shared in the subsequent resource to be developed will help employers approach autism and employment from a best practice basis.

Appendix one – Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were held between June and September 2015. Interviews were either conducted over the telephone or in person. The interviewer would firstly explain the aims of the project and then ask the interviewee questions using an interview guide that the interviewer had developed.

After the questions in the interview guide had been asked, the interviewer would explain their own reflections on what would make a good resource for employers. Interviewees would then be asked to give further feedback on those ideas before the interview ended.

The interview guide included a list of topics and questions that needed to be covered during the conversation in a particular order. The interviewer followed the guide but was also able to develop topical points in the conversation that strayed from the guide. The interviewer did this when they felt it was appropriate and relevant. The interviewer also prompted interviewees to give examples of the points they discussed. Interviews were tape recorded then later transcribed for analysis.

The interview guide included questions on the following topics:

- Recruitment and retention.
- Adjustments.
- Line manager skills.
- Common barriers or challenges in the workplace and overcoming them.
- Meaningful workplace relationships.

The initiating researcher analysed the transcribed discussions using a thematic analysis. Different themes were drawn from the conversations and put into categories based on what the interviewees had said. Themes were chosen on the basis that they captured something important in the discussions in relation to autism and employment. Following the themes being developed, the initiating researcher was contacted by two people with autism. The themes were discussed with them to gain their input.

Nine people were interviewed for the research of which three were employers that had responsibilities recruiting and retaining people with autism or for making adjustments. Two were employees from different sectors who both have autism. Four were autism and employment specialists that work in the recruitment and retention of people with autism. Participants were selected after organisations, which were either in Business Disability Forum's membership or closely associated, were asked if they would be able to provide input on the project. A larger sample of organisations were initially contacted, asked to give input and take part in the research.

Secondary sources of data included written feedback provided by a different autism and employment specialist. Another company shared information on the types of adjustments that are made for employees. During the research process another company raised a query with the initiating researcher, the response to this also formed part of the findings. Different points were drawn from the secondary sources and added to the findings.

Appendix two – Organisations involved in the research

We would like to thank the following for taking part in this research:

- Eileen Hopkins, Executive Director UK at AI-Media.
- David Perkins, Director at AS Mentoring.
- Fujitsu.
- Graeme Whippy MBE, Senior Disability Manager at Lloyds Banking Group.
- Microlink.
- Michael Vermeersch, D&I Ambassador and UK Accessibility Lead at Microsoft.
- Jonathan Andrews, Disability Task Force Member & Future Trainee Solicitor at Reed Smith.
- Tom Brundage, General Manager and Steen Thygesen, Director, at Specialisterne UK.

Accessibility statement

Business Disability Forum (BDF) is a not-for-profit member organisation that makes it easier and more rewarding to do business with and employ disabled people. BDF provides pragmatic support by sharing expertise, giving advice, providing training and facilitating networking opportunities to support organisations become fully accessible to employees with disabilities, candidates and customers.

Working with business and public sector organisations for more than 20 years, BDF has a membership of more than 300 large corporate and public sector employers that together account for close to 20% of the UK workforce. This includes 140 companies which are multinational including some of the UK and world's best known brands in energy, financial services, telecommunications, retail, transport, professional services, IT, outsourcing, retail, manufacturing and recruitment companies.

Contact us

Business Disability Forum
Nutmeg House
60 Gainsford Street
London
SE1 2NY

Tel: +44-(0)20-7403-3020

Textphone: +44-(0)20-7403-0040

Fax: +44-(0)20-7403-0404

Email: enquiries@businessdisabilityforum.org.uk

Web: www.businessdisabilityforum.org.uk

Business Disability Forum is committed to ensuring that all its products and services are as accessible as possible to everyone, including disabled people. If you wish to discuss anything with regard to accessibility, please contact us.

Company limited by guarantee with charitable objects. Registered Charity No: 1018463. Registered in England No: 2603700.

Business Disability Forum Partners include*:

Accenture
Allianz
American Express
Atos
Bank of America Merrill Lynch
Barclays
BBC
BT
CGI
Cisco Systems
Deloitte
Department for Transport
Department for Work and Pensions
Enterprise Rent-A-Car
Environment Agency
EY
Fujitsu
GlaxoSmithKline
HM Revenue and Customs
Home Office
HSBC
Infosys Limited
Kingfisher plc
KPMG
Lloyds Banking Group
Lorien Resourcing
MAXIMUS UK
Microlink PC
Microsoft Ltd
Ministry of Defence
National Crime Agency
NHS Scotland
Nuance
PricewaterhouseCoopers
Royal Bank of Scotland Group
Royal Mail Group
Sainsbury's
Santander
Shell International Ltd
Sky UK Limited
Standard Chartered Bank Plc

***correct at the time of publication, visit our website for the current list.**

