

AUTISM FORWARD RECRUITMENT ROUNDTABLE

24 September 2019 at Credit Suisse, London



Credit Suisse hosted Autism Forward's third recruitment roundtable on 24 September 2019. The roundtable was presented by Credit Suisse and attended by representatives from a wide range of employers and organisations including PwC, Deloitte, Northern Trust, Morgan Stanley, Goldman Sachs, Major, Lindsey & Africa, Herbert Smith Freehills, Latham & Watkins, Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer, River & Mercantile, Willis Towers Watson, Legal & General, Metro Bank plc, University of Oxford, King's College London, Autistica/CRAE, AS Mentoring, Ambitious About Autism, NAS, Aspirations and Makers Academy.

Chris Horne, Deputy CEO of Credit Suisse International and Credit Suisse Securities (Europe) Limited, introduced the event. Chris noted the unacceptably high rate of unemployment among autistic people (only 16% in full-time work and 16% in part-time work), contrasting this with the outcomes that Autism Forward has been able to achieve by funding specialist mentoring for autistic job seekers. Autism Forward has now funded mentoring support for over 90 autistic people around the country and 80% of the people they supported last year are now in paid (50%) or voluntary (30%) employment.

Recognising the importance of improving employment opportunities for autistic people, Chris explained how Credit Suisse began an internship programme in London last November, offering two 10 week placements to autistic candidates within the UK strategic change team. One of those candidates is now permanently employed in the team and the other went on to secure full-time employment externally. The candidates were supported by a mentor from AS Mentoring, Autism Forward's mentor partner in London, both at recruitment stage and in the workplace.

Chris noted that due to the success of the initiative last year, Credit Suisse is offering two more internships in London this year, with the intention to upscale to four internships in 2020. They will also be employing an autistic IT consultant from Auticon in their London office. Credit Suisse Raleigh in the United States currently offers seven internships for autistic candidates and four of their previous interns are now permanently employed there. The target for 2020 for Raleigh is to offer twelve internships, demonstrating the commitment of the firm to the initiative both here in London and in the US.

Implementing the Internship Programme

Liam Collins-McIntyre, the team manager of UK Strategic Change responsible for overseeing the internship programme, explained how the scheme has been beneficial both from the perspective of the talent the candidates bring to his team and also the improvements to his own management and communication style.

AS Mentoring provided training to the line managers and the wider team and one of their mentors was also present at the interviews for the candidates. The training for the team focused on key areas which can present difficulties for autistic employees and strategies and adjustments to minimise such issues. Liam noted how useful this training was not only in relation to managing the interns, but also in re-evaluating and improving his management style more generally, helping him get the best out of all his team members by considering their individual strengths.

Liam noted that the success of the programme had generated interest from other business areas of the firm and the scheme would be expanded into new departments this year. The importance of the initiative from a business perspective was also stressed, particularly the value of having team members who think differently, who can, for example, spot anomalies and patterns in data, systems and processes which inform and improve the team's analysis and performance. Making simple adjustments to recruitment procedures, providing training to line managers and offering mentoring support to candidates has enabled the autistic candidates to thrive in the team and has opened up a new source of talent to the firm.

The internships are also of considerable benefit to the candidates, who benefit from a recruitment process and working environment where their strengths and differences are acknowledged and supported. This enables them to gain valuable work experience and training which in turn improves their confidence, skills and employability.

Participating in the Internship Programme

Ali-John Mirsepassi is one of the interns who participated in the programme last year and is now permanently employed as a data scientist in the UK Strategic Change team. Ali-John described how during his internship he received training in Alteryx data science and analysis software, developing skills which he has gone on to use in his permanent role in the team where he plays an active role in project delivery.

Ali-John explained how he had found it extremely difficult to get through traditional recruitment process, despite his excellent academics. The initial screening of candidates is now often done by telephone interview, which autistic people can find extremely difficult due to their communication differences and the anxiety the situation induces. Ali-John said that out of over 20 telephone interviews he had succeeded in passing only one. He described the anxiety he felt when trying to communicate with a disembodied voice at the other end of the phone, being asked questions he had not been able to prepare for by someone he could not see and had never met. He contrasted this with his experience at Credit Suisse, where the interview took place face to face and the job description and the interview questions had been amended by AS Mentoring to ensure they were fair for autistic candidates.

Ali-John also received mentoring both at the pre-employment stage and in the workplace from AS Mentoring. The mentoring support was initially for an hour a week and subsequently once a fortnight as he settled into the role. The purpose of the mentoring is to provide professional advice and support to the individual and devise strategies to cope with any issues or difficulties that may arise in the workplace. Ali-John noted that the support had helped him understand how to communicate more effectively at work and in meetings. For example, he now writes down what he needs to discuss, so that when in the meeting he can keep his thoughts on track not get sidetracked with irrelevant issues. It has also helped him gain a better understanding of the “big picture” and how to break a task down into individual steps and to understand the level of detail required in a particular situation.

Ali-John noted that he was also offered adjustments such as noise cancelling headphones or changing his working hours, but he had decided he did not need those. For him, the adjustments have been relatively small changes to management and communication style, which together with regular mentoring support and the training his colleagues received from AS Mentoring, have had a massive impact on his ability to thrive at work and contribute his skills to the team.

Mentoring Support

Anna Roads is a mentor with AS Mentoring, Autism Forward’s mentor partner in London, Poole, Birmingham and Bristol which has over 20 mentors supporting around 150 autistic people with pre-employment or workplace support and providing consultancy services to employers. Anna has been worked for AS mentoring for the last two years and is the mentor for the participants in the Credit Suisse internship programme as well as similar programmes run by Goldman Sachs and Deutsche Bank. Anna has an autistic teenage daughter and has a City background herself.

Anna described how, prior to joining AS Mentoring, she was involved with the “Cygnet” research project into mentoring autistic adults run by London South Bank University which was overseen by Professor Nicola Martin, Damion Milton (an autistic academic) and Professor Baron-Cohen. The aim of the scheme was to test the benefit of mentoring carried out on terms defined by the autistic participants, not “befriending” but with specific objectives designed to enable the participants to fulfil their potential. So many autistic people are unable to find roles commensurate with their academic ability due to their difficulty navigating recruitment processes and workplace hierarchies and etiquette.

Anna described how as part of the she supported a young maths graduate who had been doing a part-time admin role who did not wish to disclose his autism diagnosis, so was not getting the adjustments he needed to secure roles which matched his ability. For six months Anna worked with him on communication issues and how to deal with the unwritten rules of the workplace, such as making small talk, how to deal with appraisals you thought were inaccurate or what to do if you are invited to lunch or to an event. With the benefit of her support, he was able to go on to secure a more appropriate role.

Anna noted how she and her colleagues at AS Mentoring see time and time again the difference a small but regular mentoring support makes to individuals and the earlier the support is available, the better. This is why Autism Forward funding is so important as there is no public funding available for pre-employment support. She also stressed the value of internship schemes such as

the one offered by Credit Suisse and other organisations, as so many clients come to her in their late 20s or 30s never having worked, which makes it even more difficult for them to secure employment.

Anna noted that some employers attempts to widen the availability of opportunities, for example by using phone rather than face to face interviews, has had the effect of excluding autistic candidates. Simple changes such as providing the questions in advance to lessen anxiety and ensure the autistic candidate does not misinterpret them can make an enormous difference, but such requests are often rejected by employers who do not understand the difficulties they present for autistic candidates.

Anna also described the extremely positive impact of welcoming autistic people into the workforce which encourages existing employees to disclose and get the right adjustments or support they need to work most effectively. She noted how many autistic women will hide in the workplace and will mask their autism, very often to the detriment of their mental health, for fear of prejudice if they disclose. Very many may be undiagnosed or only diagnosed as an adult, and can be extremely high achieving, but struggle due to expectations they cannot meet. Autistic people often have a very spiky profile, so they might have extremely high ability in one area but have a very low ability in another area, or their ability may fluctuate according to the amount of stress they are under or the sensory inputs they are experiencing. This is particularly difficult where employees are expected to perform to a particular standard across all aspects of a role. Mentoring support enables the individual identify and address the issues which are holding them back and identify any changes or adjustments that might be necessary in the workplace to enable them to thrive.

Discussion Points

Alison Matthews of Herbert Smith Freehills noted that there can be ignorance around the nature of adjustments that autistic people need to work effectively and noted that these can differ considerably depending on the individual. The main adjustment she has made for an autistic colleague currently working with her has been ensuring that communications are very clear and precise and recognising their difficulty with making small talk and giving feedback, for example.

Jane Pierce of Autism Forward noted that further examples of [adjustments](#) that can be effective and [how to discuss these with the individual](#) and other helpful information on neurodiversity can be found on the [ACAS Website](#).

Nick Heckscher from Aspirations noted the difficulty that arises with the transition from university, where we study one subject in immense detail, to the workplace, where we are expected to be able to demonstrate a very broad range of skills. This can be particularly difficult for autistic candidates who may have a very “spiky profile”. As well as reviewing job descriptions to ensure they only require skills or experience necessary for the role, Nick suggested that employers should consider “unbundling” roles for autistic candidates so that they can focus on the aspects suited to their individual skills.

This can be an issue both at recruitment stage when a candidate does not meet all of the “core competencies” set by an employer and also as their career progresses, where they are held back due to a failure to meet a particular target or competency at the requisite level. Competencies which judge an individual on people’s reaction to you or your enthusiasm can be completely inappropriate and unfair for autistic employees. It was noted that with the interns on the Credit Suisse programme, rather than delete or exclude particular competencies, the interpretation of what it

meant to meet each competency was assessed for each individual. For example “strong client focus” need not refer to external clients, but rather the people to whom the individual reports internally.

Adjustments are only possible however where an individual feels comfortable disclosing their diagnosis. This is why it is so important for firms to be clear that they encourage disclosure and offer the appropriate support and adjustments to which the individual is entitled to enable them to work effectively. It was noted that while firms are getting better at promoting diversity generally, neurodiversity is so often overlooked and sidelined and so many people who are neurodivergent feel they need to cover up their difference and mirror neurotypical behaviour, so we need to do all we can to end the ignorance and stigma around autism and neurodiversity.

Summary:

- Mentoring support at pre-employment and in the workplace is key to enabling autistic people to secure and maintain fulfilling employment.
- Training for line managers and other team members is important to facilitate understanding and inclusion of an autistic team member.
- Reasonable adjustments will vary according to the individual and are often of little or no cost to the employer, eg changes to communication styles, adjustment to working hours to avoid rush hour, revision of core competencies to reflect skills profile of the individual, noise cancelling headphones, adjustments to lighting and quieter desk position.
- Attitude of employers which facilitates disclosure is important so that employees do not feel they have to mask or hide their diagnosis and can request appropriate adjustments. Autism specific internship programmes can encourage existing employees to disclose and enable managers and HR teams to better understand how to ensure autistic employees can thrive and progress.

Future Events

In addition to the work Autism Forward does to support individuals into employment, we are keen to continue to hold roundtable events bring together employers, autistic employees and professionals and develop a network of people who want to drive change in this area. Please do get in touch with us if you or any of your colleagues are interested in attending future events or would like to host a similar event with us. We would particularly like to hear from any autistic people who are interested in attending these discussions.

Our next roundtable event is due to be held at midday on Wednesday 15 January 2020 at River & Mercantile, 2nd Floor, London EC2V 7HR (near Moorgate tube station). The session will be led by Ian Icceton of River & Mercantile and Dr Brett Heasman who leads the DARE project, which is a collaboration between the autism research charity Autistica and the Centre for Research in Autism and Education (CRAE) at University College London. The project conducts cutting edge research and helps companies recruit and retain neurodiverse talent and the session will focus on insights from their research to help employers improve their recruitment and retention of autistic people. As well as his role as Group HR Director at River & Mercantile, Ian Icceton is currently undertaking a Doctorate (DBA) at Cranfield University in Autism and Employment and is on the board of the DARE project.

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DARE Project

For further details of the DARE project please see <https://dareuk.org/> or contact:

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