

AUTISM FORWARD RECRUITMENT ROUNDTABLE

1 May 2019 at Herbert Smith Freehills, London



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Herbert Smith Freehills hosted Autism Forward's first recruitment roundtable event on 1 May 2019. The event brought together senior executives, HR teams and autistic employees and professionals to discuss how organisations can improve recruitment processes and workplaces to ensure more autistic people can enter the workforce. In attendance were representatives from over 20 law firms, banks, investment banks, insurers and other public and private sector employers.

The roundtable discussion was led by David Perkins, director of AS Mentoring, with valuable contributions from Helen Needham from Capco, who launched the Capco employee Neurodiversity Network in 2018, Luke Poulton, an AV technician with RBS who is passionate about raising awareness of autism, and Aisling Gallagher who, at 26, is the youngest councillor in the borough of Lewisham.

Herbert Smith Freehills Chief Human Resources Officer, Helen Anthony, said: "To support neurodiversity in the workplace, employers and HR professionals must commit to altering their recruitment processes to attract and retain talent from a range of individuals, including having conversations about accessibility and acceptance. The role of HR teams in organisations is to promote equality and support people's abilities and talents. At Herbert Smith Freehills, we welcome all of the differences that make our employees exceptional and are proud to support the work of Autism Forward."

The discussion focused initially on the reasons why the employment rates for autistic people are so low, including the barriers autistic people face due to the lack of understanding and discrimination they often face from employers and the difficulty navigating recruitment processes which pose particular issues for autistic candidates.

Job Adverts

Changes that can be made to job adverts to ensure that autistic candidates are not discouraged from applying were discussed:

- Clear job description, avoiding technical jargon.
- Clear distinction between skills which are necessary for the role and skills or experience which are desirable, but not essential.
- Avoid expressions and wording which could be misinterpreted by an autistic person who may interpret them very literally.
- Avoid blanket requirements for “excellent communication skills”, “good team player” and “persuasiveness” and focus on specific ability requirements for the role.
- Include details of location, pay, benefits, usual working hours and whether part-time or flexible working is an option.
- Invite requests for reasonable adjustments to the recruitment process without requiring candidates to disclose a particular condition or disability.
- Include contact details for further information about the role.
- Affirm your commitment to diversity.

Interviews

Interviews are a particular problem for autistic candidates as they are essentially a social skills test and interviewers will often ask vague or multi-part questions which can be difficult to process. Autistic candidates may have difficulty reading non-verbal cues and knowing when to speak or listen during an interview and are not always good at selling themselves in an artificial situation. Work trials and internships are generally a much better way to assess a candidate’s suitability and skills. Where this is not possible, adjustments can be made to the interview process to assist autistic candidates:

- If possible, offer alternative forms of interview. Some candidates will prefer not to have telephone or skype interviews, but others may find them easier.
- Give clear instructions on how to find the interview location, the format of the interview and who will be carrying out the interview.
- Providing photos of the building, reception area, interview room and interviewers can be very helpful to reduce anxiety.
- Providing the questions in advance is extremely helpful as it avoids the candidate misinterpreting a question, reduces anxiety and enables them to prepare effectively.

- Ask questions about interests and skills the candidate has which are relevant to the role and avoid questions which relate to the distant past or future.
- Avoid vague and multi-part questions which can be difficult to interpret and process.
- Encourage candidates to bring written prompts to the interview as this can be an effective way of reducing anxiety.
- Autistic candidates may need longer processing time for verbal questions, so a 5-10 second delay for the candidate to respond before repeating the question or asking if they would like you to rephrase it.
- Avoid psychometric and situational tests which can be very difficult for autistic candidates.

Line Managers

Training for line managers is also important so they can understand how their autistic employees will work and communicate most effectively and why certain adjustments may be necessary. Most workplace adjustments are not expensive or difficult to put in place and having an understanding and flexible line manager makes an enormous difference.

Rather than making assumptions about an individual, the key is to work with each employee to understand what they need to carry out their role most effectively. For example, how they prefer to communicate (eg by email rather than phone), where they would like to sit in the office, adjustments to lighting, use of ear defenders, adjustments to working hours to avoid commuting at rush hour or aspects of a role they need support with or would like to avoid. An external work coach or internal mentor can also be extremely helpful to provide support and assist with situations they find difficult.

Future Events

Employers are increasingly recognising the value of a more diverse and neurodiverse workforce but can be unsure how to make their recruitment processes and workplaces accessible for autistic candidates. In addition to the work Autism Forward does to support individuals into employment, we are keen to hold regular roundtable events bring together employers, autistic employees and professionals and develop a network of people who are keen 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.

Contact

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