

AUTISM FORWARD RECRUITMENT ROUNDTABLE

15 January 2020 at River and Mercantile, London



The Autism Forward logo, consisting of the words "AUTISM FORWARD" in a bold, sans-serif font, positioned to the left of a large, stylized right-pointing arrow.

River and Mercantile hosted Autism Forward's fourth recruitment roundtable on 15 January 2020. The event brought together senior executives, HR teams and autistic employees and professionals to hear from Ian Iceton 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. As well as his role as Group HR Director at River & Mercantile, Ian Iceton is currently undertaking a Doctorate (DBA) at Cranfield University in Autism and Employment and is on the board of the DARE project. The project conducts cutting edge research and helps companies recruit and retain neurodiverse talent. The presentation focused on insights from their respective research to help employers improve their recruitment and retention of autistic people.

In attendance were representatives from organisations including Invesco, Credit Suisse, Aspiring Solicitors, Howard Kennedy, Weil, Gotshal & Manges, AS Mentoring, Deloitte, Goldman Sachs, InVentures, Ina Ciel, Autistica/CRAE and Employment Autism.

Ian Iceton - Presentation on Research Findings

Ian Iceton outlined his background, noting that he changed from an accountancy career to HR over 20 years ago and is presently Group HR Director at River and Mercantile, having previously worked for organisations including Network Rail, PwC, VW. Since 2016 Ian has been carrying out part-time doctoral research into factors which enable or hinder the retention of autistic people in the workplace.

Ian explained that his research was divided between three organisations - a government department, an investment bank and an engineering and construction company. Ian has carried out 52 semi-structured interviews; one third with autistic employees, one third with line managers and one third with HR/support services to evaluate their different experiences. Although his findings have yet to be fully evaluated, Ian shared the early results with the meeting, diving his findings into "Enablers" and "Hinderers".

Enablers

In-house Champion: Ian noted from the case studies that he carried out was that there was often a clear “light bulb” moment where an individual, either from personal experience or wider societal awareness, realised the importance of addressing the barriers autistic people face securing employment and in the workplace. Ian noted that a determined in-house champion was key to driving forward the neurodiversity initiatives. High level buy-in was also important, not least to help unblock corporate/HR issues, but it was really essential to have someone practically getting things done and addressing any barriers.

Business Need: The most successful outcomes were where there was the best fit between the talents of the individual and the employer’s business needs, so that it was not just a philanthropic initiative. The businesses who benefited the most were those who were willing to change job profiles to allow the role to be focused on what really fits with that individual’s skills and strip away aspects they find difficult which are not essential or can be fulfilled by another employee.

Corporate culture: The corporate culture is also very important. Where a broader diversity agenda is already ingrained, it is easier to get line managers to think in a different way about recruitment and roles.

Third party support: Third party support was very important, for example in the form of awareness training, advice on changes to recruitment and HR processes or mentoring support for individuals..

Flexibility: Preparedness to adapt recruitment processes, flex roles, facilitate disclosure and offer reasonable adjustments based on that particular individual’s skills and needs.

Hinderers

Lack of training: Lack of line manager training and general lack of awareness of the range of challenges across the “spectrum”.

Lack of flexibility in HR processes: Lack of flexibility and adjustment at each stage of recruitment (ie wording of job adverts; interviews, testing), assessment and career progression is a significant hindrance. This is the area where the most challenges arise.

Deep consideration of the wording of job adverts is required. Autistic people will often be put off applying for roles where they do not have all the skills mentioned and many job descriptions contain requirements which are not essential to the role. It is also important to review the words and language used to ensure they are clear, unambiguous and jargon free.

Interviews are particularly challenging for autistic people and do not test the skills actually required for the role. Some organisations have completely re-ordered their recruitment processes or even ignore CVs entirely, focusing instead on whether the individual has the technical skills for that particular job.

Sensory challenges: Workplaces can present significant sensory challenges, especially open plan offices, strip lighting, strong smells, noise.

Lack of communication across an organisation: Problems arose where there was not consistency of communication and support across all departments. For example, where a line manager was happy with a proposed adjustment but HR were not onside, or where an adjustment to lighting was required but facilities would not cooperate. Also issues can arise where there is a change of department or line manager.

Parental or educational advice: Sometimes parental or educational advice could be a hindrance, for example discouraging the individual from disclosing which means they do not get the right adjustments at the recruitment stage or in the workplace. Disclosure is a difficult issue as many fear prejudice if they disclose too early in the process, but failure to disclose means the employer cannot make adjustments and the individual will not get the right support. Employers indicated that they prefer candidates to disclose as early as possible in the recruitment process.

Recommendations for Best Practice

- Deep consideration of job specification and language.
- Offer open days for neurodivergent candidates, liaise with universities and colleges to advertise positions.
- Provide adequate information on the role, organisation, workplace and recruitment procedure.
- Offer reasonable adjustments in selection process.
- Adjustment of assessment process for example using technical selection techniques which test the skills actually required for the role, putting less emphasis on CVs and interviews.
- Ensure adequate training for line managers.
- Commitment to flex HR and other internal processes.

In conclusion, Ian noted that all of the employers involved in his research recognised the business benefit from employing autistic people and ensuring that the right adjustments are in place to enable more autistic people to access employment and work effectively.

Dr Brett Heasman - Presentation on DARE project

Brett outlined the DARE project which is a collaboration Autistica and the Centre for Research in Autism and Education (CRAE). The DARE team have set up a public neurodiversity survey to collect data on disclosure, masking, organisational culture and attitudes, recruitment, adjustments and mental health. The survey has so far been taken by over 700 people, over 500 of whom are autistic, although the survey uses a traits rather than labels based approach. The survey can be accessed on the [DARE website](#) and covers:

- Disclosing an autism diagnosis
- Masking (suppressing autistic traits to fit in, also known as camouflaging)
- Organisational culture
- Recruitment experiences
- Mental health
- Adjustments
- Priorities for future research

Some of the main insights discovered so far from the research are that around 25% of autistic people only disclose their diagnosis to an employer after something has gone wrong in the workplace; autistic people reported lower job satisfaction and lower median income than their non-autistic peers; the respondents' main priority for future research is an organisational shift in understanding neurodiversity.

Adjustments

The focus of the presentation today would be the findings on “adjustments” as these are key to retaining talent and ensuring neurodivergent people can reach their full potential.

Where appropriate adjustments are not in place and an individual is working in an environment which is poorly designed to accommodate their way of working, they will tend to leave the role quickly and this can have a negative cascading effect on that individual and their career path.

The survey found that over half of the respondents said they were unable to ask for adjustments, or that adjustments were refused, or they were told they were not appropriate.

30% of respondents said that they were unable to discuss adjustments with their employer.

37% said they were able to discuss them with someone they trust within the workplace.

15% said they were comfortable discussing adjustments openly in the workplace.

As autism involves communication difficulties, it is a challenge for many autistic people to identify appropriate adjustments and then be able to request them. The survey results show that employers do not usually have centralised information on adjustments (i.e. what is available and what adjustments have been offered to other employees) that is accessible to employees and managers. A major benefit of a culture where disclosure is encouraged is that adjustments can be put in place which will enhance the strengths of that individual and support their needs and will help avoid the HR issues and complaints that can arise when employees feel unable to disclose.

Where the burden is on the neurodivergent individual to speak up, this is often not easy for them to do. The individual may be concerned about perceived stigma or being viewed as a troublemaker or implying that their line manager is not doing enough. They may also be concerned about the views of co-workers. It is important that an organisation reduces barriers to accessing adjustment and there is someone with an understanding of autism who is available to discuss adjustments with employees in an open and receptive way.

As set out in the [ACAS Guidance](#), under the Equality Act, employers have an obligation to provide "reasonable adjustments" for employees who are disabled. A person is disabled if they have 'a physical or mental impairment' that has 'a substantial and long-term adverse effect' on their 'ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities'. This means that even if an employee has not been formally diagnosed or assessed as autistic, they could still be considered to have a disability. Employees with a formal diagnosis may find it easier to get the adjustments they need, but employers should be willing to support individuals who have self-diagnosed and need adjustments to work effectively. Employers should be aware that obtaining a diagnosis, especially as an adult, can take a number of years.

Having a disability under the Equality Act 2010 means that your employer must consider making 'reasonable adjustments' to help you carry out your job without being at a disadvantage if:

- they become aware of your disability
- they could reasonably be expected to know you have a disability
- you ask for an adjustment to be made
- you are having difficulty with any part of your job
- either your sickness record, or delay in returning to work, is linked to your disability.

It is also important to consider how adjustments can be made sustainable as the individual progresses in their role, moves department or changes line manager or team.

The types of adjustment sought were often not costly but they do vary from individual to individual.

The main categories of adjustments are:

Physical: Eg; changes to lighting (especially strip lighting), temperature, quiet desk, sight blockers, ear defenders or ear plugs, quiet place or space to go if experiencing sensory overload, ability to eat lunch away from desk.

Social rules/etiquette: Eg: Formal on-boarding process and online resources and handbook of office procedures are helpful; ability to take breaks away from desk if needed; no negative consequences if decline invitations to office social events etc.

Mental Health: Access to mental health support as neurodivergent people have a higher comorbidity of mental health issues such as depression.

Cognitive Adjustments: Time management tools like "Wonderlist" to assist with prioritisation of tasks, organisation etc; instructions given in writing rather than orally; regular meetings may be helpful as a chance to ensure tasks on target and enable the employee to ask for advice or support; advance information about changes to working environment, role etc to minimise anxiety.

The [ACAS website](#) also sets out example of adjustments that could be offered to a neurodivergent employee.

As each individual will have very different strengths and challenges, it is important that adjustments are considered on an individual basis. There may be resource constraints or adjustments which may be refused due to the wider impact on the rest of the team, but generally the adjustments required are not costly but do require an organisation to show some flexibility and cooperation between departments to ensure they are put in place effectively and consistently applied.

Access to Work funding from the DWP may also be available to fund more costly adjustments such as third party mentoring support.

Do-It Profiler

Jane Pierce of Autism Forward also mentioned at the meeting the [Do-It Profiler](#) which is a tool that has been developed by Prof. Amanda Kirby to enable neurodivergent people to assess their skills and challenges and print out a report or suggested reasonable adjustments based on their specific role at work which they can then share with their employer as basis for discussion for reasonable adjustments. The cost is around £70 per person for the workplace evaluation and report. The advantage of this is that the individual has a report which they can take to their employer as a basis for a discussion about adjustments and they can also take it with them to a new department or employer.

Future of Work

The meeting briefly discussed whether future ways of working could benefit autistic people with more opportunities to work remotely. It was noted that 17% of staff at the internet based bank Monzo are neurodivergent, which is higher than the average (thought to be around 10%). Self-employment is also sometimes seen as a preferable option for neurodivergent people who may struggle in a workplace where adjustments are not made to enable them to work most effectively, however it was noted that this can be difficult for many autistic people who may need support with marketing, networking and other aspects of running their own business. Also remote working and self-employment can result in further social isolation, which can already an issue for some autistic people.

One of the attendees, Marc Goblot, noted that this was something that he was working on in the contacts of a new project, [Ina Ciel Digital](#). This is an inclusive creative technology business which will aim to bring together a collective of autistic digital talents to design, deliver and test products and services that benefit autistic people and those connected to them as well as other specialised markets and audiences.

The plan is for the collective to be supported by a partner network of academic, tech and design companies and individuals to co-produce digital products like web sites, apps, online systems and devices. They will deliver projects commissioned by clients from the public sector, charities, digital agencies to commission projects and will also develop products in-house to end consumers supported by grants, social investment and corporate sponsorship. By forming a collective, the individuals will have the benefit of remote working when required, but also the ability to connect and work with others with different skills and expertise.

Employment Autism

One of the attendees, Hilary Fertig, informed the meeting about Employment Autism which is launching an online information service offering evidence based best practice advice and guidance to autistic job seekers, employees and work providers. They would love to hear from autistic people about their experience of job-hunting and work, and from employers, managers and other work providers and advocates. They recognise the value of lived experience and want to backup and illustrate their content with personal stories.

Please contact Hilary Fertig at hilary.fertig@employmentautism.org.uk if you would like to share your experiences on the Employment Autism information service.

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 colleagues who are interested in participating in these discussions.

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