

AUTISM FORWARD RECRUITMENT ROUNDTABLE

11 June 2020 with Adjust Services

Autism Forward's fifth recruitment roundtable took place via Zoom on 11 June 2020. The event brought together senior executives, HR teams and autistic employees and professionals to discuss the impact of unwritten social rules in the workplace. The webinar was hosted by Daniel Aherne of Adjust Services, who provides consultancy and awareness training to employers and other organisations in relation to all aspects of neurodiversity and development of inclusive workplaces. The presentation included contributions from Hannah Reading and Luke Poulton giving examples from their own experiences.

In attendance were representatives from organisations including Aspiring Solicitors, Bird & Bird, Capc, Clifford Chance, Columbia Threadneedle Investments, Deloitte, FDM Group, Herbert Smith Freehills, Howard Kennedy, Immersive Labs, Invesco, Linklaters, River & Mercantile, Shell, University of Oxford and Weil, Gotshal & Manges.

Introduction

Daniel began by outlining his experience of working with employers including Vodaphone, Clifford Chance, Unilever and the crew of the TV show "The Undateables", where he helped the crew understand the importance of clear communication and keeping to agreed arrangements, explaining how anxiety inducing it can be if, for example, an individual is told they will be called at a particular time and then that is changed without notice.

Daniel emphasised how important it is that employers and colleagues understand the difficulty that unwritten social rules present for many autistic people. Failure to understand this is one of the main reasons why so many autistic people struggle to maintain employment as it can easily lead to misjudgment and misinterpretation of their motives. Daniel gave an example of an autistic employee who had called in sick in the morning and had then gone into work later when she felt better. She had not understood the unwritten rule that if you call in sick, you take the whole day off. To her it was logical that she went into work as soon as she felt better, but her manager misinterpreted that as her simply not getting up on time, which led to her being misjudged as unreliable.

Neurodiversity

Daniel explained that the concept of neurodiversity was first introduced by Judy Singer in 1998 ([Judy Singer, NeuroDiversity](#)), with the idea that neurodiversity is like biodiversity, there are different types of brain and we should value the different ways of thinking and processing information and the different skills profiles that we each have, all of which are necessary for our species to survive and develop. Neurodiversity includes autism, ADHD, ADD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, epilepsy and tourettes and people often have overlapping diagnoses. Many important discoveries and astonishing achievements have been made by people who are neurodivergent. We clearly need people who think differently and variations in neurology are part of the normal natural variation in the human genome, but some people may need a different environment in order to thrive.

Autism

This session will focus in particular on autism as the difference in processing of social cues and context make it particularly hard for many autistic people to understand unwritten social rules. Daniel noted that the official statistic is that 1.1% of the population are autistic, but the actual figure is likely to be much higher than this due to underdiagnosis of women and girls and the difficulty many people, especially adults, have in obtaining a diagnosis, which can take years.

National Autistic Society research shows that only 16% of autistic people are in full-time employment and 43% of autistic adults have lost their job or left because of a factor related to their autism. Autistic people face enormous barriers to employment due to the nature of recruitment processes, managers and colleagues not understanding them, not receiving the right support and the workplace environment or culture being unsuitable. A 2016 study found that 80% of autistic employees said that their managers and colleagues had not had any form of autism awareness training. The impact of unwritten rules is one of the most significant areas causing autistic people to be ostracised or misjudged in the workplace, but without any awareness training, people are unlikely to understand how this affects their autistic colleagues.

Examples of Unwritten Social Rules

Daniel gave an example of an autistic person making tea for themselves in the office and not realising that the convention is to ask others if they would also like a drink. They may therefore offend their colleagues without any realisation as to why they have done so and their colleagues are unlikely to explain this unwritten rule to them, which quickly exacerbates the situation. There are so many of these unwritten social rules that someone could break 20 or more a day without realising at all and no-one would tell them, which very quickly leads to the person being misjudged.

Autistic people may also have difficulties understanding that different social rules may apply in different contexts. For example, it is acceptable to ask how old a person's children are but not how old their partner is, even though this is not logical. Discussions which may be acceptable in a social context, for example around politics or relationships, are often not appropriate in the workplace or with people you do not know well, which again can be problematic for some autistic people to understand. Daniel gave another example which had come up in the lessons that a university had put on for their international students to help them understand British conventions. The students were told that although the British generally love to queue, they do not queue at bars. Daniel noted that being autistic can be like being in a foreign country where you have to make an effort to learn the local customs and conventions. He recommended the book [Watching the English](#) which describes the extent to which the English are governed by a web of unwritten and often illogical social rules and conventions.

Daniel noted that problems also arise due to unclear instructions and communication by non-autistic people to their colleagues. For example, their manager might say "would you like to come to the meeting tomorrow" meaning that they *should* come to the meeting, but this may be interpreted as meaning it is up to them whether they attend or not. It is important to be clear with instructions and check they are understood and also ask your autistic colleagues how they prefer to communicate, some may prefer instructions by email rather than oral instructions and this can also reduce scope for misunderstanding. Idioms and figurative language can also be problematic for autistic people which should also be borne in mind when communicating with colleagues.

The best way to support autistic colleagues is to ensure that their managers and colleagues and HR staff have awareness training so that they understand the issues which can lead to problems in the workplace, particularly around unwritten rules and communication. Such awareness is necessary to create an inclusive workplace and avoid misunderstandings. It is also important that each individual is given the opportunity to request adjustments that will enable them to work effectively as this will vary enormously from person to person, depending on their communication style and sensory processing differences.

Personal Experience

Daniel then handed over to Hannah Reading, who is a software developer presently working at Shell. Hannah described how when she was younger she would invite friends over and would be so engrossed in talking to them that she would forget to offer them anything to eat or drink. She was then upset with herself when her parents then offered them something, as she realised she should have done that but it did not automatically occur to her to do so.

Hannah gave another example of how she had made a mistake that morning at work. She had been invited to attend a meeting by the VP of IT engineering, which was going to clash with this webinar. So when she accepted she also clicked on "edit response" and explained that she could only attend for 30 minutes. The response went to the VP and she was then told by her manager that she should not have done that as it was not wise to do so and that any concerns should be addressed with her line manager first before contacting senior members of staff.

Understanding office hierarchy is often problematic for autistic people as it is never written down or communicated to staff, it is just assumed that everyone understands which can lead to considerable issues. It can be very upsetting for an autistic member of staff who can end up being disliked or misjudged through not understanding such social rules and hierarchies which are not explained to them and where their colleagues and managers do not realise the difficulty they present. This highlights the need for awareness training at all levels of an organisation.

Hannah gave another example where she had had to teach herself a new programming language and had watched a training video and then started experimenting with the new code using the development client programme using her knowledge from the training, which then had caused problems with the code which had to be fixed. Her managers explained that she should not have used the development client programme for training purposes, but this had not been made clear to her.

Hannah also noted that it was helpful for her to have the opportunity to explain to colleagues why she has stim toys on her desk that help her relax. Convention might stop colleagues from asking and misunderstanding why she needs these, so being able to discuss this creates a more inclusive working environment.

Hannah reiterated the need for clear communication and each time she is presented with a figure of speech, she needs to take time to understand or find out what is meant. She gave an example of an email she had received about a competition she was entering at work which used the phrase "when life gives you lemons", which she had to google to understand what it meant. She also said it can be difficult for her to work out when someone is joking or being humorous. She said it is helpful to her if communication is always clear and direct and instructions are fully explained.

Daniel then introduced Luke Poulton, who is an AV technician working at Howard Kennedy. Luke explained the difficulties he had also had in the past with office hierarchy, for example when he was younger he had a Saturday job at Sainsbury's and after being ordered around on his first day, he turned to his boss and said "It's all about you, isn't it?". This led to his mother having to explain that he was autistic and hadn't understood that it was inappropriate to talk to your manager in that way.

Luke then spoke about his experience later in his career, freelancing as an AV specialist for banks and law firms. He had some bad experiences with managers who had no understanding of autism and gave an example of when his manager had been reluctant to let him have the overhead light removed from his desk as it presented difficulties for him. Artificial light can often present sensory processing difficulties for autistic people, particularly fluorescent lighting which can be painful or distracting. After the light was eventually removed, the manager started shining his desk light towards Luke, deliberately making the environment very uncomfortable for him.

On another occasion Luke had been called into an HR meeting at the end of his probation period, expecting to be told that he was being offered a permanent position as his performance had been good and he was not aware of any issues. At the meeting he was told he was not being kept on, one of the reasons being that he "asked too many questions". This showed the lack of understanding of autism on the part of the HR team and management, as particular care needs to be taken to communicate the purpose of any meeting as not doing so causes anxiety and the autistic employee may not be able to react or present their viewpoint effectively at the meeting. Also, autistic people may need to ask a lot of questions where communication is not clear, where they do not understand unwritten conventions and because they want to be sure they have understood exactly what they need to do.

Luke noted that when he had moved on to a job with a bank, initially his experience was good as he had a manager who wanted to understand how autism affected him and how he could help him work effectively. However, things got difficult when his manager left and a colleague put in a complaint about Luke because he didn't say hello to her. When she was told that Luke was autistic, she was then embarrassed that she had made the complaint, which made the working environment even more uncomfortable. Again, awareness training for managers and colleagues could have avoided these issues.

Luke is now working at Howard Kennedy which he said has been completely different from the very beginning. At his interview he was invited to arrive early to look around the office to familiarise himself with the environment, which really helps reduce anxiety. His manager always asks what she can do to help and he has felt for the first time that he is in an environment which is inclusive and where people are willing to understand and help. He has been asked to give presentations on autism and neurodiversity to his colleagues and is pleased finally to be in such an inclusive workplace.

Recommendations for Best Practice

- Clear office handbook and guidelines regarding office practice, dress code, procedures and processes.
- Offer reasonable adjustments during the recruitment process and in the workplace, with clear examples of the support that can be offered as well as listening to requests from the individual relating to their particular needs.
- Awareness training at all levels of the organisation and in particular, managers, other team members and HR and recruitment staff.
- Use clear and direct communication at all times.
- An external mentor or internal “buddy” system can also help avoid issues and misunderstandings arising between autistic employees and other staff and diffuse any problematic situations.

Further reading

[An Employer's Guide to Managing Professionals on the Autism Spectrum by Marcia Scheiner](#)

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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