Guest Editorial in Advances in Autism

This important special edition of Advances in Autism focusses on employment. It is

designed specifically to be of practical use to autistic and non-autistic readers alike

when considering what good employment practice might look like and how this may

be achieved.

What I find particularly striking about this volume is the commonality between authors in their

identification of barriers to employment, enablers to circumvent these barriers and the

benefits of employment both to autistic individuals and to society. Road blocks identified in

the quest to find employment include lack of decent work experience on the one hand and

recruitment and selection processes, which do not play to the strengths of autistic potential

employees, on the other. Once in work, progress can be hampered by a range of

environmental factors, such as sensory overload and stressful levels of ambiguity. These

could be effectively altered, often at low or no cost. Co-workers and managers can be

enabling or disabling but often lack understanding of how best to work effectively with autistic

colleagues, making social interactions stressful. While training is sometimes positioned as

the solution, it remains a complicated idea, because helping neurotypical people to develop

their understanding and empathy towards autistic people is a subtle process that can be

shrouded in stereotyping, although it does not have to be.

The term “disclosure” is also contested, and for some autistic people, it represents a Catch22 because of the potential for stereotyping – and the fact that once a diagnosis is known in

the workplace, it cannot be undone.

Mentoring can be effective, but only if it is based on nuanced understanding rather than

autism stereotypes.

As long as obstacles litter the paths of skilled and highly motivated individuals in their quest to

find, retain and progress in work, everyone misses out. Some of the studies included in this

issue provide alarming quantitative information, substantiating unemployment rates in the

range of 80% among autistic people, as well as high rates of underemployment, which

constitute a waste of talent. The authors of this special edition acknowledge these concerns,

and set out to contribute to a rigorous, research-informed evidence base that identifies the

reasons behind the statistics, and ways in which the barriers identified might usefully be

circumvented for the benefit of individuals and society. Often solutions appear simple on the

surface, but a deeper dive into the findings of the various studies included here reveal greater

complexity, especially around the need for cultural change in the workplace to address

multiple forms of often subtle oppression and discrimination that make work unnecessarily

difficult.

This volume is also informed by the insights of autistic participants and scholars,

whose insider perspectives illuminate the discussion with extreme clarity, shining a

bright light on what could be done to address inequalities in the workplace for autistic

people.

While reading through this volume, please ask yourself this question: “what can I usefully do

with this information to improve every stage of the working lives of fellow autistic citizens?” We

hope that in the near future, we can report on effective responses that deliver on the high

potential of autistic people as employees.

Note: In the UK, identity first language is generally preferred by autistic people. The papers

included in this special edition have been written by authors from a number of different

countries. We have preserved their language preferences.

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