## Identifying and Addressing Barriers to Employment of Autistic Adults Nicola Martin, London South Bank University; Christopher Barnham, Visiting Fellow. Autism & Critical Disability Studies Research Group; and Joanna Krupa, London South Bank University

**Abstract**

This paper considers aspects of the employment landscape and ways in which practices focusing on employability could be more helpful to autistic people. When working in well organised, supportive environments which are conducive to success autistic employees can flourish and be an asset in the workplace. For this to happen potential employers need to understand the sort of reasonable adjustments which are necessary to enable autistic employees to reach their potential. Often these adjustments are really simple and can be achieved in the main via universal design. Preparation for employment at school, college and university requires careful consideration. Abstractly choosing a career without practical experience demands a lot of imagination and this can present a challenge. Autistic people do not always have access to good quality work experience to help them make informed choices. Interviews can create barriers and work trials often make more sense. The Equality Act and The Autism Act emphasise access to work. Various interventions exist which aim to reduce barriers to employment. They are not always joined up effectively. The aim of this paper is to equip practitioners with information which will be useful to assist autistic people to find and keep work.

**Introduction**

The gap between disabled and non-disabled people’s employment rates is on ongoing concern and reliable data is not easy to access (Baumberg *et al.* 2015). Figures tended not to isolate impairment-specific information so do not precisely illuminate the situation for autistic people. Employment is an important facet of social inclusion, and autistic people (including those with intellectual impairments) have much to offer as employees. Autistic people may well be disadvantaged in the workplace for a variety of reasons which are largely socially constructed or at least socially exacerbated. Difficulties with communication are associated with autism but communication is a two-way street and often employers do not communicate effectively with autistic people, particularly those who are nonverbal. Systems frequently fail to communicate with each other.

Employers, as well as autistic people, may well not have heard of a range of initiatives which could provide useful workplace support. Structure is usually important for autistic people who often find chaos and lack of predictability hard to manage. Workplaces can be chaotic and unpredictable and a sensory nightmare for many autistic people who experience sensory sensitivities.

Services designed to provide assistance are not necessarily joined up in ways which make them easy to access and navigate. Employers will not automatically know what they are expected to do in relation to making reasonable adjustments or helping their autistic employees to thrive in the workplace.

Transitions can be particularly difficult especially if they are poorly planned. Flexibility is something for which neither autistic people nor places of work are necessarily famous. It is easier to be flexible from a secure base where firm foundations are guaranteed but work is not always like that. Autistic people working in a safe predictable environment are more likely to realise their potential.

Strengths associated with autistic employees include reliability, sound work ethic and methodical approaches to tasks. The ability to see the bigger picture and come up with innovative solutions and a high level of motivation arising from an in-depth interest are also excellent aspects of many autistic minds. Society is missing out on the productive capabilities of autistic people who have not been able to find or keep jobs and autistic people are missing out on the satisfaction of appropriate and rewarding work.

A range of legislation is in place in the UK which aims to promote the social inclusion and wellbeing of disabled people generally and, in the case of the Autism Act 2009, autistic people in particular. Employment runs as a thread through much of this and various employment-focussed initiatives have been developed to try and improve the situation in practice. The Autism Act was followed by the Adult Autism Strategy, and its subsequent revisions (Department of Health, 2015). These have been usefully reviewed by Parkin (2016). Employment looms large as an indicator of wellbeing as well as social inclusion in legislative documents.

The Equality Act 2010 can work in harmony with the Autism Act and Adult Autism Strategy which provide a useful platform on which to build employment initiatives. Employment Autism (EA), and similar charities and private providers can work in tandem with statutory services towards the aim of trying to achieve equality in work. Equalities legislation requires public bodies to improve their understanding of ways in which public services could systematically reduce access barriers commonly experienced by autistic people.

Access to employment is the focus of this paper but it is important to acknowledge that broader obstacles around social inclusion can also impact on work opportunities. Austerity concerns, and the ways in which the benefits system operates, can create further barriers are outside the scope of this paper but rumble along as a background concern.

Barnham (2016) considers recent government initiatives designed to address the disability employment gap. He found little evidence of impact for autistic people seeking to find, keep and progress in work. Research Autism (2018) conducted a comprehensive review which further evidences the need to be proactive about finding ways to help autistic people into gainful employment. While this paper is UK focused, research evidence suggests that the situation similar across the world. Hedley *et al.* (2016) and Wehman *et al.* (2016; 2017), for example, discuss obstacles to employment in Australia and America. As with UK studies they evidence the value of work and bemoan the absence of organised support for finding and keeping a job.

**The Autism Act and Adult Autism Strategy**

Autism is the only specific impairment label with a piece of UK legislation directly associated, i.e. the 2009 Autism Act. This situation is not universally popular with academics and activists within the field of critical disability studies, but some pragmatists acknowledge the potential benefit to autistic people. The Adult Autism Strategy (2010, revised in 2014) was developed as a result of the Autism Act. Its aim was to improve the lives of autistic people by improving their access to the community and the preparedness of the community to offer appropriate support. Section 5 Fulfilling and Rewarding Lives strategy (DoH; 2010) focuses on four aspects to support autistic adults in England with regards to employment:

* ensuring they benefit from wider employment initiatives
* personalising welfare and engaging employers
* improving existing provision
* developing new approaches that will better support them.

The requirement to roll the new autism training to all Disability Employment Advisers at Job Centres was included in the 2014 recommendations. However, the use of the term ‘hopefully’ in relation to this aspiration is slightly concerning. Words like ‘must’ would probably be more effective. Nevertheless, the Act and subsequent strategy provide a useful platform on which to build. Martin and Krupa (2017) point out that finding and keeping work and then eventually retiring are accepted parts of ordinary life for most adults and, in an equitable society, this should also be so for autistic people.

**The Children and Families Act**

For some autistic young adults up to the age of twenty-five the Children and Families Act (CFA) 2014 is relevant. It is likely that Statements of Special Educational Needs (henceforth Statements) apply for individuals whose needs were assessed prior to 2014. Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP’s) are the modern version of statements and reflect the intention that various agencies should work more effectively together. Disabled children and young people may well access services from education, health and social care providers. Formalising processes to require these providers to work together underpinned the EHCP process. Autistic young adults may well have not transitioned from one system to the other as the process is in a liminal space which has resulted in two methods of recording operating in tandem. Notionally this should have been sorted by 2018 but there is still some catching up taking place. Statements do not offer the same degree of protection as EHCP’s during transition to employment. Both Statements and EHCP’s apply only to those with the most complex requirements and it is important to note that many autistic young people will have neither.

The CFA places a requirement on school settings and the further education sector to offer students study programmes which are coherent, appropriately challenging, and designed to support progression to apprenticeship or employment. Evidence of high-quality work experience being a routine part of education is limited and access to data about the extent to which young autistic people have part time jobs such as paper rounds is not available. It is safe to assume that exposure to work experience and part time employment for young disabled people does not match that of their non-disabled peers. Many autistic pupils have time out of education or are educated via home schooling. (Brede *et al.,* 2017, Sproston *et al.,* 2017). Consistent access to activities which are a sound preparation for work cannot therefore be guaranteed.

**University**

With its focus on progression to FE, apprenticeships and work, the CFA was remiss in its discussion of post compulsory education destinations for disabled learners. Higher Education really merited a specific mention. Arguably the unintended consequence of not doing so was to give the impression that university was not an option. There is a limited number of university students who have EHCP’s and the threshold for Disabled Student Allowances (DSAs) is lower than it would be for an EHCP. In effect, this means that access to support at university is available to students who may well not have qualified in school for an EHCP (or a Statement).

Disabled UK higher education students can access DSAs which also cover their support in unpaid work placements. Those on courses involving paid work placements can make use of Access to Work. As all aspects of university life are covered by the Equality Act 2010 the university has a duty to make services such as careers advice, careers fairs and alumni events accessible to disabled students. In practice autistic students often study close to home and, as a result, may miss out on the Russell Group and Oxbridge Universities. Recruiters tend to target ‘elite’ universities and accordingly may miss out on autistic talent. Staff supporting autistic students via the DSA are expected to have an appropriate level of understanding. (Sims *et al.,* 2016). Arguably this should apply to all university personnel who come into contact with autistic students (Hastwell *et al.,* 2012, 2013).

The problem of adult diagnosis however rears its ugly head here. Without an autism diagnosis the DSA is unavailable. Concerns exist around the availability of adult diagnosis which potentially disenfranchises autistic people from a wide range of services.

**The Equality Act 2010**

The Equality Act 2010 applies to public bodies and disability is one of the protected characteristics covered by the legislation. Providers of education across the age range into adulthood are included within the remit of this legislation. The legislation, as it relates to education, requires that reasonable adjustments are made to ensure that disabled learners, whatever their age, are not disadvantaged. Providing educational opportunities which are not geared to the requirements of the disabled student would arguably constitute disadvantage.

Autistic people who identify as disabled and have a clinically recognised diagnosis are therefore protected by the Equality Act. Universities and private providers are not exempt. Employers within public bodies are also expected to comply which, in theory, should make it easier for autistic people to get jobs, for example, in local authority settings.

In relation to education for work preparation, disabled pupils and students need access to information, advice and guidance on employment and career choices which will make sense to them. Their CV needs to be accessible to them as well as to prospective employers. Producing a document that the individual cannot read, and which does not reflect their aspirations does not represent equality of access. Autistic and other disabled people often require real experiences rather than two dimensional representations in order to make judgements about whether they would like to work in a particular context. Tokenism such as showing someone a picture of a garden centre and a supermarket and asking them to choose where they would like to go for work experience has no place under the good quality education for work preparation banner.

Volunteering opportunities, work experience, work coaches and mentors who are fully equipped to work with the individual concerned would form part of a good quality programme orientated towards employment. A systematic review conducted by Gibson *et al.* (2017) highlighted the need for and lack of good quality well organised work experience for disabled students transitioning from education to employment.

It is essential to understand autism as a spectrum and respect individuality. Disabled students leaving university with doctorates are covered by the Equality Act as are school pupils who have profound and multiple impairments. Equality is not about treating everyone in exactly the same way.

The Equality Act is clear that equality of access to opportunities may well mean treating people differently from each other in order to meet individual requirements. A nonverbal autistic sixteen-year-old with additional learning disabilities is not likely to access the same sort of work as an Oxbridge autistic physics graduate. Both however are likely to need some help, and both are covered by the Equality Act. Bespoke individualised assistance is part of the story. The legislation is underpinned by principles of universal design in which base line systems are sensitive to the diversity of people who are likely to access them (Milton and Martin 2017).

Public Bodies have anticipatory duties under the Equality Act. Just as it is not good enough to plan to build a ramp if a wheelchair user ever signals their intention to access a public building, it is also not adequate to fail to think in advance about requirements autistic people may have. Clearly policy makers and others require education about what these requirements might be. Enacting the principle of ‘nothing about us without us’ suggests that such training should be informed and delivered by autistic people with first-hand knowledge and insider perspective.

**Work Focussed Initiatives**

A range of initiatives exist which were set up to support disabled people into employment and at work. Barnham 2016, Blamires *et al.* (2015). Research into their efficacy is limited and sustainability is not guaranteed particularly in a climate in which the impact of years of austerity and underfunding is still being keenly felt. Many charities and statutory services have been poorly resourced for many years and operate on a shoe string. Although the Prime Minister, Theresa May, advised the UK that austerity is over during the 2018 Conservative Party Conference she did not provide compelling supporting evidence to justify her assertion. Even if austerity is now in the past, the effects of financial cutbacks on a whole range of services for disabled people will not disappear overnight.

On a more positive note, a number of private sector businesses are engaging with a sense of corporate responsibility towards social justice initiatives involving the employment of autistic people. Commentary in the public domain about the efficacy of such schemes from the perspectives of end users evidences mixed opinions. The two quotes which follow relate to a scheme set up by a large multi-national company:

‘I have been working at XXX (More than 3 years). **Pros.** Good culture and global team. **Cons.** Not sure about cons. Good place to work. **Advice to Management.** Take the offer’

‘I was put in a team which had only been formed the previous year, with a manager who was too busy to schedule regular meetings with me (in blatant disregard of the recommendations of the firm's occupational health adviser). The "work" I did consisted of tweaking a spreadsheet for a few hours each day. I tried to look for work elsewhere for after the placement, but I was held back by being unable to explain exactly what I was doing at XXX as I didn't know myself! Considering that the scheme has been in existence for 10 years now, I expected better. More fool me, you may say’.

**Apprenticeships and Traineeships**

Theresa May’s majority government introduced the ‘apprenticeship levy’ (HM Revenue & Customs, 2016). This announcement signalled the intention to incentivise employers to offer apprenticeships for young people or adult learners to earn money in ‘a real job’, whilst also gaining a qualification. Maths and English qualification requirements represented a stumbling block for some, but the overall aim was that apprenticeships should be inclusive of disabled young people. The literacy numeracy obstacles are unfortunate and unresolved to date.

For young people who aspire to an apprenticeship or a job but are not quite ready in terms of their level of work skills or experience Traineeships are a possibility. These are based on a mainstream education and training program, with built in work experience, work preparation and work skills development. Literacy and numeracy skills are built into Traineeships as deemed necessary.

**Supported Internships**

Supported Internships (Sis) are conceived as structured study programs, based with employers. They were set up to assist young people aged 16-24 (who have EHC plans or Statements) to gain sustainable paid employment. SIs were conceived as a way to learn skills required for a particular role in situ in the workplace. For autistic learners, developing skills in context has the potential advantage of reducing the requirement to generalise learning from another context or a simulation.

The main concern with SIs is that they are unpaid. The Equality Act 2010 does not cover socio economic status so cannot be used to evoke any sort of legal argument about SIs effectively discriminating against people who cannot afford to work for nothing.

Supported internships were trialled in 2012/13 in 15 FE colleges. Evaluation published in December 2013 found that 36 percent resulted in paid employment (Department for Education, 2013). Data on whether these jobs continued is not available.

**Initiatives Which Are Inclusive of People Over Twenty-five**

Many initiatives focus on getting young people into work which is rather unfortunate for people in their mid-twenties and beyond. There is a great deal of research evidence which points to the conclusion that many disabled people experience delays in their education which mean that they are likely to acquire some skills appropriate for work later in life. This is especially likely for those with learning difficulties who experience some areas of developmental delay. Acquisition of skills is, however, dependant on opportunity and not likely to happen incidentally. (Young-Southward *et al.,* 2017).

The Autism Act and The Adult Autism Strategy take a lifelong view of the social inclusion of autistic people and highlights work as an aspect of community and societal participation right up to retirement age.

**Access to Work**

Access to Work (AtW) provides grants to cover additional costs of starting or staying in work (including traineeships and supported internships). Specialist equipment, transport costs, support or workplace job coaching and disability awareness training for colleagues may be included. These facilities will depend on individual requirements determined during the AtW assessment. 36,470 people used Access to Work in 2015/16 and many report that without AtW they would not be able to do their job. (Department for Work & Pensions, 2016).

Training and ongoing continuous professional development (CPD) is important in order to ensure that AtW professionals involved are sufficiently prepared to work with autistic people and this training should be delivered by autistic people.

Assessment for Disabled Students Allowances and AtW cover much of the same ground, particularly around assistive technology. Potentially costs could be cut by allowing the DSA report to be used as a basis for AtW assessment. Similarly, equipment and assistive technology are not transferable from one job to another is often experienced as a frustration by end users. When consulted, users tend to be in favour of joined-up thinking and joined-up systems (Martin 2017).

Some concern has been expressed by disabled people about the potential loss of other disability benefits which cover independent living requirements which AtW is not designed to meet. Without these, for some, getting to work would be an impossibility. The economic arguments about why this situation is ridiculous are self-evident. (Martin 2017). Working with employers to develop an understanding, of how AtW functions and what it can offer may help.

**Disability Employment Advisers and Work Choice**

The Department for Work & Pensions has a network of around 400 [Disability Employment Advisers](http://www.jobcentreguide.co.uk/jobcentre-plus-guide/34/disability-employment-advisors) (DEA’s) in Job Centres. Part of their remit is to understand and signpost to the various opportunities described here, including AtW.

Work Choice is a voluntary programe which is described as offering disabled people a range of help to find, get and thrive in a job. This could usefully be recommended and it would be expedient to ensure DEAs know about its availability and that of other relevant initiatives. Over a quarter of Work Choice referrals (27 percent) have learning disability recorded as their primary impairment. Arguably some autistic people could be gainfully employed in delivering staff training, as required by The Autism Act 2009, about how autistic people could be assisted in making use of schemes already available but not always flagged up. (DWP, 2013).

**Disability Confident Campaign**

The last Conservative Government worked with employers on the Disability Confident Campaign, ‘a scheme to help employers to ‘recruit and retain disabled people and people with health conditions for their skills and talent’ (DWP, 2014). The end goal was that employers would follow through and employ more disabled people. Joined up thinking underpinned the idea of raising awareness amongst employers of available support services. Success stories and practical advice are built in to the processes in a positive way, designed to motivate employers. Arguably autistic workers are best placed to shine a light on their achievements in the workplace, the barriers they have encountered and ways in which said barriers could be knocked over.

**Joined Up Thinking**

Statutory provision designed to comply with legislative requirements exists to support disabled people into work and pockets of good practice can be found. However, there is a reliance on local authorities, in the school years, and individual institutions and providers of FE, as well as a range of other statutory and voluntary initiatives to support progression to work

The envisaged coherent approach to creating an easily accessible source of information about ‘The Local Offer’ in relation to services for disabled people is rather like the curate’s egg, i.e. good in parts.

The task of creating this coherent picture of services to support disabled people into work is daunting. It may be possible for researchers to collaborate to create a joined-up map of what charities can offer to supplement state support.

The Autism Act (2009) and subsequent Adult Autism Strategy (Department of Health, 2015) require public bodies to develop an understanding of autism as well as a range of provision. The extent to which information, advice and guidance is autism-aware, autism informed and readily available to employers and autistic people is unquantified. Initiatives do exist which are designed to improve ‘the local offer’ and up-skill the workforce of public servants who may impact on the lives of autistic people. There is however a lack of compelling evidence that these have resulted in easy availability autism-aware staff assisting autistic people into work via a coherent fit for purpose joined up system which is universally understood and incorporates smooth transitions. Company human resource departments may well be on the front-line when it comes to the employability equality agenda but there is scant evidence of autism-focused, autism-informed training to help personnel in these roles to be effective.

**Stumbling Blocks and possible solutions**

Qualifications

A CV which identifies attendance at a special school or pupil referral unit or considerable time out of school is likely to require some explaining to employers. Autistic learners may well leave education without the traditional qualifications which employers immediately recognise. Some special school pupils do not necessarily have access to qualifications they are capable of gaining (Douglas *et al.,* 2016). Literacy and numeracy requirements have already been identified as stumbling blocks to some opportunities designed to increase employability.

For some autistic people qualified to PhD level access to employment is still an issue so it would be a mistake to assume that those able to gain a doctorate will automatically be able to get a job commensurate with such an exceptional achievement (Martin 2017).

London South Bank University’s Participatory Autism Research Collective (PARC) is comprised of numerous highly intelligent, talented, hardworking, unemployed autistic Doctors of Philosophy and this situation is replicated across the UK and beyond. DSAs may have helped some PARC members to gain their impressive degrees. AtW could assist them in gaining and keeping employment. Pointing you potential advantages of removing the disconnect between DSAs and AtW.

Deciding whether to ‘come out’ as autistic

‘Disclosure’ is a nasty little word which is almost universally unpopular with disabled people. Unfortunately, it is a frequently used term to describe the act of an individual informing employers and others about their disability status. ‘Tell’ is a rather less value laden word. Telling a prospective employer, or anyone else, might be easier if words like ‘disclosure were binned and a favourable response to the information could be guaranteed.

Martin (2017) discovered that reactions from employers are not necessarily positive and ‘telling’ does not necessarily open doors to seamless appropriate support. It is also easy to assume that all autistic people are ‘out and proud’ but this is not necessarily the case (Martin 2008).

DSAs are, of course, behind a wall for those who choose not to identify as autistic to their university. Not accessing DSA and then not taking up AtW or other work-related reasonable adjustments can set an unfortunate pattern; potentially making studying and working more difficult and less productive.

If disabled people feel uncomfortable about discussing their disability-related requirements at work perhaps employers are not doing enough to make doing so ordinary and straightforward. Failure to implement reasonable adjustments goes against the spirit of the Equality Act (2010).

Advocacy and self-advocacy

Autistic people with a capacity for verbal language are probably in a better position than those who do not use their voice to communicate to counter negative stereotypes. If a person does not speak, even if they are very able to communicate in other ways, employers might well make unfavourable assumptions about their capabilities.

Self-advocacy is easier for people who can speak and have a strong idea of future self. (Brett 2017). Nonverbal forms of self-advocacy are entirely possible, provided that everyone involved in the interaction understands the process. Barnham (2016) suggested that it could be useful to develop some kind of ‘passport’, to assist communication by outlining strengths, interests and support requirements to ease the transition to work. Advocacy support may well be required for people less able to advocate for themselves. Advocates would need to be in tune with the autistic person and not pushing their own agenda.

To address reluctance to think about nonverbal autistic people as potentially valuable employees, case studies from employers might usefully form part of a ‘transition toolkit’ and training materials aimed at potential employers and gatekeepers to employment (such as Job Centre staff). Ensuring that all materials are informed by autistic people who are properly paid for the work they carry out is good practice.

It is important not to automatically conflate alternative forms of communication with intellectual impairment. This point is powerfully illustrated by ‘silentmiaow‘ (2007) The SilentMiaow videos form an autoethnographic account by an autistic person who does not communicate verbally but can explain her way of thinking by using technology.

Whatever mode of communication is involved the process of decision making has to be based on access to a range of experiences which would enable an individual to make realistic choices. An example of a young man with autism and intellectual impairments pointing at a picture of a train and this action being interpreted as his attempt to communicate his desire to be a train driver illustrates where things can go wrong. His father had to intervene and explain that although his son did like trains he did not necessarily understand the idea of working as a train driver. Brett (2017) has developed a subtler and nuanced approach to helping young people with autism and intellectual impairments to communicate their aspirations. Her work is underpinned by ensuring access to experiences which build a solid foundation for choice making.

Mentoring

Various more informal initiatives run alongside these which may be better regulated. Research into their efficacy is scant. Mentoring is a term which can be confused with similar interventions such as ‘befriending’, ‘life coaching’ or ‘job coaching’. All are highly skilled processes requiring subtle and focused training, especially if they are to encompass the requirements of individuals who communicate non-verbally or face other additional challenges Ongoing supervision is important but is not always built in to programmes. This is a cause for concern especially when vulnerable people are on the receiving end (Sims *et al.,* 2016).

The Research Autism Cygnet Mentoring project based at London South Bank University (Milton *et al.,* 2016) highlighted the benefits of goal orientated fixed term mentoring to enable autistic adults to identify and achieve their own goals, including goals around employment. Autistic participants reported finding it difficult to set goals themselves, especially if they were thinking about something new and outside of their experience.

Any sort of employment-focused mentoring requires the mentor to be aware of avoiding interpretation of what the mentee wants based on a false assumption that they have an adequate grasp of the idea of work. Autistic people with additional intellectual impairments are likely to struggle greatly with abstract ideas and these cannot be made concrete in decontextualised conversations. Picture prompts are no substitute for real in situ experiences. Concepts which may seem quite abstract need to be made meaningful for an individual via the provision of opportunities for lived experience. Saying ‘would you like to work in a kitchen?’ whilst using pictures of kitchens from the B&Q catalogue as the only prompt would make little sense to someone who has not experienced really cooking a real meal. Making beans on toast at home in no way resembles working in a fast-paced commercial canteen.

Mentoring always involves careful active listening. Cygnet participants were critical of bossy mentors who appeared to be imposing their own ideas rather than assisting the mentee to identify their personal goals and their own strategy towards meeting them. When spoken language is not the primary mode of communication, and abstract ideas cannot be grasped easily, mentoring has to be about more than guided conversation and paper-based action plans. Listening can be aided by watching the reaction of an individual within real contexts. Interpreting what a mentee is making of an experience is a subtle process fraught with inherent dangers. If someone has been steered towards an NVQ in horticulture with a view to working in the field, for example, and obviously hates mud and soil and worms something has gone horribly wrong. Work experience involving dirt was an obvious necessary first stage.

Practical Considerations

Work experience is important. It is particularly difficult for someone on the spectrum to imagine a situation which they have not experienced, therefore exposure to job taster opportunities is essential in order to facilitate informed choice.

Work trials with support are often more appropriate than conventional interviews. Some potential employers judge autistic people unfairly at interview because they may communicate in an abrupt manner or not realise that they are expected to elaborate on particular questions which seem to demand a yes/no response. Eye contact can be an obstacle. Interviewers may well expect it without realising that often autistic people find looking directly at someone very stressful. The social convention of looking someone in the eye is no indicator of ability in the workplace. When London South Bank University appointed an autistic researcher his feedback was that it really helped him to have in advance the interview questions in written form and a clear indication of the format of the interview.

Sensory overload is problematic for many autistic people and someone to help with navigating the sensory environment could be useful. A work-placed mentor who understands the requirements of the individual in this respect could assist with, for example, finding quiet calm spaces within the work environment.

Expectations of the job need to be explicitly and effectively communicated and understanding should be checked. Ambiguity causes misunderstanding and creates stress. Visual timetables, picture prompts and assistive technology can be relevant at work and a sound induction and orientation is essential.

Social conventions within the work setting may also need explaining and pressure to socialise can be anxiety-provoking. On the other hand, being left out of the social buzz may feel humiliating and upsetting. Someone to turn to at work can make a real difference. The autistic employee is likely to grow in confidence under conducive circumstances and may well require this sort of backup less as things become more familiar.

Milton *et al.* (2016) discuss approaches to universal design which would work in employment and are congruent with the requirements of the Equality Act. Anticipatory autism-informed planning underpins their recommendations. The REAL model (Hastwell *et al.,* 2013) calls for reliability, empathy, anticipation and logical clear communication. REAL is relevant to work as well as other situations and extends beyond the requirements of autistic people. Reliable work place support, empathically anticipating the potentially negative impact of disjointed systems and taking steps to avoid chaos and communicate clearly would help everybody.

Motivation arising from in depth interests can make work a joy under the right circumstances and a highly motivated employee who has developed an area of expertise can be a gift in the workplace. Part time or voluntary employment are possibilities which can have a positive impact on well-being and self-esteem and can be part of a co-ordinated portfolio of activities. which make up a full and active timetable.

**Conclusions**

Joined up systems and well-informed employers and employees are necessary to recruit, interview and support autistic people. Ideally everyone involved would know exactly what they were doing, having received excellent training delivered by autistic people. Trainers would inform employers about support services and ways in which they could work together. They would also understand the strengths and aspirations of autistic people, including those with intellectual impairments and /or do not use verbal language to communicate.

Ideally, autistic people would be well prepared through work experience which would enable them to make informed choices.

In the workplace, barriers to work place success would be identified and circumvented and ongoing support would be easily to access. Gatekeepers would be committed to employing autistic people and well informed about how to do this.

Help to get into work is a starting point but progression beyond gateway jobs needs to be considered. The experiences of some PARC members illustrate a level of exploitation in the workplace in which people are performing above their pay grade and unable to get promoted or are not being paid at all.

Once an autistic person had gained employment, smooth transitions would be facilitated by clear communication and joined up systems. Information would be freely available.

The sustainability of support arrangements merits consideration. Information has been provided on funding streams such as AtW but research evidence suggests that these sources of support are poorly understood (Martin, 2017; Milton *et al.,* 2017).

Work place mentors would be trained by autistic people and mentoring schemes would all be safely supervised. Work-based volunteers may well have a role but as with mentoring relationships, boundaries have to be clear, and supervision is important.

Staff employed in colleges, universities and apprenticeship schemes have an important role to play in ensuring that the employability agenda and the equalities agenda match. Placements and work experience, services beyond the disability team, careers fairs and all employment focussed aspects of the course need to be autism aware and working effectively together. Thinking about employment should of course start in school and ideally colleges and universities would pick up where excellent school provision left off.

In an ideal world can-do attitudes would prevail throughout the process.

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