

**"I'm not
unemployable,
I'm autistic."**



The autism employment gap

Too Much Information in the workplace



The National
Autistic Society

16%



Just 16% of autistic adults are in full-time paid work (static since 2007)

32%



Overall, only 32% of autistic adults are in some kind of paid work



80% of
non-disabled people
are in work



But only 47%
of disabled people
are in work



And only 32%
of autistic adults
are in work

The Government wants to halve the disability employment gap.
This would mean that

64% of disabled people would be in work



Autistic people told us their ideal job would be in:



The arts/
acting



IT



Admin/
office work



Scientific research
and development



Library/
museum work

What employers say:

60%

of employers would worry
about getting support for
an autistic employee wrong



60%

also said they
did not know where to go
for support or advice about
employing an autistic person



INTRODUCTION

By Mark Lever

In April 2016, we launched *Too Much Information* – the UK's biggest ever campaign aimed at improving public understanding of autism.



The start of the campaign drew attention to how poor public understanding of autism was pushing families into isolation – half of the people we spoke to told us they sometimes don't go out because of worries over how people will respond to their autism. Just six months on, we know we are having an impact – public polling has shown that 16% more people are now aware that autistic people can find public spaces overwhelming – this equates to greater awareness among 10 million people.

Autistic people and their families have told us that understanding in the workplace is one of their top priorities for change. So, in this next phase of the campaign, we turn to autism and employment.

Autistic people can have strengths which may be beneficial to employers, such as tenacity and the ability to see things in a different light, which can be great for problem solving. But they frequently tell us they experience too much information when applying for jobs and at work – for instance, being bombarded by questions at the jobcentre, by noisy open plan offices or with anxieties over following unwritten social rules.

Work will not be appropriate for everyone on the autism spectrum, but our latest survey of autistic adults and their families showed that the vast majority want to work. It also showed that too many autistic people are unemployed. Only 16% of adults are in full-time paid employment. And the situation hasn't improved in almost a decade.

The Government has promised to halve the disability employment gap, but autistic adults are being left behind. Their skills and abilities are being overlooked by both Government and employers. The Government must take specific action to reduce the autism employment gap. The number of autistic adults in work will need to **double** by 2020 if the Government is serious about this.

Employers can play their part too. By making simple changes to the workplace to reduce the overload of too much information and working with us to become Autism Friendly Employers, businesses can benefit from the potential of autistic employees and help them to be successful.

In this report we set out what the Government needs to do and how employers can play their role in finally tackling the autism employment gap.

A handwritten signature of Mark Lever in black ink, with a horizontal line underneath.

Mark Lever, Chief Executive
The National Autistic Society

“

Only 16% of autistic adults are in full-time paid employment. And the situation hasn't improved in almost a decade.

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Front cover image and quote taken from our film *Could you stand the rejection?*



© Mark Ferguson

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The UK Government has pledged to increase the disability employment rate from 47% to 64% by 2020

64%

For the number of autistic people in work to reach 64%, the Government will need to **commit to doubling the number of autistic people in employment by 2020.**



For nearly a decade, the full-time employment rate of autistic adults has stagnated. A survey we carried out in 2007 indicated that just 15% of autistic people were in full-time paid work. Shockingly, in this year's survey, the figure was just 16%.

A similar number are in part-time employment, giving an overall employment rate of 32%. And while full-time work won't be right for everyone on the autism spectrum, four in 10 of those working part-time feel under-employed. Others feel they are in low-skilled work and employers don't see their abilities. They see their autism. They see a problem. Meanwhile, employers have told us that they are worried about getting things wrong for autistic employees and that they don't know where to go for advice. Autistic people are overloaded by too much information at work, and employers don't have enough.

The UK Government has made a very welcome pledge to halve the disability employment gap by the end of this Parliament, meaning that they have to shift the disability employment rate from 47% to 64%. But the autism employment gap is even wider. For the number of autistic people in work to reach 64%, the Government will need to commit to **doubling** the number of autistic people in employment by 2020.

Both Government and employers need to take specific action to make this happen – without it, recent history tells us that autistic people will continue to be left behind.

To double the number of autistic adults in work and address the autism employment gap, the Government should:

- launch a new programme targeted at employers to raise awareness of the skills and potential of autistic people and to encourage them to take on autistic employees
- develop an autism employment pathway that includes end-to-end specialist autism support¹
- routinely collect data on the employment rate and other outcomes for autistic people, so that we can learn what works and so the autism employment gap gets the consistent attention it deserves.

Employers can play their part by:

- signing up to receive advice and tips from The National Autistic Society² in order to make the reasonable adjustments autistic people may need
- offering apprenticeships, work experience, volunteering opportunities and internships to autistic people
- increasing their managers' and employees' understanding of autism and making their workplace autism-friendly, including working towards our new Autism Friendly Employer award.³

¹ For the UK Government, this means making sure that autism specialist help is built into the reforms that will be taken forward alongside the new Work and Health programme. In Scotland, the Government must consult with autistic people, family members, third sector organisations and a range of providers to make sure the new devolved scheme provides end-to-end support that works for autistic adults | ² Sign up for The National Autistic Society's new newsletter for employers, *Autistic Talent*, at www.autism.org.uk/employers | ³ Read more at www.autism.org.uk/autismfriendlyemployer

ABOUT AUTISM AND THE WORKPLACE

Being autistic means you see, hear and feel the world in a different way to other people. Because autism affects communication skills, people may struggle during job interviews, misunderstand the questions asked and be judged for not making eye contact.

Without the right support, the work environment can be confusing. Sometimes everything can become overwhelming – from the noises of clattering keyboards or ringing phones to the unspoken social rules of work life. It can feel like getting too much information.

Sometimes autism can mean people are skilled in things that others aren't. Many of the autistic people or family members we spoke to in our research told us of the range of skills and interests that they had, which would be invaluable to employers. People told us of their varied career aspirations, from IT consultant to working in the arts, to admin roles.

Employers told us about their autistic employees, who, when supported and understood, were thriving at work.

There are around 450,000 autistic people of working age in the UK. But no two people experience autism in exactly the same way. Some people find it difficult to say what they need, and how they feel. Others find it hard to understand people and how they expect you to behave. It works both ways, though. Autistic people can feel misunderstood. With a little understanding and adaptations to the work environment and work practice, autistic people can be a real asset to a business.

Methodology

This report is based on a series of focus groups and surveys carried out in the first part of 2016 as follows:

- Our charity carried out an autism and employment survey online between March and May 2016. It was completed by 2,080 autistic adults, or people responding on their behalf.
- Focus groups of autistic adults were held in Bristol, Manchester and Nottingham in April and May 2016. Further insight was gathered from a roundtable discussion with autistic adults and the former Minister for Disabled People hosted by The National Autistic Society in April 2016.
- YouGov carried out an online survey on our behalf of businesses of varying sizes. The sample size was 686 senior decision makers. Fieldwork was undertaken between 31 May and 3 June 2016. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB businesses in terms of size (ie number of employees).
- We also carried out a survey of employers online during May 2016. The data collected from the 20 employers who responded was qualitative.
- A roundtable hosted by the Employment Related Services Association, including providers of employment support.



ARRAN LINTON-SMITH, 60

Arran wants to help more employers understand the benefits that autistic people can bring to the workplace...

“

I'm autistic and have a successful job as a senior consultant at Interserve, one of the world's foremost support and construction companies. I feel appreciated in my role and get on well with my colleagues.

But it wasn't always like this in my career. I have held a range of different jobs and struggled in a number of them. Looking back, I can think of so many times I've faced significant problems because my autism wasn't understood. For example I have had four redundancies, I have been asked or encouraged to leave employment and on two occasions I have even had to change my career.

A turning point came four years ago, when I was diagnosed with autism at the age of 56. It took a while for me to accept the diagnosis but when I did, all the problems I'd had in the workplace started making sense.

Even though I was advised not to by my family, I took the difficult decision to disclose my autism to a colleague whose son was autistic. He was surprised, but encouraged me to tell the rest of my team. To my surprise everyone was so understanding and people started to realise that my different way of seeing things was a huge asset – I was able to spot problems and come up with solutions that weren't even being considered. My team listened, and together we were able to work even more successfully.

“

I know that many autistic people aren't so lucky – they're struggling to find work or to stay in work. There's so much wasted talent.

”

Arran



© Interserve

While I'm now in a good position and feel respected for who I am, what I am and the way I think, I know that many autistic people aren't so lucky – they're struggling to find work or to stay in work. There's so much wasted talent.

That's why I want to help employers understand the diversity of the autism spectrum and the huge benefits autistic people can bring to the workplace, through diverse thinking. So I've been working with The National Autistic Society, sharing my experiences in the media and I've recently joined the charity's National Forum where I feel I can spread my message further. I've also been active in my workplace, becoming one of their diversity champions, supporting staff awareness training via The National Autistic Society and helping to develop work placements for autistic people.

When it comes to the issue of 'autism and work', I feel like I've got a duty to hold open the door to the next generation of autistic people. There's a vast untapped pool of talented individuals out there who can help businesses and other employers become stronger and more competitive.

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1. UNTAPPED TALENT

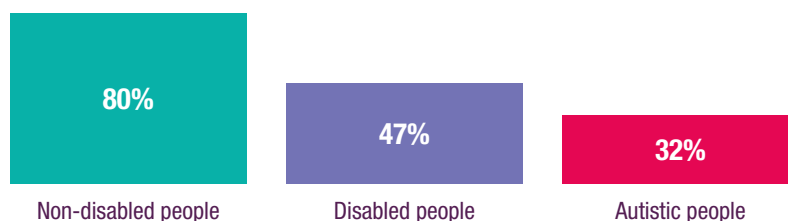
An unchanged picture

“I want a job to give me purpose, to give myself something to live for, to give back to society and to use my skills.”

– Jean, Bristol focus group

While work isn't right for everyone on the autism spectrum, the majority of autistic people want to work and have much to offer. But efforts to help them into work and stay in work are failing. Our survey of over 2,000 people indicates that the full-time employment rate for autistic people remains stubbornly low at 16% – just 1% higher than the figure from our 2007 survey.⁴ Combined with the part-time rate of 16%, this gives an overall employment rate of 32%. This compares with about 80% for non-disabled people and 47% for disabled people as a whole.⁵

% people in work



The potential benefits of addressing this huge social problem are clear. Autistic people's lives would be improved by the many rewards of paid employment, including increased independence and confidence. Taxpayers would be saved the cost of out-of-work benefit payments. And employers would gain from the skills and commitment of autistic employees.

“Besides the more accepted advantages of people who think and look at the world differently, there are benefits to us being more tolerant of disabilities and differences which might be invisible or ambiguous. For example, managers being more explicit about tasks, direction, challenging judgements and prejudice and generally being more open-minded.” – Employer

Our survey indicates that there has been an increase in part-time employment of autistic people. In 2007, 9% of respondents were in part-time work⁶ compared to 16% of respondents today. Some autistic



Just **16%** of autistic adults are in full-time paid work. This has remained static since 2007

“...there are benefits to us being more tolerant of disabilities and differences which might be invisible or ambiguous.”

”
Employer

⁴ The actual figure from this survey was 15.5% and does not represent a statistically significant change | ⁵ Office for National Statistics (2016) *Dataset: A08: Labour market status of disabled people* (20 July 2016). London: Office for National Statistics | ⁶ Rosenblatt, M. (2008). *I Exist: The message from adults with autism in England*. London: The National Autistic Society.

people want or need part-time employment, but many do want to work more – four in ten of those who responded to our survey who are working part-time want to work more hours than they do currently. Under employment, as well as unemployment, therefore appears to be an ongoing problem for autistic people.

Not only do people report working fewer hours than they would like, but many told us that they are working in roles that do not make the most of their skills. Just over half (51%) of autistic people in employment who responded to our survey said their skills were higher than those their job required.⁷

Four in ten of those who responded have never worked. While employment may not be a realistic or desirable goal for all autistic people, over three-quarters (77%) of those in our survey who are unemployed want to work. This figure is similar to the survey we carried out in 2009.⁸ It means that the majority of autistic adults (53%) are unemployed but want to work.

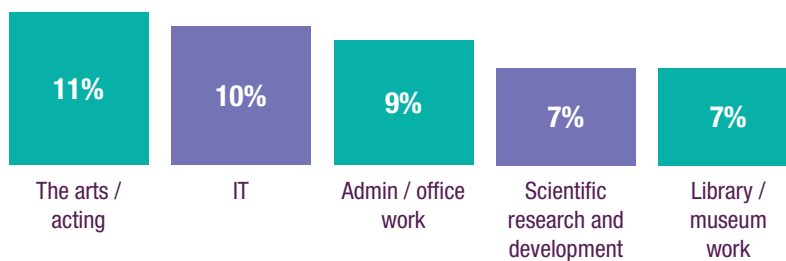
What do autistic people want?

The overwhelming majority of autistic people want to work, but the types of work that people want vary greatly. Autistic people report assumptions from services and employers that they want work that is solitary, technical or requires attention to detail.

Many *do* want this, but many don't. Our survey found that slightly more autistic people want to work in the arts (11% of respondents) as want to work in IT (10% of respondents). Like anyone, the truth is that autistic people want to work across all sectors in a huge variety of jobs from research to admin work, from catering to cleaning or care work.

Given the low employment rate of autistic adults, but the high mix of skills and interests, a new Government programme should be developed to both raise awareness of autism among employers and identify the skills gaps in the economy and how autistic adults could be supported to help fill these gaps.

What industry would your ideal job be in?



Over three-quarters



77%
of those in our
survey who are
unemployed
want to work



4 in 10
autistic adults
working part-time
want to work
more hours



11%
of autistic adults
want to work in
the arts

⁷ Stated their skills are much higher (26.7%) or a bit higher (24.7%). ⁸ Redman et al., *Don't Write Me Off* (2009). London: The National Autistic Society. 79% of survey respondents on out-of-work benefits wanted to work.

When we asked autistic people about the single biggest thing that needed to change to help them into work, over 50% said support, understanding or acceptance.

As well as being the right thing to do, ensuring that managers and colleagues at work have a better understanding of autism will help secure a more diverse and productive workforce.

What is the Government doing?

The UK Government has made an ambitious commitment to halve the disability employment gap by the end of this Parliament, with a Green Paper expected in the autumn.⁹ The Government also runs the Disability Confident campaign to make employers aware of the benefits of hiring disabled people. The Autism Employment Ambassador in Wales promotes employing autistic people to Welsh businesses.

Based on the current employment rate of non-disabled people, halving the disability employment gap would mean increasing the rate for disabled people from about 47% today to 64% by 2020. There is no specific target for autistic people. And despite the Government's pledge, the disability employment gap has remained largely static for over a decade.¹⁰ Considering that the economy has been growing at a steady rate for the past six years, it's clear the Government can't rely on economic growth alone to halve the gap.

Moreover, as our research suggests, the autism employment gap is even wider than the disability employment gap. With an overall employment rate of just 32%, the Government would need to **double** the number of people on the autism spectrum in employment to meet its ambition for disabled people as a whole. Given the potential of autistic people, there is no reason that employment levels for autistic people shouldn't, at the very least, be increased to the same levels as for disabled people in general.



50%

of autistic people said that **support, understanding or acceptance** would be the single biggest thing that would help them into employment

RECOMMENDATION

The UK Government should commit to doubling the number of autistic adults in work to support its pledge to halve the disability employment gap by 2020.

This should include launching a national programme to promote the employment potential of autistic people to employers, and collecting and publishing data on the employment status of autistic adults.

See page 20 for full details of recommendations.

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/first-disability-confident-city-sets-out-bold-employment-ambition>

¹⁰ <http://www.scope.org.uk/press-releases/employment-gap-disabled-people>

2. GETTING READY FOR EMPLOYMENT

Autistic people have a lot to offer employers, but most need some degree of support to become work-ready.

The most common reason given for not being in or looking for work is a lack of confidence.

Almost a quarter (23%) of respondents told us this was an issue. Employment support services have a crucial role to play in helping people to gain skills and consider work options, but also in building confidence by highlighting people's existing strengths and capabilities.

Support from Jobcentre Plus

But autistic people too often tell us of negative experiences at their local jobcentre. Jobcentre Plus is often the 'front door' where people first go to talk about gaining work. When asked to rate their experience of Jobcentre Plus, over six in ten (61%) of those who responded said it was poor or very poor. Fewer than one in seven (13%) rated it as good or very good.

Many say that staff do not treat them as individuals or consider the particular adjustments they need to make to meet the communication and other needs of autistic people. This is particularly important for people who may not qualify for formal employment programmes (like the proposed Work and Health Programme – see below), who increasingly will receive their support from work coaches based at Jobcentre Plus. To do their jobs effectively, but also to make sure they are complying with Equality Act duties on public sector services, all staff in Jobcentre Plus should have the training and knowledge of autism to support the people they are working with.

The Work Programme

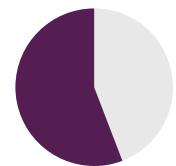
The Work Programme was introduced in 2011 and was intended to provide support, work experience and training for people to develop the skills and confidence to find paid work. But it is not working for autistic adults. We have not seen significant changes in the employment rate since it was introduced and our survey indicates negative experiences of the programme among autistic adults. Over half of those who responded (56%) described their experience of it as poor or very poor. Fewer than one in 10 (8%) said it was good or very good.

“

I don't like change, even when I know it's coming. I had a letter with no name on it, just telling me to turn up on a date and time. So we assumed it was the person I already knew. We turned up early and I was very anxious. We waited an hour. We asked and were told we had to see a new person.

David, Nottingham, describing Jobcentre Plus appointment

”



56%

described their experience of the Work Programme as poor or very poor

The new Work and Health Programme that will replace the Work Programme must do better. In introducing the new scheme, the UK Government should set out specific plans for how autistic people will be supported into work, including:

- support from staff trained in autism at Jobcentre Plus
- access to specialist autism support, from specialist providers if needed
- support tailored to each individual's needs and ensuring that it is provided on a voluntary rather than mandatory basis
- ongoing support to make a success of work placements
- making sure that when an autistic person has found a job, they know what support is available to them to help them keep it, and they know they can access this support as and when issues arise.

Furthermore, the Government cannot accurately tell how current programmes are working for autistic people – they don't routinely record information about the outcomes for autistic people. With more than one in 100 people on the autism spectrum, it is crucial that data on outcomes for autistic people is recorded so that the new Work and Health Programme can be monitored to ensure it is making a difference.

These principles will all need full consideration as the Scottish Government develops new employment support programmes, as this area of policy is devolved.

The UK Government and the Scottish Government must ensure that specialist autism support is made available, as part of a comprehensive employment support pathway for autistic people.

“

I was shoehorned into applying for work that was way below what my qualifications indicated. And I felt I was treated as one of a mass rather than my needs being taken into account. I felt that there was the attitude that to get people into work you need to beat them with a big stick.

”

Thomas, Nottingham focus group, describing a Government-contracted Work Programme provider

Surrey Choices EmployAbility, Employment Works for Autism

EmployAbility ran a service for 16 autistic jobseekers across Surrey from January–December 2015.

The service combined training, work experience and ongoing support. Training included identifying people's skills and needs for development, CV preparation, confidence building and interview training. Personalised internships were found in areas of work including retail, web design and administration.

Seven of the 16 (43%) were in paid work at the end of the project, and half were in ongoing work experience or volunteering.

As a specialist service, the programme costs just under £3,000 per head per annum. The evaluation of the project said that it represented good value for the public purse, considering savings to benefits, improvements in family life and socialising.¹¹

¹¹ Earl, C and Sutton, B. (2015). *Employment works for autism: evaluation final report*

The role of employers

A growing number of employers are working with our charity and with others to offer work experience and internship programmes. Research suggests that these types of ‘stepping stone’ jobs often translate directly into jobs as they enable both participants and employers to test suitability.¹²

We believe that more employers should be looking to take on these sorts of opportunities. This would help their recruitment and give autistic people the opportunity to develop skills in a real work context and learn more about their interests and strengths.

Success for autistic interns at SAS

SAS is the leading analytics software and services company. They have worked with The National Autistic Society over the past couple of years to improve autism understanding in the company. Following this, SAS decided to take forward an exciting initiative to offer work experience to interns on the autism spectrum.

We worked with SAS and recommended changes to existing recruitment and interview processes that could help autistic applicants, as well as providing training for key staff on how to adjust communication and make adjustments for sensory issues.

This support continued throughout the internship. We carried out regular reviews to check if any further adjustments could be made to optimise the experiences of both interns and managers alike.

The first year of the internship was a success. One of the interns said:

“The internship programme was important for me to gain work experience and I felt appreciated at SAS. It’s essential that the people you work for understand what disabilities you have, are aware of how you learn and make changes so that it is easier to carry out the work. Sometimes I might need to take a few minutes’ break, for example.

SAS was really understanding of this and the internship has really helped boost my confidence. The consultants from The National Autistic Society assured me that I was doing well and made me feel really supported.”

“

I’ve just started as a volunteer on a working farm. It’s not my field, which is in woodland management. We agreed I would tell them initially I have autism. So I did – by email. And it went very well – I was surprised. I’ve been with them now one month, three to four days per week. They now want to offer me a job.

David, Nottingham focus group

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¹² Paul Wehman et al., ‘Competitive employment for youth with autism spectrum disorders: early results from a randomized clinical trial,’ *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 44, no. 3 (March 2014).

Apprenticeships as a pathway into work

Learning and developing skills on the job can help autistic people gain the confidence they need to work. The UK Government recently pledged to create three million new apprenticeships. A taskforce led by Paul Maynard MP identified some important ways to make sure that they are more accessible to young people with learning difficulties and disabilities (which includes young autistic people). This included making sure employers know that support is available from Access to Work for apprenticeships and making adjustments to entry requirements like English and Maths grades. The UK Government has accepted these recommendations and will be working to put them in place over the next couple of years. The Scottish and Welsh Governments and the Northern Ireland Assembly and Government should look at these recommendations carefully and look to implement them in their own apprenticeship schemes.

As these recommendations are taken forward, we believe that the Government should also run a pilot to help develop a model of what a gold standard apprenticeship should look like for autistic young people. This may include looking at whether apprenticeships need to be longer for this group and how teaching can be adapted so that autistic people are able to better transfer what they have learnt in the classroom to the job.

Incentives for employers to take on more autistic apprentices also need careful consideration. The UK Government recently announced an apprenticeships levy for large employers to help pay for apprenticeships schemes. They should look to 'flex' the apprenticeships levy, such as by increasing the 'top-up' payment for those who take on more disabled apprentices to incentivise employers to work with disabled apprentices.

Making school work

In 2017, our charity will open an innovative new school in Chigwell, Essex, on its new Enterprise Campus. Anderson School's curriculum will be individualised to ensure that, in line with their aptitude and career aspirations, each student can access the support, training and skills they will need to move into work or further education.

We will develop a range of local partnerships to link students with employers, give them access to work placements and internships and ensure that they achieve relevant vocational qualifications to enable them to fulfil their potential. Every child will leave the school with a future.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The UK Government should develop an autism employment pathway, providing end-to-end specialist support to help double the numbers of autistic people in work.

Jobcentre Plus should make sure that their staff have the necessary training and expertise to support autistic people to find work, including more advanced training for work coaches.

The UK Government and devolved administrations should work with employers to make sure apprenticeships are working as an effective pathway into employment for autistic adults.

Employers can play their part by working with The National Autistic Society or other organisations with autism expertise to develop supported internship and work experience schemes for autistic young people and adults.

See page 20 for full details of recommendations.

3. GETTING AND KEEPING A JOB

Once autistic people are work ready, many still face unnecessary difficulties when applying for a job and, if they get one, further barriers in the workplace.

Autistic people, employers and colleagues need better support to change this.

Employer and colleague understanding

Our YouGov survey of employers exposed some of the myths that employers may believe, which could cause bias against autistic people both in recruitment and in the workplace. For instance, 34% said they thought an autistic person would be unlikely to fit into their team, and 28% said that an autistic person would be unlikely to be a team player.

As part of our separate study we were also shocked by some of the distressing experiences of autistic people at work. Roughly half of our respondents with experience in the workplace reported bullying or harassment (48%) or other discrimination or unfair treatment (51%) due to their autism.

These bad experiences have long-term consequences. Autistic people can be left with lower confidence than ever, leading to long-term unemployment, greater dependency or mental ill health.

However, it is important to recognise that the vast majority of employers want to do the right thing but feel apprehensive about getting things wrong and do not know where to go for advice. Our YouGov poll found that 60% of employers would worry about getting support for an autistic employee wrong, while 60% also said that they did not know where to go for support or advice about employing an autistic person.

Telling people

When an autistic person applies for a job, they must decide whether to disclose their autism in their application. They are left with a dilemma. Should I tell employers I am autistic, and potentially face their conscious or unconscious bias? Or should I not tell them, meaning I cannot benefit from adjustments in the recruitment process or an employer's possible understanding? Many are still undecided whether to tell their employer or colleagues after they get a job, due to fear of negative reactions or poor understanding.

In our survey, over half (58%) of respondents told us they had told their current or most recent employer that they are autistic, while just under a third had not (32%).

“

The problem is that people in society don't perceive us for what we can do. They don't see the skills and opportunities we can offer.

Arran, Nottingham
focus group

”



48%
of our respondents
had experience
of **bullying or
harassment in
the workplace**

“

I've been badly bullied and abused. One employer fired me and said 'employers want people who can be normal'

Survey respondent

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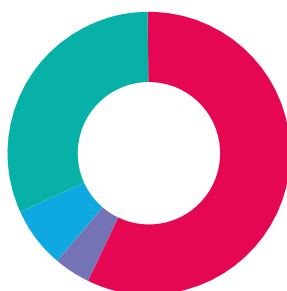
Did you tell your current or most recent employer that you're autistic?

Yes (58%)

No (32%)

Not relevant (self-employed) (7%)

I don't know (3%)



Following disclosure, experiences were mixed. Just over a quarter (27%) said that they received no acknowledgement and no changes were made, but around a third (32%) were asked what adjustments they would need in the workplace.¹³

Disclosure of autism would increase if those who do tell employers about their autism, either when applying for or after getting a job, had positive stories to tell. Some do, but more often people get no response or a bad response.

"I never tell my employers I am autistic because I feel like they'll set a low bar for me. They'll assume I can only do so much, when I know I can do a lot more. I'd rather people think I was just weird or unusual, than know I have a reason for the way I act." – Survey respondent

"I had no problem disclosing my diagnosis. I am autistic and proud! I told [colleagues] if you tell me something I won't get it but if you show me I will get it immediately. I will constantly ask questions to make sure I have got it right and I will ask for help if I need it." – Kalim, roundtable with former Minister for Disabled People Justin Tomlinson

Interviews and application process

Autistic people may need a range of adjustments in interview and at work because of their difficulties in communication, interacting with others and sensory issues, such as over- or under-sensitivity to light or sound. A major reason why people do not disclose their autism on job applications is that the reasonable adjustments people want are usually not available. Most jobs require an interview. In our survey, only 11% of those who disclosed their autism on their application were offered an adjustment for their interview. Just 3% of our survey respondents who disclosed to their current or most recent employer were offered an alternative interview process.

Alternative forms of assessment include work trials which can give both an employer and potential employee a more meaningful opportunity to find out if they are right for each other. Employers could also give autistic people interview questions in advance or make sure they are given a bit more time to process them in the interview. If companies are serious about being disability confident, they should explore alternative forms of recruitment or adjustments to the interview process.

¹³ An additional 11% were asked what reasonable adjustments they needed at interview.

“

I've asked for interview questions beforehand so that I could have an understanding of the questions they were going to pose but they wouldn't do that for me. Instead, they gave me the questions 15 minutes before the interview so I could jot down some answers beforehand – this wasn't long enough and only confused the situation further

Jean, Bristol focus group

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Interviews are basically beauty parades. We are a failure in interviews. You are better off having a longer, softer launch where both parties can see if they get along with each other, that works for both parties.

Arran, Nottingham focus group

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Reasonable adjustments at work

The experiences of autistic people in work are mixed. Some have great employers who know about their autism and create supportive environments and approaches to work. Others react badly, including doing nothing to adapt their employee's environment or work.

The barriers autistic people face at work are often surmountable. Busy workplaces can be socially overwhelming and can overload people with too much information such as noisy conversation, bright lights or other sensory stimuli. Many such barriers can, however, be overcome quickly, easily and cheaply, through spreading understanding or simple adaptations to the environment.

Over a third (35%) said that the support or adjustments made by their current or most recent employer, both in relation to sensory needs or in relation to their autism generally, were poor or very poor.

Access to work

The lack of adjustments is partly explained by the 60% of employers polled, who said they do not know where to go for support or advice about employing an autistic person. This also explains other reservations employers may have about employing someone who is autistic, particularly the belief that it costs more to employ an autistic person, held by 40% of employers asked. *The Equality Act* sets out a legal requirement for employers to make reasonable adjustments at work. In addition they can also access help, including financial support, to make changes to the workplace to ensure they can provide the right help for disabled employees through Access to Work.

An Access to Work grant can pay for practical support to help an employee stay in work, by paying for adaptations in the workplace. For autistic people, this can pay for a range of things such as an assessment to identify what changes or adaptations may be needed, training for colleagues and managers, so that they are able to better communicate with their autistic colleague and understand their needs, or aides and adaptations to help with sensory needs, such as noise cancelling headphones.

Awareness of this support needs to increase among employers, especially smaller employers, as the scheme is also more commonly used by larger companies.¹⁴ At the same time, the Government also needs to make sure the scheme is working effectively for autistic people and the funds are being used creatively to meet the needs of those on the autism spectrum.¹⁵

Autistic adults tell us they would like more choice and control over how Access to Work funds are spent – sometimes asks like training are resisted – and over who their support provider is. The scheme could also be more flexible, for example by taking on the recommendations of non-contracted assessment providers.

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There were strip lights which gave me migraines as I was in the office all day and they were flickering. It was only in retrospect that I realised.

Constance, Manchester focus group

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“

I love books and I have now found a job in a book shop and the job suits me well – I am good with micro-interactions with people. And the shop staff are so understanding of my sensory limitations and the job plays to my strengths. I am really lucky. There is a space where people go to chill out away from people.

Lizzie, roundtable with former Minister for Disabled People, Justin Tomlinson

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¹⁴ Federation of Small Businesses. (2009). *Small business, big employers, good employers*. ¹⁵ The Government recently created a new Hidden Impairments Specialist Team within Access to Work to provide support from advisers who have greater awareness of hidden impairments, including autism. This is a good step, but we are still hearing from autistic applicants that the process is unclear and that adaptations, such as training, are not always fully considered.

Autistic people may also need longer-term support from employment support services to adjust to the fluctuating social demands and stresses of a job. Work and Health Programme providers, Jobcentre Plus work coaches or the providers of the new scheme being developed in Scotland need to be able to continue to support autistic employees once they are in work. This should include securing help from Access to Work and checking in with the employer at regular intervals, as appropriate, to help resolve issues before they develop further.

Working for yourself

Self-employment is an alternative and popular option for some autistic people. It offers the possibility of working in your own way, without needing to conform to traditions and conventions, such as long meetings, always working in teams or the structures of the normal working day and working week. Ten per cent of those we surveyed who have been employed were self-employed. Many more would like to be self-employed but would need ongoing support to do this, for instance to structure their time or manage their finances.

Some employment support services provide initial support when someone finds a job, before passing that responsibility to employers. But if someone is self-employed, longer-term support may be necessary and should be provided through employment support services or Access to Work.

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I badly need a business mentor to help me unravel some written aspects of business, but cannot afford one.

Self-employed
survey respondent

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Employers can play their part by signing up to receive free and regular tips and advice from The National Autistic Society and working towards our new Autism Friendly Employer Award.

Employers may also want to consider becoming leaders in their sector on autism and employment and sharing their experiences with others.

As well as launching a programme to promote the potential of autistic adults, the UK Government should make sure that Access to Work is working effectively for autistic people, and

make sure that specialist support is available through the scheme.

The UK Government, the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland Assembly Government should lead the way in their employment practices, by a) increasing work experience schemes for autistic adults, b) signing up to receive free and regular tips and advice from The National Autistic Society and c) working towards our new Autism Friendly Employer Award.

See page 20 for full details of recommendations.

CONCLUSION



Too many autistic people are unemployed or underemployed. The Government has made a welcome pledge to halve the disability employment gap, but autistic adults are being left behind. Their skills and abilities are being overlooked by both Government and employers.

Specific action needs to be taken to reduce the autism employment gap. If the Government is serious about this issue, the number of autistic adults in work will need to **double** by 2020.

We need leadership from the Government – a new programme to promote the potential of autistic people and an end-to-end pathway to work, which includes specialist help.

Employers can make a huge difference too by learning about the adjustments that autistic adults may need. With the right information, they can reduce the overload of too much information that autistic people may experience at work. They can offer internships and apprenticeships and work with us and other autism experts to become Autism Friendly Employers.

Working together, the UK Government, devolved governments, local government, third sector and employers, can make sure we understand autism, the person and what to do and tackle the autism employment gap once and for all.

Turn over for the full list of recommendations

RECOMMENDATIONS



Full list of recommendations

The UK Government should:

- commit to doubling the number of autistic adults in work to support its pledge to halve the disability employment gap by 2020
- working with the Scottish Government, Welsh Government and Northern Ireland Assembly, launch a national programme to promote the employment potential of autistic people to employers. This should include developing programmes to help match the particular skills and interests of autistic people to the sectors where those skills are most needed
- develop an autism employment pathway that includes end-to-end specialist support as part of the new Work and Health Programme. This should include enabling autistic adults to choose the provider that they would like to support them locally
- monitor the numbers of autistic adults in work by routinely collecting and publishing data on the employment status of autistic adults. This would include adding autism to the list of disabilities asked about in the Labour Force Survey
- make sure they are learning about what support works for autistic adults and investing further in that support. Do this by recording the outcomes for autistic adults who go on the new Work and Health Programme and who are accessing help through the Jobcentre. Monitor what is working and what isn't
- make sure that specialist autism support is available through Access to Work, including the use of specialist non-contracted providers, to assess individuals' workplace needs. Commission support based on the assessments' findings
- record data on the numbers of autistic people supported by Access to Work, the services they are referred to and the outcomes of that support
- set a target within a wider action plan to boost the number of autistic apprenticeships in the Government's overall target of three million
- implement the recommendations of the Apprenticeships Taskforce and ensure that the specific needs of autistic people are taken into account in that implementation
- run an autism apprenticeships pilot so that a gold standard for how apprenticeships can be made effective for autistic young people and adults can be developed
- look at ways to flex the apprenticeships levy, such as by increasing the 'top-up' payment for those who take on more disabled apprentices to incentivise employers to work with disabled apprentices. The Government should monitor the impact of this, including by recording the number of autistic apprentices recruited through this route
- lead the way in its employment practices, increasing work experience schemes for autistic adults across government departments, signing up to receive The National Autistic Society's new employment newsletter and working towards our new Autism Friendly Employer Award.

The Scottish Government should:

- in designing new employment support programmes, consult with autistic people, their family members and third sector and other providers to make sure the new programmes will work effectively for autistic people
- make sure it is monitoring work outcomes for autistic people in any new employment programmes
- note the recommendations of the England taskforce on apprenticeships and look at the scope for implementing them as part of the apprenticeships programmes in Scotland.

The Welsh Government should:

- maintain the role of the Autism Employment Ambassador and look at enhancing the role as the autism strategy for Wales is refreshed
- make sure that support for finding work is included in its Additional Learning Needs reforms
- ensure the new £6 million integrated autism service, announced by Welsh Government in March 2016 as part of its refreshed strategy, includes employment support
- note the recommendations of the England taskforce on apprenticeships and look at the scope for implementing them as part of the apprenticeships programmes in Wales
- set a target as part of a wider action plan to boost the number of autistic apprenticeships within the commitment to creating at least 100,000 apprenticeships.

Jobcentre Plus should:

- make sure that all staff have training which would enable them to make reasonable adjustments to their communication style for autistic people. Make sure that work coaches in particular have more advanced levels of training to support autistic people to find work
- make sure that staff are contributing to local autism plans in line with legislation and strategies of each of the four nations of the UK.

Across the UK, assessors for social care and support should:

- make sure that employment as an outcome is included in needs assessments for young autistic people and autistic adults as appropriate.

The Northern Ireland Assembly and Government should:

- undertake an independent examination of the range of support provided to autistic young people/adults to examine if it meets their needs
- ensure that autistic adults can access a range of autism-specific pre and post-employment support that best meets their individual needs
- note the recommendations of the England taskforce on apprenticeships and look at the scope for implementing them as part of the apprenticeships programmes in Northern Ireland
- make sure that recommendations from this report are included in the next autism action plan to be produced shortly.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Local authorities in England should:

- make sure their local partnership board includes representatives from local stakeholders with an interest in employment and representatives from Jobcentre Plus, in line with good practice outlined in the Autism Act statutory guidance
- make sure that local autism plans include plans for getting more autistic people into work
- make sure that support for finding work is included in Education, Health and Care plans for autistic young people as they transition from children's services to adult services.

Local authorities in Scotland should:

- make sure that local autism strategy working groups include people with an interest in employment
- make sure that local autism plans include strategies for getting more autistic people into work.

Local authorities in Wales should:

- make sure that local autism stakeholder groups include people with an interest in employment
- make sure that local autism plans include strategies for getting more autistic people into work
- make sure that employment as an outcome is included in needs assessments for young autistic people and autistic adults as appropriate.

Employers can play their part by:

- signing up to receive regular free advice and tips from The National Autistic Society on how to make the right adaptations to the interview process and the workplace for autistic people
- becoming leaders in their sector on autism and employment and sharing their experiences with others
- working towards attaining The National Autistic Society's Autism Friendly Employer Award, which will be awarded to employers for their good practice in supporting autistic employees
- working with The National Autistic Society or other organisations with autism expertise to develop supported internship and work experience schemes for autistic adults
- pursuing opportunities to recruit autistic apprentices.

ABOUT THE TOO MUCH INFORMATION CAMPAIGN

Sometimes, autistic people can get overloaded by everything around them. It's like they're getting 'too much information'.

All the sights, smells and sounds can make the outside world feel like an overwhelming place. For autistic people and their families, all the looks, judgements and tuts can make it feel like a lonely and isolated place.

Too Much Information is the biggest ever UK campaign to help the public to better understand how autistic people experience the world. We know that by doing this we can turn public judgement into empathy and kindness, and make sure autistic people and their families no longer feel excluded from public life.

You can help us make sure autistic people, and their families, get the understanding they need. To find out how, visit www.autism.org.uk/TMI.

We rely on donations to tell the public about Too Much Information. If you can help us educate more people by donating, by providing media space or if you want to make your business more autism-friendly, get in touch at corporate.partnerships@nas.org.uk.

About The National Autistic Society

We are the UK's leading autism charity. Since we began over 50 years ago, we have been pioneering new ways to support people and understand autism. We continue to learn every day from the children and adults we support in our schools and care services.

Based on our experience, and with support from our members, donors and volunteers, we provide life-changing information and advice to millions of autistic people, families and friends so that more people can make informed decisions about their lives. And we support professionals, politicians and the public to understand autism better so that more autistic people of all ages can be understood, supported and appreciated for who they are.

Until everyone understands.

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Until everyone understands