

How to be inclusive of autism in recruitment practices

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Introduction

Autistic people bring immense value to the workplace. However traditional recruitment processes can make it difficult for them to bring their best selves to the table.

Learn how to recruit with greater inclusivity, in four steps.

53.9% of unemployed autistic Australians have never held a paid job despite wanting to work.

A recent study commissioned by Amaze found the unemployment rate of autistic adults in Australia is 31.6%. The same study also found that 53.9% of unemployed autistic Australians have never held a paid job despite wanting to work. There are many barriers to gaining employment for autistic people and inclusive recruitment practices would be a positive step forward for everyone.

About the author

Ashlea McKay is an autistic writer and talented UX professional. She is passionate about neurodiversity acceptance and inclusion. Herein she provides practical inclusion tips across all stages of the recruitment process. Follow these points and gain access to a skilled, talented and under-utilised workforce.

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1. Carefully consider any ‘must have’ skills listed in job advertisements

Autistic persons tend to interpret job criteria and advertisements literally and may not apply for a job they can do:

“I’ll only apply for a job if I can prove that I meet ALL the selection criteria”.

Peter Horsley, founder of Cerebral Palsy Alliance’s technology accelerator Remarkable, recently shared “for someone with autism, they might read a job ad quite literally and say if there are nine attributes that are needed in a job and I don’t have one of those attributes then that job is not for me.” You can help make job advertisements more inclusive of autistic people by listing only the absolute MUST elements in the job, and by focusing on the tasks the successful candidate/s would need to be able to perform in the role instead of the long list of all your ‘mandatory’ and ‘desired’ attributes.

It is also good practice to write your mandatory list clearly. For example, wanting “good communication skills” is quite vague in terms of specific outcomes wanted. How do you measure ‘good’? Who is communicating to whom? In that instance saying, “Able to communicate with customers in a face-to-face capacity” could be more apt. Similarly, reflect on whether this skill is a MUST, or if it can be developed.

2. Make it easy for autistic people to see inclusivity in your organisation

“Cultural fit matters and it’s important for me to feel safe to be my authentic autistic self in a workplace. If you support neurodiversity, say it LOUDLY and CLEARLY”.

Before I consider applying for a role, in addition to checking an employer’s website and social media, I’ll often analyse the job advertisement to determine how inclusive they might be. This information isn’t always included in the job advertisement. When it is, sometimes the employer will name specific types of

diversity they welcome and support. Disability and neurodiversity rarely make that list, and this can make me feel excluded or unwelcome. Instead of listing specific types of differences you support, *show* how your organization is modelling inclusive behaviour by including a sentence or two about tangible diversity and inclusion initiatives you run.

3. Proactively manage unconscious bias in your recruitment team

“Autistics will present differently”.

Everyone is biased in some way — it’s part of being human. Affinity bias, our tendency to hold a more favourable opinion of someone similar to ourselves, is a common one to be mindful of when hiring. While autism is invisible, we’ll often present differently to our peers. For example, I find it hard to make eye contact, I sometimes come across as blunt and I’ll often miss social cues. Any of these examples can make me *appear* to be a poor cultural fit. Chuck Edward, head of global talent acquisition at Microsoft, recently shared his personal experiences with affinity bias when hiring and how he’s “had to be very careful to address it head on.”

BIAS CAN ALSO COME INTO PLAY DURING DISCLOSURE.

“From an employment perspective, we are often viewed as less capable or unable to perform certain roles”.

There are many misconceptions about autistic people. Ableism and discrimination — whether direct, indirect, intentional or unintentional — is common. From an employment perspective we’re often viewed as less capable or unable to perform certain roles. A recent study into community attitudes and behaviours towards autism in Australia found that 39.2% of non-autistic respondents did not believe an autistic person could be a doctor and 32.4% felt that we couldn’t be a lawyer. The same research team also discovered that 29.2% of autistic respondents reported a

lack of understanding of autism from potential employers as a barrier to employment.

Unconscious bias training is a great way to proactively manage this and has an added bonus of benefiting *all* your hiring activities. It's also likely the training will have a positive impact on your internal working culture. Diversity coach and trainer Peta Bayman says: "confronting unconscious bias is a key aspect of the leadership mindset". Thus, it is important to reflect on how this may be affecting your team.

Also, you might consider participating in the Disability Confident Recruiter program offered by the Australian Network on Disability, which helps organisations empower candidates and staff to create a more inclusive workplace.

4. Rethink the interview concept

Traditional job interviews are stressful for everyone but even more so for autistic people. Steph Carayannis from Specialisterne explains, "Since autistic individuals exhibit differences in their social interactions and communication, they often don't do as well in the traditional interview recruitment processes as [this method] relies more on rapport building and verbalising the individual's skillset."

"Ditch the formal process that relies on behavioural questions and adhere to an arbitrary structure. Let us show you our value instead".

To get the best out of autistic candidates and accurately assess our capability, ditch the traditional interview process. Replace the high pressure formal one-on-one discussion with a mix of skills-based assessments, informal conversations and group activities. Let us *show* you our value instead. As another autistic job seeker, Cain Noble-Davies, reflects, "If I'm applying for a data entry position, put me in front of a typing speed calculator so I can show what I'm capable of."

Many autism hiring programs such as DXC's Dandelion Program include practical tasks in their hiring processes that employers can draw inspiration from for all recruitment activities. This approach has an added bonus of being inclusive of people with other forms of neurodiversity, such as Dyslexia and ADHD, allowing you to cast an even wider net when looking for talented neurodiverse candidates.

If changing the process isn't an option right now, there are a few adjustments you can make today as a positive first step:

- Provide interview questions in advance, to allow time to process and think.
- Clarify how many people will be attending and their roles, to reduce anxiety.
- Share details about the interview room, to reduce anxiety. Refer to details in terms of lighting (natural or otherwise), temperature (and whether it can be adjusted), room orientation and design (for example, where the windows and doors are located and whether the walls are made of glass) and access to facilities within the building (for example, toilets, cafés, quiet spaces and public waiting areas).
- Ask if the autistic person needs any reasonable adjustments to attend the interview, for example a change of location if what you've described is unsuitable, extra time to respond to questions without being penalized, or lift access.

"Inclusion of autistic candidates must be present at every stage of the process and it is a surprisingly easy and inexpensive thing to do".

**IMAGINE HOW MUCH BIGGER YOUR TALENT POOL WOULD BE
WITH A FEW INCLUSIVE ADJUSTMENTS...**

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