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Geraldine Robertson

Autistic Self Advocacy Network Australia & New Zealand

Ph: 0488651500

**Critical issues in Disability Employment**

1. The Autistic Self Advocacy Network of Australia and New Zealand Inc. (ASAN AUNZ) is a non-profit advocacy organization run by and for individuals on the [autism spectrum](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Autism_spectrum). ASAN holds that the goal of autism advocacy should be a world in which Autistic people enjoy the same access, rights, and opportunities as all other people, and that Autistic voices should be included in the national conversations about autism and disability.
2. ASAN AUNZ congratulates the Disability Employment Taskforce on conducting public consultations with the purpose of identifying the key ways in which improvements can be made what to lead to better employment outcomes for people with disability. We welcome the long term goal of equal employment outcomes for people with disabilities. However, we set out some comments and recommendations to further strengthen measures with regard to the distinct needs of persons with Autism Spectrum Disorders.

**Access to DES and employment:**

## While the identification the key disability employment issues that need to be addressed in order to achieve equal outcomes is both commendable and essential, it is important to recognize that the characteristics of Autism exclude Autistics from having a voice in the management and provision of many generic and specialist services intended to support them. In order to ensure that autism specific changes to be made to inclusive access and participation in order to address this concern, we suggest that liaison with ASAN AUNZ Inc., the only Australian advocacy organisation run by Autistics, for Autistics, is an essential aspect of equal access for Autistic individuals in improving the employment position of people with disability in Australia.

**Barriers to Employment (Autism Spectrum Conditions} in Australia:**

People with Autism Spectrum Conditions (ASC) face additional difficulties in participating in the workforce. In 2012, the Australian Bureau of Statistics stated that, “…the labour force participation rate for people with autism was 42%. This compares with 53% labour force participation rate for people with disabilities and 83% for people without disabilities.”

The implications of this disparity mean that Autistic people not only have lower economic security than the general population, but they have worse outcomes than people with disabilities in general. People who do not have opportunities to also lack the freedom to make financial decisions in their lives. They are restricted from many of the benefits of work such as an expanded social network and a sense of belonging and purpose. When these are lacking. People are less likely to have informal social networks which contribute to supporting physical and mental wellbeing. When Autistics do not have opportunities to participate in the workforce, the characteristics of Autism, which include communication and social challenges further restrict their ability to participate productively in their communities.

## In our view, there are priorities that ought to be incorporated in strategies that develop access to employment for all.

**Autism and implications for access:**

Traditionally Autism has been defined by perceived behavioural deficits in socialising, communication, restricted or specific interests, difficulties with executive function and differences in sensory perceptions e.g. many have a significant sensitivity to noise. The deficit focus ignores the specific strengths common to this group which will also be of benefit in the workplace. These strengths include:

* Excellent long term memory
* Attention to detail
* Thinking “outside the box”
* Task oriented
* Value clear protocols
* Know their subjects.
* Working in an area of interest is a passion
* Loyalty to the company.

Autism support is generally informed by people who do not have lived experience of Autism. The implications for successful workforce inclusion are many and may account for the dismal participation rates described by the ABS. For example, while Autistic adults may have communication difficulties ranging from unusual use of vocabulary and syntax, unusual speech patterns, slow expression of ideas and articulation difficulties. The difficulties they demonstrate often mask their abilities e.g. they are often highly intelligent lateral thinkers who have a deep commitment to achieving excellence in a chosen field. Alternatively, outwardly they may have a high level of verbal communication, but will have difficulty reading body language and understanding social conventions. Others may be workers who enjoy clear routines and restricted activities which they perform with attention to detail and strict observation of employer expectations.

When service providers and employers have a limited understanding of the impact of autistic characteristics, the job seeker is significantly disadvantaged. For example, many people who provide social training for Autistics still force them to make eye contact, particularly in interview situations, thus limiting their capacity to listen to conversation partners and to process verbal information.

“There are just NO OPTIONS for individuals with complex needs/ASD. It is extremely frustrating that even in this environment with the profile of autism that the only comment in a supported employment IEP was “you need to improve your eye contact”. School was tough but since leaving school trying to cope and source options is mission impossible. I would urge, no make that plead Aspect, to work with providers to source options for these young people.” {Robson, 2011)

Another example comes from the understanding of the impact of sensory processing on daily living. It is common practice to place people with disabilities in laundry work. In the case of autism, this may be a very hostile environment with noise, smells, temperature variations and co-workers who may have a limited capacity to be supportive. The pressures of the environment can be so great that the autistic employee becomes disoriented, frightened and may be in pain. If unrecognised, this can result in violent and/or verbal outbursts and loss of a potentially successful placement. An informed support worker could provide information for supports which would enable that individual to cope. An informed support person could identify a workplace situation which should be avoided rather than destroy the confidence of the job seeker and the confidence of the employer in engaging Autistics. Great harm is done when service providers frequently deny the validity of evidence from those with lived experience and rather than liaise with and inform potential employers, perpetuate outdated practices which limit, rather than facilitate increased workforce participation.

“He has a Diploma in library and Information Services which he only partly uses in his job at UWS. The employment provider found him the job at Woolies 5 years ago and has made no moves to change him to anything more challenging and has now ‘left’ him as he is so ‘successful’ “ (Robson, 2011)

**Representative participation in employment service provision:**

It is difficult for Autistic adults to have input into external decision making about their lives. Many autistic adults live highly controlled circumstances. They may live in supported accommodation or they may live with parents, far beyond the usual age of independence. Often, intellectual capacity has nothing to do with these decisions. Autistics in these circumstances generally make very few decisions about their lives and often have limited support in communicating their needs and abilities, with stereotypes informing their supports, rather than personal perceptions. A common example is the idea that Autistics work well with computers. For many, this is true. For some, the stereotype may be true in specific situations or applications. Many are not interested and have no aptitude for computer related work.

**Lack of skills:**

Employment systems will only serve the needs of people with disabilities adequately when we consider the issues that exist in schools, Higher Education and beyond. Autistic people entering the workforce are often disadvantaged by poor education outcomes. The ABS survey of Disability Aging and Carers (2012) found that 87% of children on the autism spectrum have difficulty with school. These difficulties include limited access to supports, frequent suspensions and low expectations of achievement. Many do not participate in work experience placements, therefore they may not see themselves as having a capacity to work. The result is that 81% fail to gain a post school qualification, well above the figure for the general population and for disability in general. In addition, while a core characteristic of autism is difficulty with social understanding, very few receive specific instruction which will develop the skills young adults require when moving into the workforce. In addition, they often have limited understanding of their entitlement or access to support from DES in preparing for and finding work.

““When my son was in Year 11, we were told by the principal and other teachers that they could do no more for him and that he was actually a distraction to the other children in his class and were holding them back from reaching their full potential. We were told that he would not gain anything by coming back to school the following year! “(Robson, 2011)

**Lack of access to role models:**

While many Autistics are job seekers and some are employed, it is less common to find participation as employers, mentors or service providers. There are autism specific characteristics which may limit opportunities in these areas, not because of incompetence but because of perceived stereotypes of autistic characteristics as deficits rather than difference. Communication differences may limit perceptions of intellectual ability. Some Autistics are nonspeaking, but may also have significant cognitive strengths. Others may have unusual prosody or idiosyncratic speech which prejudice interview panels with regard to capacity for team participation and critical thinking. While there are many Autistics who have high academic qualifications, low rates of employment or underemployment results in limited opportunities to demonstrate expertise and competence in the workplace. In addition, the barriers to autistic representation on management boards serve as a circular limitation. If you cannot demonstrate experience, you cannot get experience. If you cannot meet normative criteria designed for the composition of a management committee, you cannot challenge the assumptions of that committee. Similarly, if service providers and employers do not see autistic people functioning well in the workplace, they often have concerns about how well a person with unusual communication abilities will be able to function. Perceptions of Autism stereotypes, therefore form a severe, but unnecessary barrier to full workplace participation by highly qualified and capable Autistic individuals.

**Ableism and language:**

Workplace discrimination is often perpetuated by stigma with negative interpretations of common stereotypes and negative value judgements. For example, the common perception that autistics have no empathy is based on the theory of the extreme male brain, which has been found to be incorrect ([Subbaraman](http://sfari.org/author/?author=https://id.simonsfoundation.org/nidhisubbaraman), 2014). The atypical responses to empathetic experience have resulted in assumptions of incompetence which may lock workers out of the “caring” professions, rather than employers understanding that different types of empathy are intact and often highly developed in Autistic individuals, particularly females.

Similarly, the label of Autism Spectrum Disorder, combined with media representations of Autism as “Rainman”, often limit workforce participation to jobs which fall far below the capacity of the individual for work. The term “disorder” predisposes employers and service providers to see disability, rather than assess the individual’s different abilities resulting in placements in job vacancies available to the agency rather than suitable work.

“After leaving school he has, as a last resort, placed in a facility for severely mentally challenged people, where he had no direction and usually washed staff cars or windows, My son is a talented artist and musician but the talents were never explored by any professionals. “ (Robson, 2011).

Reference to Autism Spectrum Condition opens the discussion to a focus on difference, rather than deficit. This view of deficit has an impact on people with disabilities in general. For example, once an individual is relegated to a lower level of employment, it is typical that the individual is deemed successfully employed and no longer attracts support. It is therefore very difficult to move on from ADE positions or indeed any level of employment which is lower than the individual’s capacity to work.

The characteristics of autism complicate workplace supports in ways that are rarely understood by non-autistic service providers. For example, typical panel interviews rely on common interpretations so that respondents may select appropriate responses. Autistic interviewees often understand language differently and have a strong need for precision. They may take additional time to formulate a response that demonstrates understanding very precisely. They may be more able to provide explanations using diagrams and/or augmentative communication devices. Some jobseekers may not have the capacity to work in very busy environments. Thought needs to be given to alternative employment e.g. training for small business start-ups or working from home.

**Broader implications for employment and the inclusion of Autistic individuals.**

Autism Spectrum Condition is not a “standalone”. It occurs concurrently with many other disabilities e.g. Fragile X, Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, epilepsy deafness, vision impairment, diabetes, auto immune conditions, intellectual disability and Down syndrome, with a high comorbidity of mental illness and untreated psychiatric disability. It is therefore important that organisations consciously act to ensure that participation from future employees who also have Autism Spectrum Condition is appropriate and accommodated at all levels of the training, application and work processes using collaborative strategies developed with autistic self- advocates.

**Reform of Disability Employment Services:**

**Accountability:**

While it is recognised that short term employment situations can provide excellent opportunities to prepare for work, it is also essential that appropriate long term employment for each job seeker is the end point.

* Develop evaluation criteria which take into consideration job seeker and employer satisfaction, with consideration to criteria relating to individual outcomes and employment plans informed by the jobseeker and, if necessary, an advocate who understands the circumstances of the individual.
* Use technology e.g. Skype, to support rural and remote jobseekers and employers more effectively.
* Use technology e.g. Skype, to provide effective communication for job seekers who are unable to leave home or communicate effectively in person.
* Develop a broader understanding of employment to encourage both employers and jobseekers to consider more “work from home” or small business options and to provide training for these.
* Continue to promote a culture of difference, rather than dysfunction amongst all stakeholders.
* Structure an environment of competition with minimum standards to be met. Organisations which surpass those standards by working towards six and 12 month targets should attract higher incentives and outcome payments. Organisations which provide training and liaison with employers to achieve higher rates of professional and managerial employment outcomes, should also attract greater incentives, in addition to outcome payments.
* Develop service criteria to support choice of service providers by job seekers. Criteria should assess:
* Outcomes addressing the achievement of long term job outcomes which are appropriate to the skill levels of clients.
* Outcomes which address training provision appropriate to the individual.
* Consultation and collaboration with employers and people with disabilities in providing appropriate training and support for job seekers with high or exceptional needs.
* Employment of people with disabilities within the service organisations.
* Facilitate jobseeker engagement with employment services by adopting a system similar to the NDIS, in which the job seeker purchases training and support appropriate to individual needs in consultation with advocates, when necessary.

**Conclusions:**

* Effective and equitable service provision requires an understanding of Autism specific issues as well as the issues identified by the disability sector in general. User participation at all levels should be identified and given funding priority.
* Future priorities for the employment of Autistics in Australia must be designed with reference to the characteristics of autism as expressed by the individual. This requires the development of protocols to ensure that skill development includes explicitly taught team work and social skills appropriate to the position. The applicant should also be taught to “sell” difference as an advantage, not a deficit. It requires and acknowledgement that the employee will not be “normalised” but will do well in an environment where employers and co-workers understand autism if education is the wish of the applicant.
* It is essential that the advantages of diversity and different abilities are promoted to employers, co-workers and the general public to remove the stigma of hidden disabilities
* While it is acknowledged that employers must select the best person for the job, interview techniques which give autistic applicants an opportunity to show their abilities could be used. Rather than conversation, the applicant could complete a task to demonstrate skills. Alternative communication processes such as augmentative communication devices could be used if preferred. The interviewee could be allocated a block of time prior to the interview to view the questions which will be asked.
* While all impairments have needs specific to individuals affected by their condition, Autism is unique in being a hidden disability, often associated with areas of very high ability. It is associated with many other conditions. The existence of Autism in addition to other disabilities which may otherwise be relatively well addressed is a complicating factor that negatively affects the participation in generic services and outcomes for those with an additional diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Condition. Autism support services which recognise that Autistic adults represent a true community capable of working as equal partners has the potential to transform autism employment, moving from the view that any work is appropriate to work that benefits from the specific skills and interests demonstrated by the individual.
* The employment of Autistic trainers/mentors has the potential to provide informed support for service providers, job seekers and employers by addressing the needs of the stakeholders and ensuring that support provision and workplaces are inclusive and address broader and sometimes

hidden human rights issues. Collaboration with autistic mentors will provide meaningful information, useful in addressing complaints and strengthening training processes to reflect the needs of all stakeholders.

* ASAN AUNZ believes that jobseekers need to be able to make informed choices about services. To do that, they need qualitative information, such as success rates in placing applicants. Success needs to be judged on several levels, including success of placements judged by ongoing employment of up to two years. Assessment of the quality of training and ongoing support is essential. Evaluation of the suitability of employment judged by the jobseeker is also an important factor.
* Consideration of alternative employment opportunities such as small business and work from home opportunities are important.
* Develop best practice models of disability employment in order to encourage and support the private sector to take up employer incentives.
* Develop mandatory targets to Increase the number of people with disabilities employed in the public service e.g. NDIS and not for profit organisations.
* Accommodate supports for workers with disabilities who have sporadic or short term needs.
* Develop skills and experience in managerial and professional roles by providing paid work experience and internships which do not affect income support.

We thank you for the opportunity to inform the development of equitable employment practice and frameworks which will promote the recognition of the knowledge and expertise of autistic people in accessing meaningful and rewarding employment. We are a very small self-advocacy group, coming together because the Autistic perspective is often forgotten or considered flawed. We request that our submission be shared with other stakeholders, particularly as autism is associated with so many other disability groups who may not even realize that we are a part of the populations they serve. If you would like to discuss our submission further, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Yours sincerely

Geraldine Robertson

Secretary

ASAN AUNZ

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