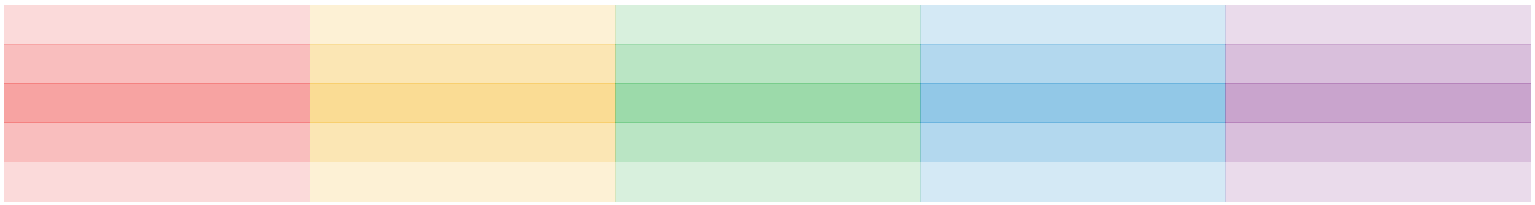


How can Graphic Communication be used to help fix the Autism Employment



Gap?

By Liam Moore



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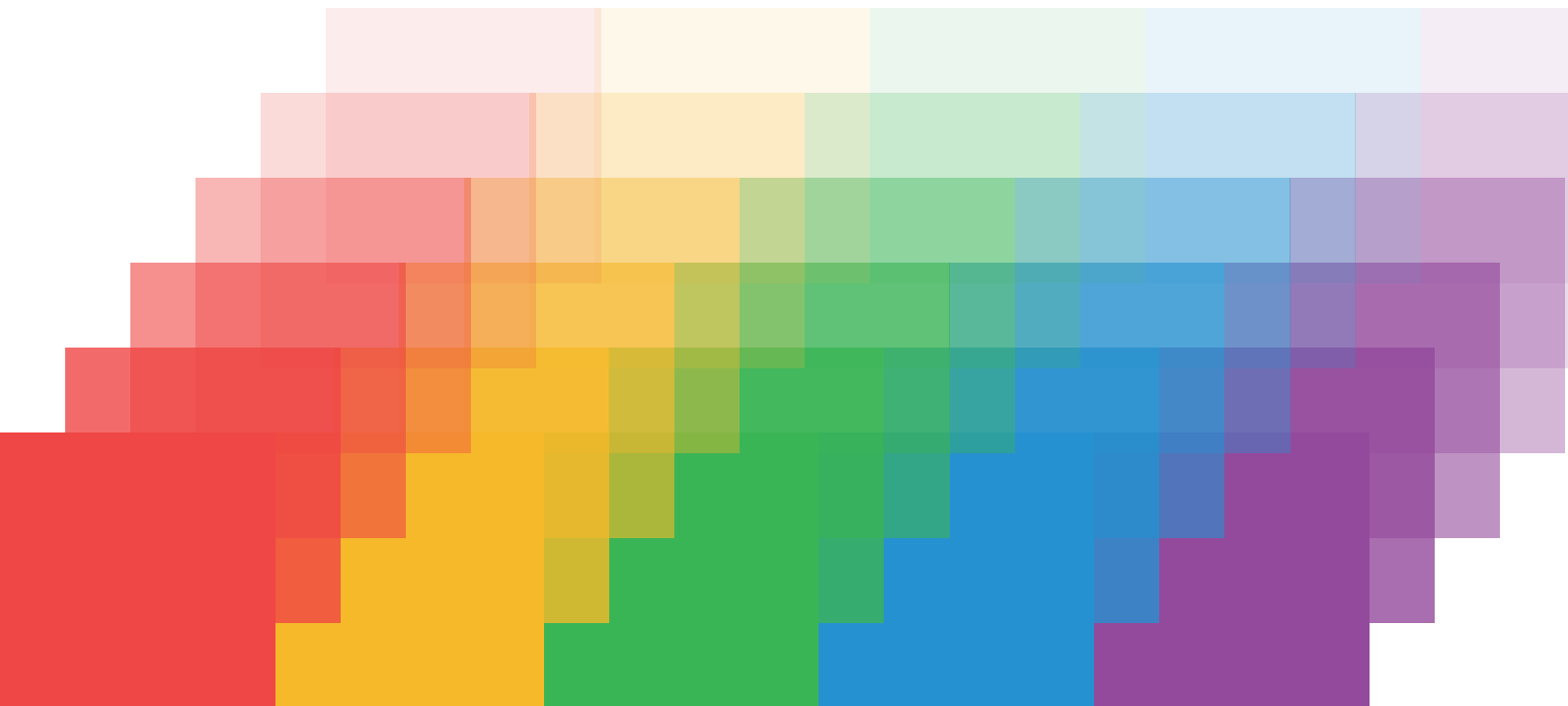
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Introduction

I have decided for the project to investigate what is recognized as the Autism Employment Gap for the Insights Report Research Project. The Autism Employment Gap was first brought into public knowledge in 2007 after a report from the National Autistic Society. Nine years later the National Autistic Society made a new report that continues to talk about the issue with the rise of more people than before being aware of autism, for this report the National Autistic Society (2016) surveyed over 2,000 autistic adults across the United Kingdom about finding employment and keeping their jobs. Out of the 2,000 only 16% of them are currently in full time paid employment. The National Autistic Society also called out for the government to help and double the number of autistic people in full time employment by the end of 2020. I've chosen this as my topic as someone on the autistic spectrum who will be looking for employment within the graphic design industry after my university course comes to an end. And apart from the report from the National Autistic Society in 2016, there has not been any new statistical data or reports suggesting that the percentage has changed in the last 3 to 4 years. However, in July 2019 the government began observing the Autism Employment Gap as the National Autistic Society (2019) acknowledges.

With the government now beginning to record the amount of autistic people in full time employment in the near future these reports, and statistics could lead to a higher amount of people on the autistic spectrum being able to get full time jobs. It could also remove or lessen any barriers that have excluded autistic people from getting jobs. Furthermore, I thought that this would be a good topic to research and see what can be done using graphic communication that could help improve work place environments and remove or lower some of the barriers that could stop people on the autistic spectrum disorder from getting full time jobs.

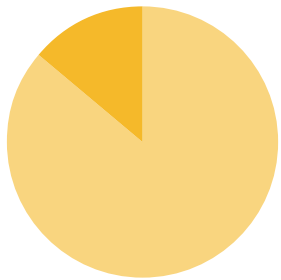
In this report I will investigate into the Autism Employment Gap to get a better understanding of the topic by looking at available statistics and reports for my secondary research, and as part of my primary research I will be getting in touch with charities in the UK as well as asking them questions on the topic for their views and opinions. I will investigate any misconceptions on autism that could lead to employers not hiring people on the autistic spectrum. Furthermore, I want to find out if there are any other misconceptions that could be linked with the Autism Employment Gap. If so, how are these misconceptions causing the low number of autistic adults in full time work.

The aim of this investigation is to identify what the Autism Employment gap is and what could contribute to such a low number of people on the autism spectrum in employment and despite a huge amount of them wanting to work.

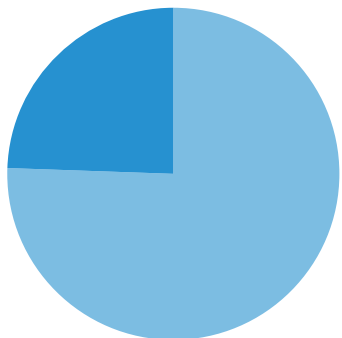
My objectives with this report are to investigate into the Autism Employment Gap by finding out what could be seen as causes that can stop people on the autism spectrum getting hired in to jobs, to do this I will get in touch with charities that provide work support for autistic people and support to find employment for them, and ask them questions that will be based off what I find during my secondary research.

Main Body

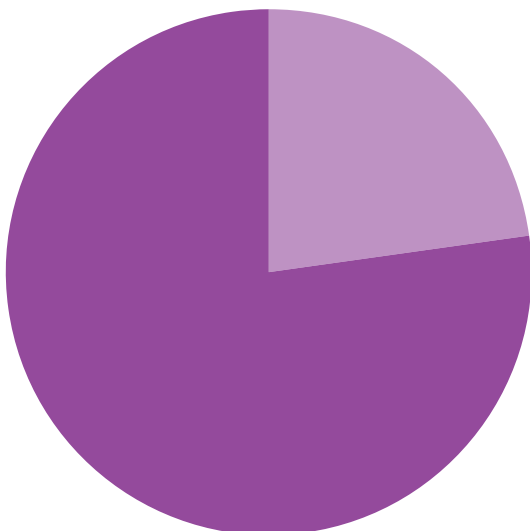
A report from 2016 conducted by the National Autistic Society investigated and highlighted what is now being called the Autism Employment Gap, the report surveyed over 2,000 adults that are on the Autism Spectrum Disorder about their employment status, the report found that out of the 2,000 and more responses only 16% of autistic adults are in full time paid employment which is 1% higher compared to their previous study back in 2007. The report also came up with the same percentage (16%) of autistic people in part time jobs resulting in the total employment rate of autistic workers out of the 2,000 at 32% (National Autistic Society, 2016, p. 5). The report also showed that 77% of the unemployed autistic adults that took part in the survey do want to work (National Autistic Society, 2016, p.9).




16% of people with autism are in full time work.



Combined numbers of autistic workers in full time and part time jobs is 32%.



Out of the 2,000 that are unemployed 77% of them do want to work.



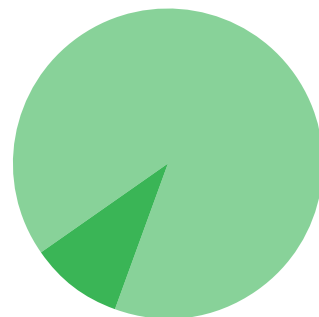
After receiving the results the National Autistic Society also called for government action to take place suggesting that “For the number of autistic people in work to reach 64%, the Government will need to commit to doubling the number of autistic people in employment by 2020” (National Autistic Society, 2016, p.5). The report done by the National Autistic Society is so far the most reliable and up to date information available on the employment rate for people with autism. To help increase the number of autistic people in full time employment Christine Burns, from the Flintshire County Council, informed me that it’s important for the “employers to listen and reassure people with disabilities it is ok, and [that] they will support them.”

After the report got published the United Kingdom government made a vow to help double up the amount of autistic people in employment by the end of 2020 to help combat and close the Autism Employment Gap. In July 2019 the United Kingdom government took a step forward to reduce and close this gap by announcing that they are committing to monitor the Autism Employment Gap by recording the amount of people with autism in the workplace. According to the National Autistic Society (2019) this can help paint a bigger and better picture on the employment gap with the Policy and Public Affairs Manager at the National Autistic Society, Anna Bailey Bearfield stating that

This is an important step, as it’ll give us better insight into the employment gap and barriers autistic people face finding work... So, it’s vital that the Government sees this intention through, and they must then ensure it leads to the right action, including better and specific support for both autistic people and employers, so we can finally close the employment gap. (National Autistic Society, 2019).

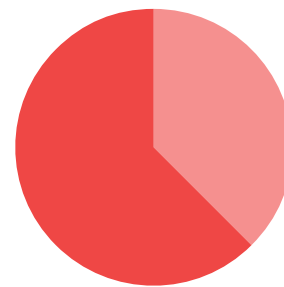
Autism is a developmental disorder that can affect how the person with the disorder interacts in social situations and their communication skills, and as autism is a spectrum condition this can affect people with autism differently with no two being the same. With the National Institute of Mental Health (2018) defining autism as a Developmental disorder that affects communication and behaviour. Although autism can be diagnosed at any age, it is said to be a “developmental disorder” because symptoms generally appear in the first two years of life. (National Institute of Mental Health, 2018)

This means that whilst someone may have issues with communication and processing questions in interviews, others on the spectrum may have sensory issues that could affect them during an interview such as being sensitive to loud noises and bright lights as well as feeling anxious or upset about unfamiliar situations. This means that for some people on the spectrum job interviews are seen as barriers between them and getting employment. As Christine Burns told me “often it is the communication issues that when put under pressure, they feel unable to cope in interviews.” To reduce the job interview barriers usually adjustments can be made for the interviews. If the person makes it known to the employer that they are autistic they can make adjustments to make them more comfortable. However, the National Autistic Society (2016, p16) reported that in their survey only 11% of people who told their employer about their autism were offered to make adjustments for their interviews.

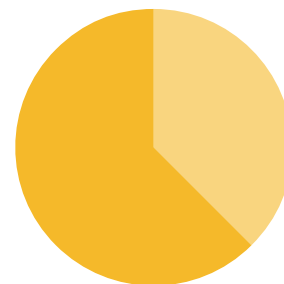


Only 11% of people on the autism spectrum were offered adjustments for job interviews.

There can also be barriers in the workplace with employers potentially, not being able to provide support for people with autism and this makes getting a job as an autistic person harder. According to the National Autistic Society report (2016, p.2) there are 60% of employers who worry about getting the support wrong for employees on the autistic spectrum. Also 60% of employers have also said that they did not know where to go for the support or advice needed about employing someone on the autistic spectrum. This is also supported by Christine Burns who said, “not many managers know of Access to work to help with reasonable adjustment in the workplace.” In Christine’s opinion she thinks that “employers need to have mandatory training and if managing staff must have certificate of competence that they can support disabled employees in the workplace.” Libby Duo from Conwy County Borough Council supports Christine Burn’s opinion by telling me that introducing “local employers ASD [Autism Spectrum Disorder] support specialists to upskill and help employers understand what support is available to them.” Keith Ingram, an Autism Spectrum Disorder project manager for both the Cardiff and The Vale of Glamorgan Council, told me that the whole employment process is more “geared towards non diagnosed applicants.” To make the recruitment process more flexible (Pratt, 2018) listed that some of the ways that this can be fix is by employers are making sure that they give a clear outline of the recruitment process by adding a deadline for applications and proposed dates for interviewing, sending potential candidates the interview plan, telling them how many people could be in the interview and what their role in the company. As well as giving them clear directions to the interview by providing information on public transport, pictures, and maps and encouraging a pre-visit. As some people with autism may have sensory issues making them more aware of what is going on around them and therefore, they may feel more overwhelmed in some environments that can be distracting for them. Some changes that (Pratt, 2018) suggested what employers can do to make better adjustments for autistic people by making sure there is no bright lights around, any background noises such as televisions or radios. Removing what you can to clear their thinking space which can be beneficial to them.



60% of employers worry about getting the support needed wrong.



60% of employers also don't know where to go for support.

“Not many managers know of access to work to help with reasonable adjustment in the workplace.”

Christne Burns

Christine Burns also argues with these adjustments by saying that adjusting light and providing “noise reducing headphones, IT inventories, working in a quiet space, spending time with [an] employee to know how they take on board information.” Some of these steps can make the workplace environment better and can help them be more productive with Christine Burns also stating that some “ASD employees can be more productive than their neurotypical peers.”

In the working environment there are still many barriers, I got in touch with Simon Humphreys who told me that “Work environments [are] usually set up for Neurotypical people (NT’s). Not set up for autistic mind set.” Some autistic people may be placed in these environments and could face potential issues such as their hypersensitivity to lighting and sounds could affect them by making them anxious. Another barrier could be changes to their routine at first when starting a new job this could be the reason why that 60% of employers worry about getting the support needed wrong as Keith Ingram, told me that

The fear is a fear of the unknown. They would give them the job, but they don’t know what that will mean, what they may have to change and crucially the person themselves may not be able to tell them.

Another barrier in the workplace is the employer not understanding how some autistic people may struggle processing and digesting information or instructions that can lead to miscommunications between the employer and employee. In the workplace employers can be more sensitive and slow down their approach to giving instructions and information in a clear way. As Keith Ingram told me that making “sure instructions, targets etc. are clear. Don’t come in, bark instructions, move the goalposts and then leave.”

“Work environments [are] usually set up for Neurotypical people (NT’s). Not set up for autistic mind set.”

Simon Humphreys

“Don’t come in, bark instructions, move the goalposts and then leave.”

Keith Ingram



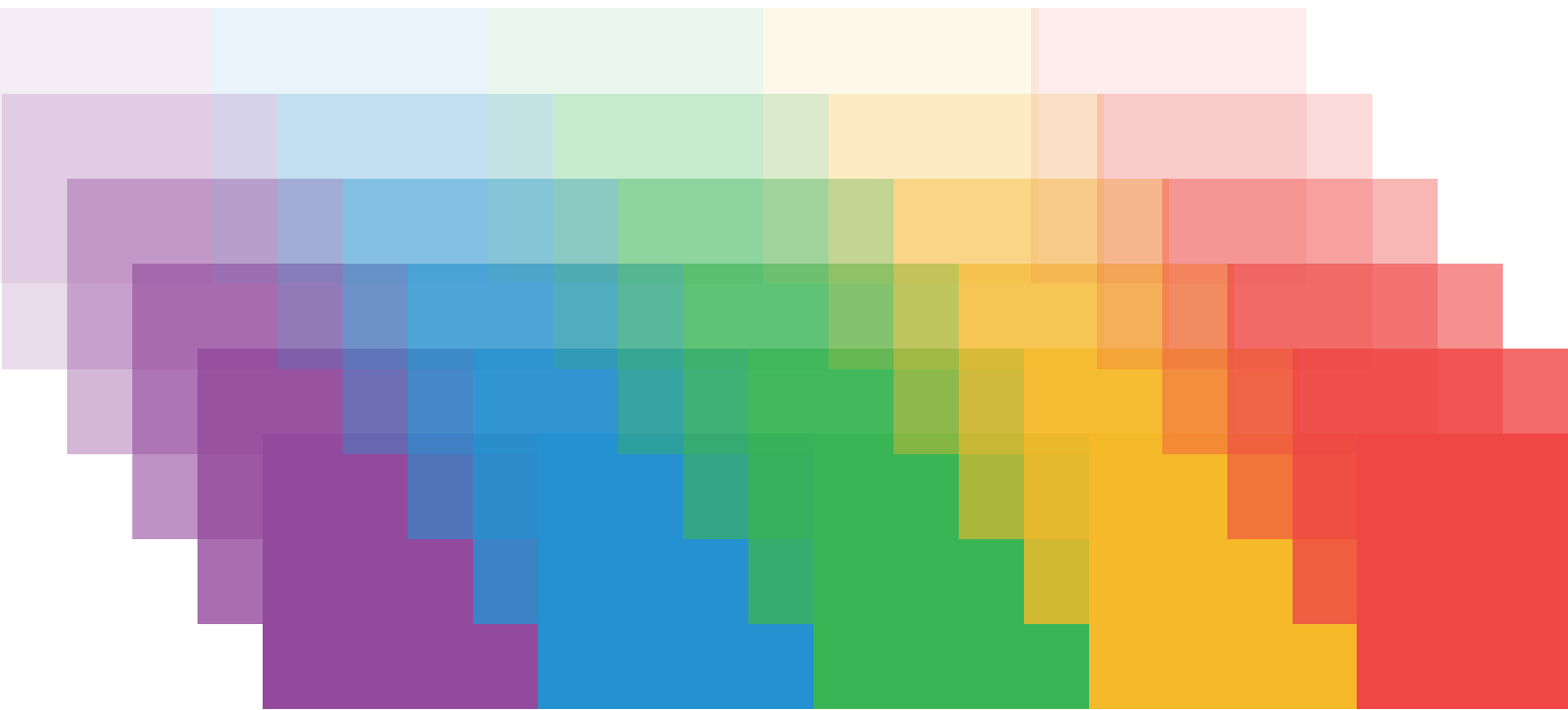


Interviews

As part of my primary research I have come up with 7 different questions to interview charities that have dedicated themselves to supporting people on the autism spectrum. The questions were all based on what I've learnt and have found out during my secondary research.

I emailed 3 different charities and asked if they would be able to answer any of my questions. The first charity that I emailed was The Autism Directory who did not reply. The second one was the National Autistic Society and they replied letting me know that they would not be able to answer any questions however they did provide me with a link about the autistic disorder. The third charity I got in touch with was ASDinfoWales, who were willing to contact all of their leads from different councils in Wales with my questions. I ended up getting four replies from Keith Ingram, who is the ASD project manager for both Cardiff and The Vale of Glamorgan Council, Christine Burns from the Flintshire County Council, Libby Duo, a Communities for work and work plus delivery manager at Conwy County Borough Council and Simon Humphreys.

The questions that I asked are:



1. Do you think there is enough being done from companies to make their workplaces autism friendly?

Keith Ingram:

Your question implies that your hypothesis is that one of the reasons for an “autism employment gap” is that workplaces are not autism friendly. I would struggle to clearly define what an autism-friendly workplace looked like. It is relatively straightforward to define that in terms of each individual case but more difficult to come up with a generic approach that is suitable for all cases.

For example, it is probably in your mind that autistic adults work best in a quiet environment, perhaps using a computer at a desk. We have recently completed materials around work-based learning. There are 2 case studies in the film, one is a bus garage, one a nursery, neither of which would normally be considered as “autism-friendly” <https://www.asdinfowales.co.uk/work-based-learning>

So if that is true for me as a specialist in the field then it is doubly true for companies. What they can and are required by law to do is make reasonable adjustments.

<https://www.gov.uk/reasonable-adjustments-for-disabled-workers>

Christne Burns:

No, due to my background as a TU [Trade Union] steward and Disability Rep I have to talk to employers as manager of the team to try and get them to understand their duty of care under the Equality Act. Despite amendments to the Equality Act to put a duty on employers to ensure their employees act under ethos of the same, a lot have no clue. Also, not many managers know of Access to work to help with reasonable adjustment in the workplace.

In my humble opinion employers need to have mandatory training and if managing staff must have certificate of competence that they can support disabled employees in the workplace.

Libby Duo:

No.

Simon Humphreys:

Companies with an interest in autism (usually where senior manager/key staff member has a child with autism) try and support/help.

Often lack of understanding which leads to fear/prejudice. In Wales diversity landscape is further complicated with issues and misunderstanding around Welsh Language. (This takes over and is the only goal)

2. What are some steps that companies can take to make workplace environments better or more appealing for people on the Autism spectrum disorder (ASD)?

Keith Ingram:

This has a number of steps. The first thing that can be done is to have a public image that encourages a diverse range of applicants. The company is welcoming to all staff whatever their disability or background. There is little point making the environment better if they don't apply in the first place or do apply but don't disclose. The recruitment and assessment process need to again be one that is inclusive and has the flexibility to adapt to the people applying. So, if the job is cutting grass, why do they need to be IT savvy to fill in an online application or be really great at interview, they are sitting on a mower going back and forth. Induction needs to be inclusive, processes clearly explained, ideally in writing so that poor processing speed doesn't get in the way. Make sure instructions, targets etc. are clear. Don't come in, bark instructions, move the goalposts and then leave. In short, an autistic employee needs a good manager who can adapt process and to some extent the workplace to their needs. Process is in many ways more important than workplace as a big Tesco for example may be able to change the way it instructs this particular staff member but can't change the store layout. There are many simple things that can be done it's about being inclusive and recognising that some staff members will work in a different way, maybe they don't attend team meetings, maybe they always get an email confirming the instruction and setting the priorities. Maybe they work a longer day but with more breaks. None of these are autism specific, they are just a sample of reasonable adjustments that could be made. There is funding available through Access to Work <https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work> that can even have the potential for a PA or support worker.

Christne Burns:

Adjust lighting, provide noise reducing headphones, IT inventories, working in a quiet space, spending time with employee to know how they take on board information – do they need recap/ written instructions – how is information best presented etc.

Libby Duo:

I think the huge majority of employers are unaware of the different needs of people on ASD.

Simon Humphreys:

Person centred (Need to know the person and their needs, making reasonable adjustments to the work environment) this allows success for the company and individual. This may include light, noise, chair, desk, routine, breaks, working from home, etc. Work environments usually set up for Neuro Typical people (NT's). Not set up for autistic mind set.

3. With a reported 16% of people on ASD being in full time employment what do you think can be done to raise this number?

Keith Ingram:

More inclusive employers taking advantage of the resources available for them and autistic adults applying for the jobs.

Christne Burns:

For employers to listen and reassure people with disabilities it is ok, and they will support them. ASD employees can be more productive than their neurotypical peers.

Libby Duo:

Introduce local employer ASD support specialists to upskill and help employers understand what support is available to them.

Simon Humphreys:

Look for win-win solutions, the clear and definite strengths of ASD people.
Don't do a standard NT interview, look at what's needed and work to test that.
Match the ASD person to the job. Use their strengths/special interests to really add value to the firm.

4. Do you think that misconceptions on autism is to blame for people on the ASD not being able to get jobs or even keep their jobs in some cases?

Keith Ingram:

Employers are in business to make money; they are not a charity with a social conscience. They will give someone with a disability a job because they can do the job and will contribute to the company. The fear is a fear of the unknown. They would give them the job, but they don't know what that will mean, what they may have to change and crucially the person themselves may not be able to tell them. Taking on a new person is a big investment in time and money, for the first few months they often cost more than they contribute. I think I've gone over quite a few of the things and retention is a big issue, possibly the biggest.

Christne Burns:

Sometimes but more often it is the communication issues that when put under pressure, they feel unable to cope at interviews. If they were given job trials etc – their worth might be observed rather than judging on the spoken word alone.

Libby Duo:

Definitely, some employers focus on ability to perform at the highest level.

Simon Humphreys:

Employers need empathy, understanding and knowledge.

Selecting the right person for the job is a tough ask.

This is not the same as ensuring the whole process is fair.

The challenge for the firm to get the best people for the role to drive the firm forward, not just evidencing the process was fair for all and people appointed.

5. What barriers of the employment process are stopping people on the ASD getting jobs?

Keith Ingram:

The whole process is geared towards non diagnosed applicants.

Christne Burns:

Anxiety and lack of self-worth, not being able to explain themselves.

Libby Duo:

Lack of confidence, too many knock backs, afraid of not fitting in.

Simon Humphreys:

Lack of understanding of how ASD works.

Not understanding what skills or outcomes they want.

Evidence that the greater the diversity the stronger the workforce.

6. Do you think the process of getting employment can be better for people on the ASD?

Keith Ingram:

“Absolutely, I spend a lot of my working life doing this.”

Christne Burns:

“Yes, with a little bit of imagination and the employer making simple adjustments, a lot more could be achieved.”

Libby Duo:

“Definitely, with specialist support.”

Simon Humphreys:

Yes. Great skill set from some ASD people.

Incredible concentration, lack of boredom, interest and drive around things they're interested in.

7. What do think can help people on the ASD get jobs?

Keith Ingram:

I think I've covered quite a few things.

Christne Burns:

Educate employers.
Adjustments to the interview process.
Innovation – ask them how they cope best with an interview.
Provide questions in advance.
Give reassurance that disability is not a barrier.

Libby Duo:

Education of employers. Employers could be offered a payment to take those on the ASD on. More use and knowledge of Permitted Work.

Simon Humphreys:

Needs to be a desire to get the right person.
Wide understanding of diversity and that different can be good.
Person centred solutions.
Creative and personal model of employment to same fits all.
Social model of diversity.

Conclusion

In summary of the report I found out that there are not many people in employment that are autistic and that there is a large majority of unemployed autistic people who are willing to find full time employment but face barriers caused by their condition for example not being confident in interviews and feeling anxious. As Keith Ingram said earlier that the employment process is “geared towards non diagnosed applicants.” Another point I found out and was surprised about to learn was that some employers do not know where they can get access to support and advice on helping people on the autism spectrum in the workplace.

To conclude this report through my research I have found these problem areas within the Autism Employment Gap that could be fixed or have more attention on these subject problems. These problems are:

A lack of knowledge on where employers can gain the support needed for their and or potential employees on the autism spectrum.

Employers misunderstanding what needs and adjustments some autistic people and worrying about getting the support needed for them completely wrong. Both of these problems can be tackled by proving and promoting more information and insight on where employers can educate themselves on how to support their employees and how to get the support.

A better public image that shows and encourages a diverse range of autistic adults in employment. And show that the employers are willing to offer and provide support with people with an autism spectrum disorder.

A lack of confidence and support going into or in interviews for autistic people.

Through all that I've learned from my investigation I've come up with these insight questions for my final project:

- 1) How can graphic communication be used to provide better knowledge for employers to get support for autistic workers?
- 2) How can graphic communication be used to help provide employers get support for certain needs of people on the autism spectrum right?
- 3) How can graphic communication help make people on the autism spectrum get through communication issues whilst under pressure from job interviews?
- 4) How can graphic communication be used to make the employment process better to help people on the autism spectrum?
- 5) How can graphic communication be used for people on the autism spectrum to digest information done quickly or better at work?
- 6) How can graphic communication be used to better disclose job information and requirements better when hiring people in particular with these with autism?
- 7) How can graphic communication be used to reassure people on the autism spectrum that employers don't see their disorder as a barrier?
- 8) How can graphic communication be used to reassure employers that being diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder isn't a barrier to be employed?

As both the first and second questions are similar, they can both be merged in to one question:

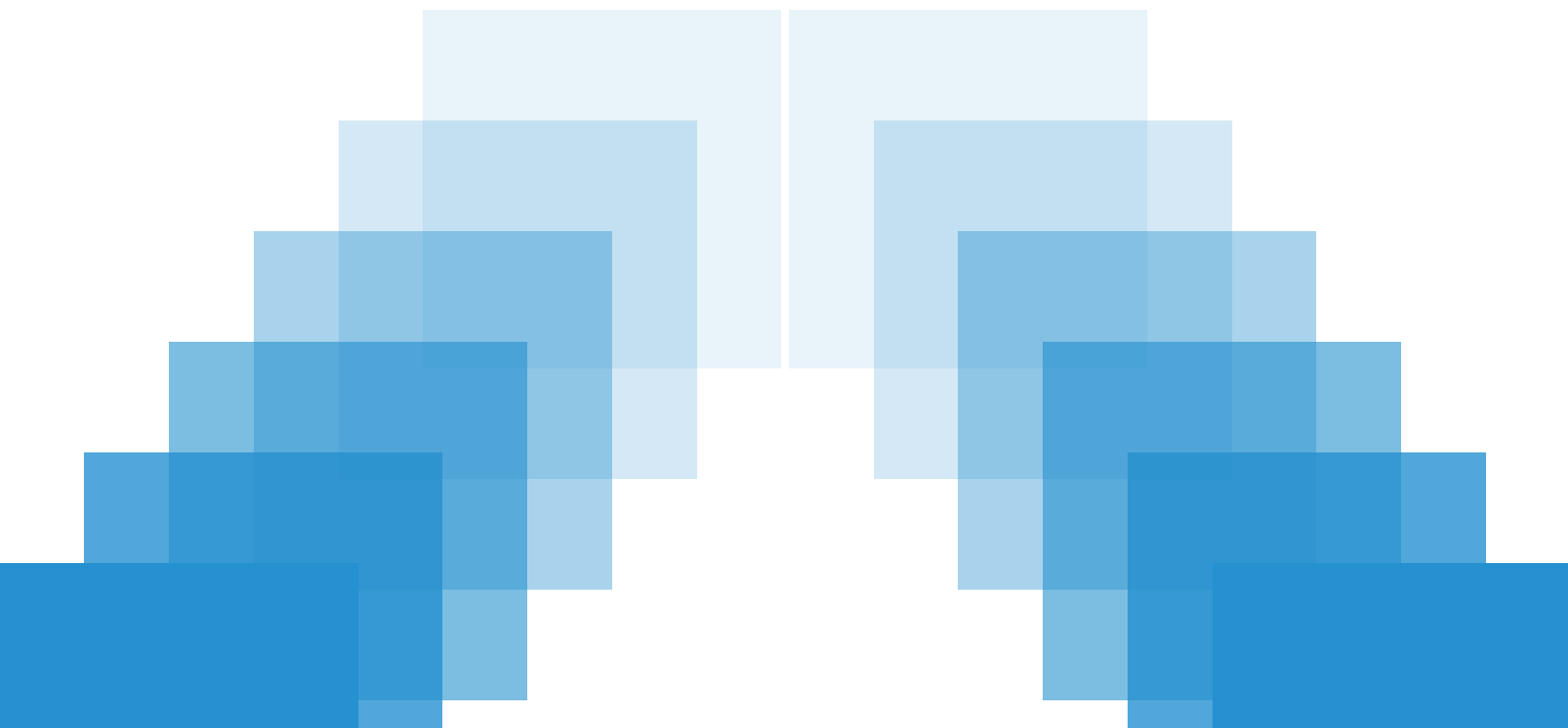
How can graphic communication be used to provide employers with a better knowledge to support people on the autism spectrum under their employment?

As the seventh and eighth questions are also similar, they can also be merged in to one question:

How can graphic communication be used to reinsure both employers and autistic people that being diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder isn't or shouldn't be a barrier for getting employed?

Originally for this investigation my initial question for this was How can graphic communication be used to help fix the Autism Employment Gap? But through this report my question became much narrower whilst still on the topic of the autism employment gap. My new question for the second part of the insights report is. How can graphic communication be used to provide employers with a better knowledge to support people on the autism spectrum under their employment?

How can graphic communication be used to provide employers with a better knowledge to support people on the autism spectrum under their employment?



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