Autism and Transitions

Transitioning from University to Meaningful Work

Autism Network Scotland

University of Strathclyde Glasgow

Using This Resource Guide

This resource guide is designed to provide information on autism and the transition from university to employment. It covers a range of background theory of autism, and applies it to everyday experiences. Autistic people face a number of challenges when seeking and maintaining meaningful employment. Increasing the employment rate of autistic adults will benefit the individuals quality of life and well being, but will also have broad economic benefits (Hedley, et al. 2017).

Through exploring the positive and negative factors that autistic people experience during the employment process, we can increase our knowledge and understanding of how to improve these experiences. This has the potential to positively impact practice, and therefore improve autistic adults' life outcomes.

Information about links, resources, and references, are detailed throughout this document, and can be found at the back of the resource guide. Information about local resources can be found from Autism Network Scotland.

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Autism Network Scotland

Autism Network Scotland is based at Strathclyde University and works in partnership with a range of stakeholders including autistic people, parents, carers, and a range of autism service providers including national organisations and local authorities to provide a hub of impartial information and knowledge exchange in Scotland.

University of Strathclyde Careers Service

The University of Strathclyde Careers Service provides friendly, impartial and confidential support and draws upon professional expertise to enable students and graduates to develop the personal skills and confidence required to make appropriate career decisions throughout their lives. We work closely with each Faculty, to complement the learning and development provided by academic colleagues, and are accredited to the Matrix Standard, the quality framework, for information, advice and guidance services.

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1. Autism Awareness

For autistic people, this can present as a spectrum of varying abilities and difficulties, which require varying forms of support throughout their lifetime.

Autism will affect each persons' life differently. However, differences in:

- communication
- perceptions of social interactions
- repetitive or "rigid" thinking styles and behaviours
- differences in sensory processing

are all associated with autism. The "Supporting People With Autism: A Guide for Employment Practitioners" via Skills Development Scotland provides a comprehensive and informative overview of how these differences in processing and interpretation can affect a person's experiences during the whole employment process.

Autism Terminology

There is not one single way of describing autism that is universally accepted. Kenny et. al, (2015) conducted an online survey involving 3470 members of the autistic community, to explore their preferences on how to describe autism. The most preferred terminology used to describe themselves was condition first, such as "**autistic person**", as opposed to "person with autism".

The language that we use has the power to influence and shape how people view autism, and we should therefore be considerate of the terminology we choose to use. We should listen to the autism community and we should respect autistic people's personal preferences on how they choose describe themselves. If in doubt, just ask the person!

1. Autism Awareness

Autism and Transitions

Transitions can be a challenging time for everyone, but for autistic people there are often further difficulties that they experience. Autistic people can often experience a need or desire for routine and structure in their day to day lives. This way of thinking can be an excellent asset for certain jobs, however it also means that even little changes in life can be a source of great stress. It is therefore important that transitions for autistic people are meaningful, planned, and carried out with consistency.

It has been theorised that people with autism experience differences in their executive functioning. This is the ability to plan and organise future events or tasks. It is important to have an understanding of this when working with autistic students, as they may benefit from extra support in this area of forward planning. The ability to recognise a need (for example support with finding employment) and link up how to deal with this need (booking an appointment with a careers advisor) can be a challenge for some autistic people.

Not knowing what life after university may involve, and losing the structured routine that comes with it can be overwhelming; knowing where to start with planning the next stage of a person's life can be extremely stressful.

It is important to recognise that the transition from university to meaningful employment is not one transition, but rather a series of many little day to day transitions, all of which can be challenging. Contacting the careers service, or visiting the office for the first time, can come with it's own complexities. It is therefore important to try and break down the bigger picture, and think about the little transitions that the student experiences to get to the end goal of employment.

2. Pre-meeting planning

Prior to a student's initial meeting, it would be beneficial to establish if the student requires:

- Additional aids or their preferred means of communication (written, verbal, mind mapping - e.g. MindGenius, written timetables or schedules).

- Additional time when conversing (e.g. if a person doesn't immediately respond to a question, allow for extra processing time. Repeating a question can interrupt their thought process).

- Sensory sensitivities or environmental preferences.

- Keep questions direct, as opposed to open ended ones. (e.g. "are you available 10am on Monday?" rather than "when are you free?)

- Would the student benefit from a quiet transition area prior to a meeting?

- Does the student have a Student Mentor? The Student Mentor can be knowledgeable about the person's previous experiences throughout university, things they have struggled with or succeeded in in the past, and have insight into what support the person may benefit from during this transition. It may be beneficial for them to be present for the initial meeting if the student wishes.

If the student has been referred from the university's disability or wellbeing support services, the staff they have worked with will be able to help with some of this information. Communication between all of a student's support services is a key aspect of getting transitions right.

If the student has not been referred through the disability services, it may still be beneficial to ask some of the general questions about communication and environmental preference as a means of good practice.

It is likely that you will encounter students who may not necessarily disclose that they are autistic, but who would still benefit from adapted support.

If you are ever in doubt of something regarding the student, just ask them!

3. Disclosure

Perspectives on Personal Disclosure

A person's decision whether or not to disclose that they are autistic is a personal one, and can be affected by their previous experiences in life. While disclosure of a diagnosis to staff or potential employers is beneficial in the sense the support and adjustments can be offered, the person may have had negative experiences after disclosing in the past.

Disclosing to a Potential Employer

"I don't want to be perceived as what I feel is a stereotype, I think people think autistic people are rude and mentally slow, I do not want to be perceived as a stereotype. And if somebody thinks I'm too introverted, I'd much rather have that as a sort of label."

"Yeah, I don't really wish to disclose my autism in my work, I don't really feel like I need to be honest.. Unless something comes up in which I really need to, I'd rather not. I don't want people treating me any differently."

"I do have a habit of disclosing my autism immediately, when it comes to these things I tend to be like "This is me". It's one of those things when people have questions, I am very open about all parts of my life."

(Johnson & Joshi, 2015)

Positives

- Employers are legally obligated to accommodate reasonable adjustments (Equality Act, 2010)
- Raising awareness and understanding in the employer
- Adaptions are made so the individual has the opportunity to fulfil their potential

Negatives

- Understanding from employers/interviewers, or reasonable adjustments may not be as expected
- Adverse experiences such as prejudice or discrimination

3. Disclosure

When to Disclose to an Employer

This stage would happen during the application process, prior to interview stages.

If the student you are supporting does decide to disclose their autism to a potential employer, making the employer aware of the specific difficulties the student may encounter during the interview process, and why they may find these aspects difficult, is important. This will help the employer's understanding of the student, and ideally of autism too. Which should ultimately benefit the student.

It is also important to highlight the positive aspects that are associated with autism too. As mentioned earlier, the need for routine is often associated with autism. For example this can mean that the person is good at sticking to a schedule, and is punctual, both of which are very desirable qualities in a potential employee.

"**Network Autism -** Short video with top 5 tips on disclosing an autism diagnosis to employers" includes a template for disclosing a disability to employers.

The "Supporting People With Autism: A Guide for Employment Practitioners" via Skills Development Scotland includes sections on adapted interview techniques for employers, and interview techniques for autistic people. This includes examples of adjustments that can be made to interviews to make the process more autism inclusive (e.g. closed questions as opposed to open ended one).

4. Interview Experiences

Happe and Frith (2006) proposed the theory that autistic people can experience differences in the way they cognitively process information, compared to a person without autism, known as differences in central coherence. They hypothesised that autistic people can show a bias for small details, as apposed to processing the whole and seeing the big picture. This is one of the many benefits that an autistic employee can bring to a role, as they can offer a different perspective on work tasks. However it can also result in communication barriers between the autistic person and the interviewer, due to a miscommunication of non-verbal cues and not reading between the lines of what the speaker is saying (Nuske & Bavin, 2011). Damion Milton describes this as a double empathy problem (2012), when two people in an interaction have difficulty empathising with each other. It is not just the autistic person who can misunderstand social cues and situations. The neurotypical person can also make assumptions on things such as body language, tone of voice, or reading between the lines for a "hidden intentions" that aren't there, and jump to the wrong conclusions.

However in this situation it can result in barriers that autistic individuals experience in their search for employment. For example, when identifying what personal skills are required in job advertisements, or understanding the intent of questions in a job interview.

Practice Example 1 discusses how the general interview process can be a difficult experience for autistic adults. Mock interviews and practicing general interview questions can be beneficial. The person's stye of thinking will not change, but it is this different way of thinking that will be an asset for the right job. Practice Example 2 details how adjustments made by the prospective employer or interviewer can help reduce these barriers that autistic adults can experience during the interview process.

Practice Example 1

"One of the students who I have worked with has experienced difficulties in interviews, in particular when interpretation is required for a question. For example, when asked "why did you chose to apply for this position" they replied "my Dad told me to". When we have practiced mock interviews, interpreting the questions has been difficult. The student would sometimes have difficulty interpreting a question, and would go into a lot of detail about a specific part of it."

Practice Example 2

"A graduate I have been working with for some time finally encountered a very supportive interviewer. During the interview, they observed that the graduate was clearly finding the process stressful, so suggested that they pause the interview, and demonstrated some relaxation techniques which they both tried. The interview was positive and the graduate was offered a paid work trial which, when I last saw them, had been extended."

5. When things don't go to plan

If the student has been referred to the careers service by the disability support team, being aware of the student's support needs throughout university will help make the transition consistent. This knowledge can be adapted to this new phase of the person's life, and ideally, transition with them into meaningful employment.

However, it is understandable that this will not always be the case.

The transition from university to meaningful employment for autistic adults can be complex, and will not necessarily result in the right job the first time round. This doesn't mean the transition is not successful. Finding the right job, and the interview process, can be a bit of trial and error. This is to be expected!

The experiences will be different for each student. Being understanding and informed of how the student's autism affects this experience is key to supporting them through this transition.

References & Resources

References

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Resources

Access to Work - Government website that provides information about reasonable adjustments that can be made, and potential funding if the adjustments incur extra cost for the employer
https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work

Autism and Education Trust – information about the transitions toolkit and person centred planning tools can be found at
http://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/resources.aspx

Autism and Employment Website – this is a forum for sharing information and good practice in relation to autism in the workplace as well as highlighting common challenges and promoting the benefits that autistic people can bring to the workplace. Information can be found at
http://employment.autismnetworkscotland.org.uk/

Autism Initiatives – information about autism as well as services and support can be found at
http://www.autisminitiatives.org/where-we-are/scotland/

Autism Network Scotland - information about local and national resources, local One Stop Shops, autism training resources, the Menu of Interventions and The National Autism Coordination Project can be found at
http://www.autismnetworkscotland.org.uk/

Exploring Transitions: Digging Deeper – the report for this consultation can be found at p16
http://www.autismnetworkscotland.org.uk/ les/2015/10/Digging-Deeper-Report.pdf

MindGenius - Mind mapping software, as recommended by strathclyde university's disability services. May be useful to visualise the breakdown of large tasks or transitions.
https://www.mindgenius.com/

National Autistic Society – information about a wide range of autism related topics, including transitions and social stories as well as the Autism Helpline and Transition Support Service can be found at
http://www.autism.org.uk/

Network Autism - Short video with top 5 tips on disclosing an autism diagnosis to employers
http://network.autism.org.uk/knowledge/insight-opinion/top-5-autism-tips-employment-disclosing-autism-diagnosis-employers

Network Autism - Short video with top 5 tips on employment and reasonable adjustments
http://network.autism.org.uk/knowledge/insight-opinion/top-autism-tips-employment-reasonable-adjustments

Scottish Strategy for Autism - information about the national strategy and local strategies as well as information about Working Group 2 can be found at
http://www.autismstrategyscotland.org.uk/

The Scottish Transitions Forum – information about the Principles of Good Transitions 3 and the work of the Scottish Transitions Forum can be found at
http://scottshtransitions.org.uk/

Scottish Autism – information about a wide range of autism related topics, including services and support as well as the Autism Advice Line can be found at
http:/www.scottshautism.org/

Scottish Autism Share Magazine - Winter 2017 issue exploring autism and sensory processing differences
http://www.scottishautism.org/about-autism/research-and-training/centre-practice-innovation/share-magazine

Skills Development Scotland - Supporting people with autism: A guide for employment practitioners
http://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/media/35514/sds%20nas%20employment%20practitioner%20handbook%202011.pdf