



Enhancing the employment prospects of young people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): A Pilot Study

Konnovs, H. and Vine, T.
University of Suffolk, Ipswich, UK.

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Abstract

According to the National Autistic Society (2016b), only 16% of autistic adults are in full-time employment and only 32% are in any type of paid work. These statistics fall significantly below the overall rate for the UK of 74.6% (Office for National Statistics, 2017). Notably, they are also lower than the rate of employment for all people registered with disabilities, reported at 47% (the National Autistic Society, 2016b). This paper reports on the ways in which young autistic people are prepared for the working environment, and explores the effectiveness of these preparations. Unlike much of the existing research in this field, the data generated for this paper involved communicating directly with young autistic people. Invariably, this necessitated a qualitative-interpretative methodology. However, unusually for such an approach, we ultimately collected data via online survey rather than via interview, focus group or other methods more usually associated with qualitative research. An online survey was considered most appropriate given the communication challenges autistic people typically face. Our findings suggest that there is a lack of formal, standardised preparations for autistic people. Currently, it would seem, the majority of support comes from families. Some participants did report that they received formal preparatory guidance for employment, but of those that did, most described it as unhelpful or very unhelpful. The data presented are valuable to not only to academics working in the fields of work and organisation studies, but to scholars associated with the allied health professions. It is also hoped that the data will prove useful to employers, charities and other organisations who actively engage with young people with ASD. Finally, the findings will clearly be of interest to autistic people themselves. The paper concludes by delineating recommendations for future research.

Introduction

Recent years have seen an increase both in public awareness of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and in the volume of clinical research in this field. In one sense, ASD attracts interest precisely because the manifestation of symptoms varies considerably between individuals both in terms of range and severity. The impact of the symptoms on those affected in respect of daily life varies too. Inevitably, this means the study of individuals affected by ASD is complex.

Research by the National Autistic Society (2016b) revealed that only 16% of autistic adults are in full-time employment. This is well below the wider UK population which stands at 74.6% (Office for National Statistics, 2017). Notably, it is also significantly lower than the rate of employment for all people registered with disabilities, reported at 47% (the National Autistic Society, 2016b). This discrepancy evidently warrants scholarly attention. This research is therefore guided by the following two research questions: (1) Why are so

many autistic adults are out of work? (2) What can be done to assist job-seeking autistic adults who have the physical and mental capability to work? This research is pertinent given that it is well reported that unemployment can have considerable negative effects on an individual's life. Data published by Belle and Bullock (2011), for example, found that the unemployed are more likely to experience problems with their physical and mental health, be less content in their relationships with their partner and/or children, be less satisfied with their lives overall, and have increased rates of mortality.

Autism Spectrum Disorder

According to the Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey, 0.8% of the population in England have an Autism Spectrum Disorder and it is less prevalent among women than men (National Health Service, 2016). The phrase 'Autism Spectrum Disorder' (ASD) is an umbrella term for many different conditions including autism, Asperger's and pervasive developmental disorder (Mental Health Foundation, 2017). Despite their differences, many of the terms describing conditions on the spectrum are used interchangeably (the National Autistic Society, 2016c).

However, conditions on the autism spectrum do have similarities. These include difficulty expressing emotions (Sigman et al., 2004), susceptibility to sensory abnormalities or overload (O'Neill et al. 1997), a desire for routine (Lam & Aman, 2007), and intense interest or knowledge of specific topics (Treffert, 2009). Many people with autism often have other conditions too. Autistic people are often also separately diagnosed with conditions such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyspraxia, hyperlexia, epilepsy and learning difficulties (the National Autistic Society, 2017a). Anxiety is also common in autistic adults and it can cause 'real difficulty... psychologically and physically' (the National Autistic Society, 2017b). These additional diagnoses often create further confusion when seeking to understand Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Of course, not all work is suitable for all people with autism, especially those who struggle to communicate verbally. However, it is clear that many autistic adults currently out of work would like to work and previous research has suggested that half of these are actively seeking support to help them with job-seeking

matters (Bancroft et al., 2012, p32). Furthermore, it should be stressed that there are likely many different roles available to suit the specific competences and preferences of autistic adults, such as those not requiring verbal communication, or those that do not involve working within a large team.

A review of the literature

We begin by exploring how neurotypical young people are prepared for employment in the United Kingdom. We then consider whether or not these methods should be adapted to preparing young people on the spectrum, before exploring the extant research in this specific field.

Preparing neurotypical young people for employment

The preparation for employment for neurotypical young people has its roots in cultural assimilation. This typically begins in childhood when a child undertakes domestic chores, for example, often in exchange for pocket money. Some parents choose to do this to teach their children the value of money or to create a work ethic (Klein, Graesch and Izquierdo, 2009). Once a child reaches secondary school age, the prospects of paid work are more formally enmeshed in the organization of learning. Subject areas are clearly delineated and the relationship between them and prospective careers are fleshed out. Additionally, adolescents are often required to sit psychometric tests which purportedly match the student with viable career paths. Most schools have a careers advice department too, further formalising expectations. Finally, secondary school age students are often required to gain work experience as part of the school curriculum. More recently, and perhaps in part to meet Neoliberal shifts in expectation, some schools now offer vocational courses alongside or in place of traditional academic subjects. As part of their traditional remit, secondary schools also endeavour to prepare young people for employment by priming their students for specific paths into both further and higher education. Apprenticeships are also encouraged to combine more tangible experience of the working world alongside a recognised qualification (Mirza-Davies, 2016).

Formal preparations continue at university. While studying for their degree, students are often encouraged to engage CV-enhancing activities such as

volunteer work, internships and part-time employment, all of which are considered precursors to the world of work. Finally, career-focused workshops and networking events form a part of most university timetables. Each of these initiatives enculturates students to the world of professional work.

For those neurotypical young people who do not go on to further or higher education, other avenues of support are available. In the UK, for example, the Job Centre has offices nationwide to assist in the job-seeking process. They encourage their clients to enrol on training courses, arrange work trials, volunteer work, and more generally mediate between their clients and local businesses and recruitment agencies. Their focus is very much on NEETs ('young people Not in Education, Employment or Training') (Office for National Statistics, 2016). Beyond the Job Centre, young people are also prepared for employment through charities such as the Prince's Trust. The Trust supports young people by providing short-term work experience and on-the-job training.

Evidently, there are many ways in which neurotypical young people are prepared for employment. But how are young people with Autism Spectrum Disorder prepared? Are the methods of preparation for the neurotypical population appropriate for autistic adults too?

Preparing young people with ASD for employment

Scholarly attention to ASD is apparently increasing. By way of illustration, a keyword search for 'autism' in journals published by Sage in 2016 yielded more than double the number published in 2007. However, despite this increase, research focussed on the effectiveness of preparations for young people with autism entering employment remains virtually non-existent. Of the research that has been undertaken (e.g. Howlin et al, 2004; Lorenz and Heinitz, 2014) very little focuses on young people specifically. Whilst some studies have focused on young people specifically, those studies tend to have a very small sample size. The study by Nuernberger et al. (2013), for example, reported on data from just three participants.

Other relevant studies (Spain and Blainey, 2015; Shattuck et al., 2012; Strickland, Coles and Southern, 2013; and Nuernberger et al., 2013) were premised on

wide-angle metrics such as level of education and employment rate. Although undoubtedly useful, this sort of research does not impart detail as regards the job-seeking experience of young people with ASD. Indeed, the vast majority of existing research in this field is principally quantitative in orientation. Baldwin, Costley and Warren (2014), for example, surveyed autistic adults in Australia on their experiences of employment but asked mainly closed questions, each of which invited only yes or no answers. Participants were thus unable to provide further detail, context or explanation for their responses. However, this research did reveal that over 50% of those surveyed were on permanent contracts. This figure is in stark contrast to the National Autistic Society's figure claiming that only 16% of autistic adults in the UK are in full-time work (2016b). To the extent that the data are reliable, research in the UK might usefully reflect on what it is that is done differently in Australia, assuming that differences are discernible.

Of the qualitative studies to date, most focus on the experience of work itself (rather than the experience of finding work in the first place). Baldwin et al.'s study, for example, explored negative experiences at work. These findings revealed that nearly half of all participants found working relationships difficult, and around one-third found problems specific to Autism Spectrum Disorder (such as sensory overload) made working a particularly challenging experience. These findings recommended the implementation of social skills interventions that aim to help people with autism gain employment. They also endorsed the video campaign by the National Autistic Society (2016a) that demonstrates how managing sensory overload and maintaining social etiquette in professional situations can be challenging for a person with ASD. Similarly, Beardon and Edmonds (2008) enabled contributors to describe in the first person their experiences as individuals with ASD in the working world. This book not only speaks directly to people with autism, but lets them express their opinions freely and honestly, without the use of any structured questions. Beardon and Edmonds' research contributes a great deal of knowledge to understanding what autistic adults' needs are when working, what tasks and situations they find difficult, and what qualities they bring to the workplace. However, though insightful in so many ways, Beardon and Edmonds work focuses on experiences once in work; our focus is on employment preparations.

More recently, Lange (2015) did focus on employment preparations. However, Lange chose to

interview adult support workers, including teachers, parents and paraprofessionals to better understand what they were doing to help the autistic people they supported to transition into employment. But one obvious limitation of Lange's work is that it doesn't provide a voice for autistic individuals themselves; and it is this limitation that our specific research has been designed to address.

Methodology

Given (1) the limited resources at our disposal, (2) our relative inexperience working in the field of health, and (3) the fact that we were engaging with sensitive subjects (especially in terms of autistic people's reported susceptibility to sensory overload and desire for routine), we decided to configure this piece of research as a pilot study. Our pilot study aimed to 'speak directly' to autistic young people. By reflecting on the reported experiences of autistic people rather than on experiences mediated by medical professionals, parents, teachers and other stakeholders, it was hoped that the findings would provide a voice for young people with autism. Ultimately, our research aimed not only to address the unemployment gap for this demographic, but to actively help realise the economic potential of a relatively large group of people, many of whom have noteworthy talents.

Ethics – as noted in the review of the literature, it is well reported that autistic people often struggle in social situations and find communicating challenging. This is probably at least part of the reason that most extant research has avoided direct communication with autistic subjects. However, we were determined to buck the trend and so our methods had to be developed with due sensitivity and robust ethics. The use of one-to-one interviews can be extremely valuable in generating qualitative data, but given the social framing of a typical interview (even when conducted remotely), they may not be especially effective in the case of autistic subjects. In any event, and as Doherty-Sneddon et al. (2012) have noted, sitting with a stranger in a one-to-one setting may not be as easy for autistic individuals as it would be for neurotypical individuals. Ultimately, it is worth stressing in advance that one of our findings (a finding others have reported too – e.g. Smith, 2012) was that participants resented the need for job interviews for similar reasons; retrospectively, this served to vindicate what was a difficult decision not to conduct our research via interview. Ultimately, therefore, we decided to gather

data via carefully-scripted online survey. Less invasive, surveys enable participants to answer questions at a time of their choosing, ostensibly in a more familiar environment. This is especially important for autistic people who are often averse to change and are more content with a familiar routine, in a familiar environment.

Access, distribution and data analysis – Since both researchers have a familial stake in the autistic community (Hannah has a brother with ASD; Tom has a sister-in-law with ASD), access was perhaps more straightforward than it would have been otherwise. Ultimately, the questionnaire was shared amongst the autistic community via social media. In the case of all participants, each engaged with the research via a mutual contact. This engagement was entirely voluntary. The survey was distributed online via Survey Hero. In addition to screening respondents in terms of eligibility and capturing key demographics, the survey incorporated both multiple choice questions and unstructured open questions. Following Beardon and Edmonds (2008), the survey placed an emphasis on these open questions so as to generate as much qualitative data as possible. In total, there were seventeen questions contained within the questionnaire. The questionnaire was structured in a way that participants were free to avoid any questions they felt uncomfortable answering. Once collected, the data were manually coded. With a code frame in place, we conducted four rounds of data analysis before we were satisfied that no further emergent themes were identifiable.

Participant profiling - While we recognise that it is important for readers to get a good feel for our research demographic, invariably we have a duty to ensure any information we do impart in respect of participants does not risk compromising their anonymity. Given the sensitivity of the subject matter, we are perhaps more conservative than we would be otherwise in terms of profiling our participants. We therefore decided to divulge restricted detail, as follows: Of the fifteen participants, ages ranged from sixteen to twenty-five. Two-thirds (66.7%) live in England, one-fifth (20%) live in Scotland, and 13.3% live in Wales. Of the fifteen, thirteen (86.7%) had been in some form of employment at some time in their life and two out of fifteen (13.3%) had never been employed.

Findings and discussion

The online questionnaire was completed by fifteen participants. Given our efforts at the research design stage, in one sense this rate of response is disappointing. Certainly, this could be viewed as a small sample size, but it is worth stressing that sample sizes of the extant research varied greatly and – ultimately – this was intended as a pilot study. Whilst Nuernberger et al.'s (2013) social skills programme was comprised of just three participants, Lorenz and Heinitz's (2014) work involved 306 participants. While we certainly recognise the limitations of a small sample size, our review of the literature concluded that research undertaken by Beardon and Edmonds (2008) and Lange (2015) was probably the most insightful (given its qualitative orientation and, hence, closeness to its subject matter), yet their work involved only fifteen and sixteen participants respectively. It is also worth stressing that although participation was gently encouraged, given the sensitive nature of the research it was imperative that potential participants did not feel pressured in any way. Finally, the response rate may also suggest a reticence on the part of autistic individuals to engage in research. This requires greater exploration. For example, is it possible that conventional academic research which is, of course, modelled on neurotypical assumptions by neurotypical researchers will inevitably struggle to engage people with ASD?

Work type

Of the thirteen who had been in some type of employment, eleven (84.6%) had experience of paid work and six (46.2%) had experience of unpaid work. The number of individuals who had participated in unpaid work is slightly higher than the participation rate in the United Kingdom of 41% (Institute for Volunteering Research, 2016). There was a sense that unpaid work was a step on the ladder; one respondent went so far to recommend that other autistic people gain experience through volunteer, noting that work “employers look for lots of experience”.

Eleven (84.6%) participants had experience of full-time work and seven (53.8%) had experience of part-time work. Five (38.5%) participants had been on casual contracts (often referred to as ‘zero hour contracts’) and one (7.7%) had been given a flexible working contract.

Eight (61.5%) respondents had gained permanent positions, whilst nine (69.2%) had temporary contracts. The percentage of participants who had worked fulltime at some point in their life (84.6%) is significantly higher than the National Autistic Society's statistic of 16% (2016b). This may suggest that there is a gap between the people who have been in full-time employment at some point in their lives, and the people who have remained in it. It suggests the need for more research to discover what autistic people find difficult about full-time employment in particular, and what has helped the 16% to remain in this type of work.

Eleven (84.6%) of the participants who had been employed in some way, had gained work directly through an employer, whilst three (23.1%) individuals had done so via a charity, and seven (53.8%) had gained work via an agency. The questionnaire found that whilst many of the individuals had gained employment directly through an employer, over half had used a recruitment agency. With less than a quarter using a charity's service to get a job, recruitment agencies appeared to be the preferred method of securing employment. This may simply be that agencies invest more in their profiles. However, it may also be that autistic adults do not want employers to know about their autism – which association with a specific charity may well reveal - or do not want to be treated differently because of it (the latter is something that was specifically stressed by one respondent). Certainly, if there is a preference for autistic adults to use an agency to find work, as opposed to a charity, this warrants further investigation.

Difficulties applying for jobs

Ten out of fifteen participants (66.7%) had found it difficult to find jobs in the past, whilst only four (26.7%) respondents did not. The remaining one participant (6.6%) did not answer this question. When participants were asked what aspects of finding and applying for jobs they found difficult, three major obstacles were identified:

First, confidence issues. Participants reflected on their lack of confidence in respect of applying for jobs, and even to attend Job Centre appointments. These weaknesses could possibly be improved using social skills interventions such as those described by Walker (2015), Nuernberger et al. (2013), Blainey and Spain

(2015) and Wehman et al (2016). These interventions all report some degree of success in helping autistic adults in social situations generally, so could therefore improve their confidence in the social situations that are necessary for employment; such as attending interviews.

Second, interview-related issues. The specific challenges reported here included: difficulty imagining situations for hypothetical questions; not being able to process information quickly enough for the interviewer; interpreting questions incorrectly; and generally finding interviews extremely challenging.

Third, perceived lack of skills to successfully complete the application. Participants often felt that they lacked the requisite skills, even to complete the application. For example, six participants (40%) found writing a CV or filling out an application form difficult (including concerns about handwriting, grammar and syntax). Additionally, two participants (13.3%) felt they lacked the ability to effectively articulate how their own skills and experience could be matched to the skills and experience conveyed on a job description. Whilst these problems could be linked to the confidence issues cited, it is worth reiterating the point that many autistic adults have also been diagnosed with conditions such as dyslexia which affects literacy skills, and ADHD which is associated with inattentiveness (the National Autistic Society, 2017a). These additional conditions could further complicate what is already a challenging process.

Participants were then asked what could make the application process easier. Suggestions included eliminating the need for CVs, personal statements and psychometric tests. Interestingly, British company Timpson have adopted this approach. The owner of the Timpson Group, John Timpson, admits ‘we’re not bothered by qualifications or CVs. We just look at the candidate and work out who they are...’ (2017). Perhaps unsurprisingly a number of suggestions centred on a desire for more routine and less variability in respect of the application process. Suggestions here included “streamlining the application forms themselves so that they take less time to complete” and putting “the entire application process online”. One participant went so far to suggest that there should be “one single, universal, online database for job applications.”

Of the interview process itself, one participant suggested that young people with ASD should be offered a script of interview questions prior to the appointment. This, it was further suggested, would help individuals prepare better and ensure they are less likely to experience significant discomfort associated with being “put on the spot”, an experience which often renders the young person with ASD unable to answer the question. Indeed, in their recent video campaign, the National Autistic Society (2017c) suggest that autistic people need ‘more time to process information’. With this in mind, the supply of interview scripts in advance would autistic individuals to organise their responses more effectively and so compete for a job on equal terms with their neurotypical counterparts.

Another participant suggested that interviews should be conducted via an online platform such as Skype. As previously commented, many people with autism feel more comfortable following a set routine in a familiar environment. Thus, participating in an interview whilst in a familiar, comfortable environment may help autistic individuals compete more effectively for employment.

General support

Of the thirteen participants who responded to the question ‘who has given you support to prepare for employment?’, seven participants (53.8%) said that family helped them, four (30.8%) stated a charity, three (23.1%) stated university, one (7.7%) said the Job Centre, one (7.7%) said school or college, two (15.4%) said ‘other’ and four (30.8%) said that no one supported them.

It is not surprising that many of the individuals had been supported by their family, as this is usual for neurotypical individuals as well. However, in light of the recent campaigns by charities such as Ambitious About Autism and The National Autistic Society, it is somewhat surprising that only one in three people said a charity supported them. Only one third stated that their education provider had helped prepare them, and it is undoubtedly cause for concern that around a third of respondents stated that no one had helped prepare them for employment. This may be a result of late diagnosis, but these statistics suggest that more needs to be done to ensure that all those with autism are offered support.

Of the support they had received, this included basic guidance in respect of writing a CV or cover letter; completing relevant sections of an application form; and improving their interview skills. Some respondents also indicated that they had received additional support including the provision of live work experience, meetings with careers advisors, advice for using job vacancy websites, as well as having a charity liaison with an employer on a participant's behalf.

However, although on the face of it, the available support seems to be comprehensive, there was a sense that it wasn't being delivered effectively. Indeed, only one respondent believed the support that they received was 'very helpful', and one other that it was 'helpful'. The vast majority, therefore, were either indifferent towards the level of support they had received or found it either 'unhelpful' or 'very unhelpful'. This is clearly cause for concern. In part, at least, this is likely to be down to the fact that the available support does not cater specifically for the challenges the autistic individual faces.

Participants were also invited to make suggestions for ways in which support in respect of preparations for employment could be improved. Some implied that the guidance in respect of what the working environment is actually like would be of most use. Other respondents wanted more practical preparations such as clear and comprehensive guidance in respect of preparing a CV. The apparent diversity of perspectives and methods in respect of CV preparation (online and beyond) was evidently confusing. One respondent, in particular, felt that greater assistance in respect of how best to articulate their skills and experience was what was needed. Another suggestion was to be informed of the potential difficulties that they may encounter at work; specifically as an autistic employee, so that they could prepare for these challenges. Although it was not suggested how this type of preparation could be undertaken, it could potentially be undertaken through employability workshops where experienced autistic people share their real-life experiences. It could also be done more realistically through work experience or volunteering, which would not only give the individual practical experience, but enhance their CVs too.

One participant stated that they would like to see more constructive liaison between charities and employers. In

a recent film produced by the National Autistic Society called 'Could you stand the rejection?' (2016a), the focus is very much on the autistic individual's potential struggles in the workplace. In this sense, it feels rather negative and preoccupied with the limitations of autistic individuals. It would seem that typically these sorts of film are aimed at a general public for whom knowledge about the limitations of autistic people is considered crucial in better-understanding their behaviours. However, the message could (and perhaps should) be different where the audience is potential employers. The alternative approach is surely to emphasise the unique strengths and potential of autistic individuals? More generally, as part of a more constructive dialogue, those charities could take on an educational role and so help address common misconceptions about people with autism. Furthermore, since such charities are familiar with the particular competencies of autistic individuals, they would hopefully enable employers to recognise the unique, valuable attributes of autistic people. Notably, Hewlett Packard (2016), Microsoft (2017) and the Israeli Army (BBC News, 2017) have all set up initiatives to make the most of the attributes that autistic people can bring to a workplace.

A final suggestion for improvement was that employability workshops should be configured on a one-to-one basis instead of in a group format, as the participant in question felt more comfortable in this situation. Although this may benefit the individuals, especially as the majority of respondents noted that they find social situations challenging, there are some evident drawbacks. Running these workshops with one autistic individual at a time would be time-consuming, resource-intensive and costly. Furthermore, it would remain to be seen whether or not there would be a demand for this type of service and whether the individuals concerned would learn best in this environment, especially considering the success of the group social skills programmes analysed by Blainey and Spain (2015). So, although one-to-one workshops may be considered desirable by some autistic individuals, they may not necessarily be practical or affordable.

Advice to other autistic young people

In the final part of the questionnaire, participants were asked what advice they would give to young autistic adults who are job-hunting for the first time. As well as

recognition that a potential employer needed the right attitude ('seek employers who support disabled people, especially people with learning difficulties or autism'.) more general advice was imparted: 'find a job that involves what you enjoy doing', 'find out what you are good at, what you enjoy doing and what environment suits you best' and 'find a job that makes you happy, surrounded by people you get on with. It is important to be comfortable at work'. To the neurotypical individual, such advice may seem self-evident. However, in the case of autistic individuals, this same realisation may not be self-evident. To this end, one participant suggested to a more systematic approach to finding enjoyable work: 'think about how different situations make you feel, make a record of them and give the record to people who will help you find work'.

Of the application process itself, respondents stressed the importance of 'asking questions', 'taking time to create a good CV' and 'choos[ing] referees who know you and your autism'. In order to prepare for an interview, participants suggested doing volunteer work if they lacked the experience that many employers desire. They also suggested building a portfolio of work suited to the desired industry and getting a friend to help analyse a job description in order to see what the employer is looking for in a candidate. This last point was seen as especially important in terms of articulating an effective 'match' between the job role and the applicants existing skills and experience.

Conclusion

Following growing expectations – both culturally and legally - to promote equal opportunities in respect of gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, it seems likely that employers will soon be expected to promote equal opportunities in respect of neurodiversity. The ramifications of research in this field are therefore far-reaching.

Although most participants in this study received support from their families in preparing for employment, it was surprising to discover that there is no formal framework, government initiative or otherwise to assist these individuals in pursuance of their employment goals. It was also surprising to discover that many autistic adults had not received any support in respect of employment

preparations. Certainly, if the rate of employment for autistic individuals (when compared to that for neurotypical individuals) is a reflection of available support, more must be done in respect of employment preparations for autistic young people. Furthermore, it seems clear that of the existing support, most is considered ineffective since virtually none of the individuals who participated in the study were satisfied with the support they had received. Following this project, we have a number of recommendations both in terms practical implementation and further research.

1. Despite the aforementioned negative experiences, it is encouraging that participants were enthusiastic in respect of advising other young autistic people looking for work, and contributed some useful practical guidance. And this, we think, is an area of untapped potential: workshops run by autistic individuals for autistic job-seekers.
2. Given the strong desire for routine and familiarity among individuals with ASD, it would seem sensible to develop a universal support framework – rather than rely on local or regional grass root initiatives.
3. It would seem that closer liaison between employers and charities from the outset is necessary. More specifically, charities might consider creating a campaign to focus on the strengths of autistic employees, rather than focussing on their limitations. Charities might also consider partnering with larger businesses to develop ASD-focussed training schemes, geared towards specific job roles.
4. An interesting finding revealed that more autistic people had used a recruitment agency to find work than a charity. To the extent that our sample is representative more generally, further research might consider what it is that autistic adults prefer about using agencies, and what deters them from using charities. This is especially interesting given that so many of our respondent recommended closer interaction between charities and employers in respect of improving understanding of autism. It may simply be that because agencies match candidates to a vacancy and communicate with a company on their behalf, there is much less effort necessary for the person seeking work. However, it might also be that because these agencies are accessible to every individual, autistic or not, individuals are more comfortable using them as they do not have to declare their autism and therefore worry that they will be treated differently because of it. The dynamics are certainly complex. Ultimately, the findings of this research could help recruitment agencies and charities improve their respective services.

5. To bolster the rates of employment among autistic young people, employers should be encouraged to develop a better understanding of Autism Spectrum Disorder. Although we envisage growing expectations that employers are required to be sensitive to neurodiversity, through a better understanding of Autism Spectrum Disorder it is hoped that employers will begin to recognise the unique strengths of autistic employees for themselves.
6. Ultimately, this was a pilot study and so inevitably its scope is limited. Future research will hopefully yield expanded data sets to enhance the provisional findings presented here.

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