



Neurodiversity, jobsearch and work - a review of the evidence

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The ReAct Partnership

About Us

The ReAct Partnership is an industry-led, active collaboration to support a continuous improvement community in the Restart programme through action research, shared and iterative learning, and the development of applied, evidence-based resources.

The Partnership is co-funded by eight of the 'Prime providers' for the Restart programme — FedCap Employment, G4S, Ingeus, Jobs22, Maximus, Reed, Seetec and Serco — and is being managed by the Institute of Employment Studies (IES), working alongside the Institute for Employability Professionals (IEP) and the Employment Related Services Association (ERSA).



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Introduction

Why this paper

At least one in ten people in the UK have a neurodivergent condition, and those with neurodiversity have low employment rates. Therefore, it's likely that a significant minority of Restart¹ participants could either have a neurodiversity diagnosis or appear to be so without a formal diagnosis.

There is a concern that people with diagnosed or undiagnosed needs may find it more difficult to engage with a programme of support, or be more likely to disengage from that support, while at the same time being less likely to achieve positive employment outcomes without appropriate support.

Recent ONS statistics published by the National Autistic Society (NAS)² has shown that there is an 'autism employment gap', with just 22% of autistic adults in any type of employment. The NAS noted that out of all disabled people, those with autism seem to have the worst employment rate, and that while not all autistic people can work, 77% of those who are unemployed want to work. The NAC report, *'The autism employment gap'*³ finds there is a greater need for information and guidance to support people into employment.

Employers reported not knowing where to turn to for help when supporting autistic people in the workplace, and autistic individuals also reported barriers to entering employment, including a lack of services to help them achieve this goal.

This evidence review has been undertaken with the aim to further the understanding of neurodiversity within the employment sector as well as to identify good practice that identifies how employment providers can best support neurodivergent participants into work. It highlights enablers and barriers people with neurodiversity experience when finding

¹ The Restart Scheme is delivered across England and Wales in 12 different Contract Package Areas (CPAs). Each is managed by a prime provider. The prime providers and their delivery partners, including specialist charities and small and medium-sized enterprises, complement the work of Jobcentre Plus with extra expertise, investment, innovation and additional capacity for tailored support for those people who have been out of work and claiming Universal Credit for at least nine months.

² <https://www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/news/new-data-on-the-autism-employment-gap>

³ <https://s3.chorus-mk.thirdlight.com/file/1573224908/63516243370/width=-1/height=-1/format=-1/fit=scale/t=444848/e=never/k=59f99727/TMI%20Employment%20Report%202024pp%20WEB.pdf>

and entering employment, as well as highlighting what further support providers can offer to ensure participants have access to good quality employment and employers.

Methodology

To reach these aims, an extensive literature review was conducted, focusing on neurodiversity-inclusive employment support, identifying evidence on the role of employment providers and practices that effectively facilitate neurodivergent participants into employment. In order to provide depth, this review also considers the evidence on barriers faced at other relevant or adjacent situations, particularly around transitions; for example, the move from education to university.

The literature review was followed by a focus group which included representatives from five Restart providers. This captured frontline experiences of current support provided to both participants and employers when placing neurodivergent participants into employment, explored what further support could be helpful and sought examples of good practice to be shared. It also provided researchers with the opportunity to test the recommendations that arose from the literature.

Finally, the research also includes evidence from an observational visit, conducted at a Restart office, and discussions with employment and health advisers that occurred on site.

Research findings: definitions of neurodiversity, its prevalence and implications for employment

What is neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity is ‘the range in differences in individual brain function and behavioural traits, regarded as part of normal variation in the human population’.⁴ In practice, this means individuals having different ways of thinking, learning, perceiving the world and interacting with others.⁵ Neurodiversity is not an illness or a mental health disorder,⁶ rather it is a natural variation and diversity of brain and neurocognitive functioning.

The term ‘neurodiversity’ includes individuals who are ‘neurotypical’ and ‘neurodivergent’; where a neurotypical person’s brain functioning is considered ‘normal’ functioning, a neurodivergent individual’s brain functioning differs from the norm.⁷ However, there can be inconsistencies in how neurodiversity is defined, and this means that support and guidance could be seen as confusing or conflicting.⁸ This can make it difficult for employment providers and employers who want to support neurodivergent individuals to enter and remain in work.

Prevalence of neurodiversity

Estimates of the prevalence of neurodiversity in the UK range from 10%⁹ to up to 22% of the population.¹⁰ This deviation may be due to some estimates including only those with a

⁴ Oxford English Dictionary. (2023, July). *Neurodiversity*. https://www.oed.com/dictionary/neurodiversity_n

⁵ Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion. (n.d). *Neurodiversity in the Workplace*. Retrieved 20 October 2023. <https://askearn.org/page/neurodiversity-in-the-workplace>

⁶ PMAC. (n.d.). *How to support neurodiverse colleagues*. Retrieved 6 November 2023.

<https://pmac.uk/resources/neurodiversity/support-neurodiverse-colleagues/>

⁷ Bewley, H. & George, A. (2016). *Neurodiversity at work*. <https://www.acas.org.uk/neurodiversity-at-work-report>

⁸ Doyle, N. (2020). Neurodiversity at work: a biopsychosocial model and the impact on working adults. *British Medical Bulletin*, 135, 108-125, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bmb/ldaa021>

⁹ Brinzea, V. M. (2019). Encouraging neurodiversity in the evolving workforce – The next frontier to a diverse workplace. *Scientific Bulletin-Economic Sciences*, 18(3), 13-25.

¹⁰ Weber, C., Krieger, B., Häne, E., Yarker, J., & McDowall, A. (2022). Physical workplace adjustments to support neurodivergent workers: A systematic review. *Applied Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/apps.12431>

clinical diagnosis while others make allowances for individuals without a clinical diagnosis but who may have characteristics indicating a neurodivergent condition.¹¹

As the concepts of neurodiversity and neurodivergent conditions are becoming more widely discussed, and understanding and diagnosis is increasing, many people are recognising that they may be neurodivergent (or display neurodivergent characteristics) and this could be contributing to the rise in diagnosis. For example, some adults may not have known about neurodivergent conditions in their childhood, which may lead to a later-in-life diagnosis.¹² Additionally, the UK has an ageing population, and combined with the average age of acquired disability at 53, there may be an increasing number of people who will be facing a changing cognition.¹³

People with neurodiversity have low employment rates, even within groups with a health condition or impairment, and this is likely to be reflected in the make-up of Restart participants (although they may or may not have a formal diagnosis), underlining the importance of understanding the barriers that people may face and highlighting what best practice can look like, in order to improve employment outcomes for this cohort.

Characteristics of neurodiversity

Neurodivergent conditions include:

- attention deficit disorders
- autism
- dyslexia
- dyspraxia
- dyscalculia
- Tourette's Syndrome¹⁴

¹¹ Wharmby, P. (2023). *Untypical: How the world isn't built for autistic people and what we should all do about it*. Mudlark.

¹² Ghanouni, P. & Seaker, L. (2023). What does receiving autism diagnosis in adulthood look like? Stakeholders' experiences and inputs. *International Journal of Mental Health Systems*, 17(1), 1-10.
<https://doi.org/10.1186%2Fs13033-023-00587-6>

¹³ Institute of Leadership Management. (2020). Workplace neurodiversity: The power of difference.
<https://leadership.global/resourceLibrary/workplace-neurodiversity-the-power-of-difference.html>

¹⁴ Institute of Leadership Management. (2020). *Workplace neurodiversity: The power of difference*.
<https://leadership.global/resourceLibrary/workplace-neurodiversity-the-power-of-difference.html>

There has been, and continues to be, a focus on deficits or areas of difficulty rather than strengths or heightened abilities. There are many shared qualities and characteristics that are common across neurodivergent conditions, including difficulties with organisation, memory, concentration, time, direction, perception and sequencing.¹⁵ However, there is a move to celebrate and reframe differences in cognition and thinking as strengths and as valuable components of diversity.¹⁶ This is in line with a social model of disability, and suggests neurodivergent individuals should be supported to be themselves and should not be forced to change to meet societal and employment norms and ideals.¹⁷ Instead of trying to fit square pegs into round holes 'companies should create environments in which pegs of all different shapes and sizes can thrive'.¹⁸

Figure 1 challenges the traditional deficit model and illustrates different neurodivergent conditions and how qualities and characteristics (that may be valued in the workplace) correlate between them.

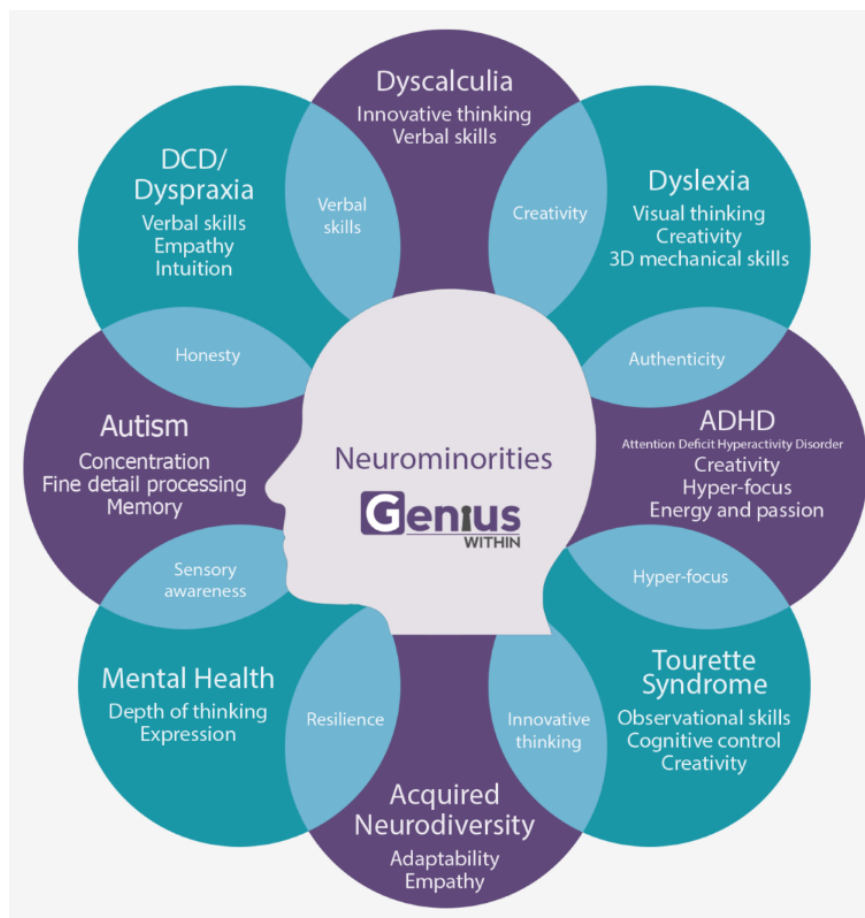
¹⁵ Icton, I., Goldman, A., Gray, H., Callen, A., & Hey, L. (2019). Capitalising on neurodiverse talent (Powerpoint presentation). <https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/2019/capitalising-neurodiverse-talent>

¹⁶ Cooks-Campbell, A. (2022). *Unlock creativity by making space for neurodiversity in the workplace*. <https://www.betterup.com/blog/neurodiversity-in-the-workplace>

¹⁷ Institute of Employability Professionals. (n.d.) *Neurodiversity Employability Support partnered training from IEP and Genius Within*.

<https://www.myiep.uk/page/NeurodiversityLearning?&hhsearchterms=%22neurodiversity%22>

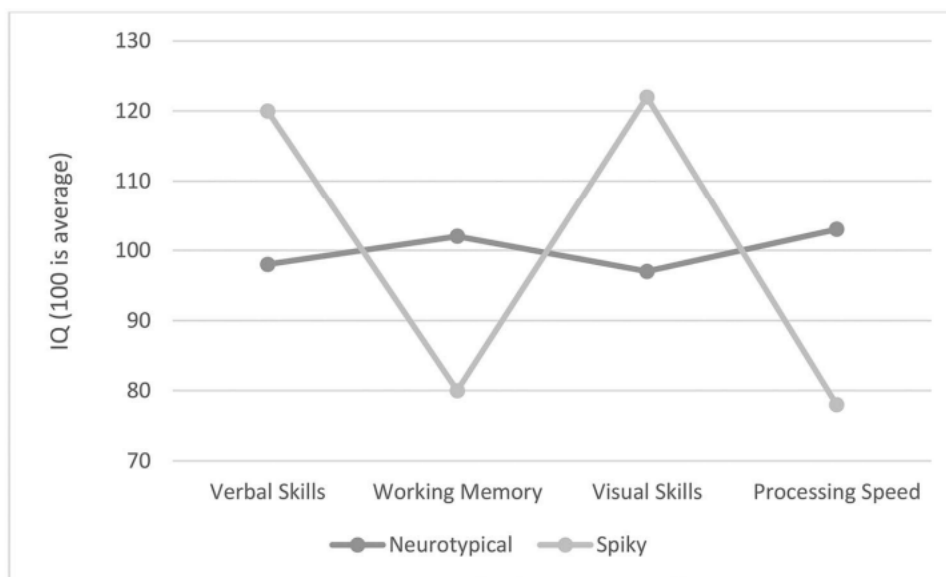
¹⁸ CIPD. (2018). *Neurodiversity at work*. <https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/guides/neurodiversity-work/>

Figure 1: Neurodivergent conditions and characteristics¹⁹

Neurodivergent individuals may have ‘large, statistically significant disparities between peaks and troughs’ of certain characteristics or skills.²⁰ Figure 2 shows how skills can differ between a neurotypical profile and a “spiky” neurodivergent profile.

¹⁹ Genius Within. (n.d). *What is neurodiversity?* Retrieved 17 November 2023. <https://geniuswithin.org/what-is-neurodiversity/>

²⁰ Doyle, N. (2020). Neurodiversity at work: a biopsychosocial model and the impact on working adults. *British Medical Bulletin*, 135, 108-125, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bmb/ldaa021>

Figure 2: Spiky profile for a neurodivergent person compared with a neurotypical person²¹

Universal design

Universal design describes how environments and equipment can be developed to be used by all, through adaptations and well-considered design. The Centre for Excellence in Universal Design describes how this should ‘push the boundaries’ of products, services and environments to allow as many people as possible to engage with them and also to minimise any difficulties that may arise in adapting to specific users’ needs.²²

For example, using a ramp analogy: instead of only putting ramps on certain entrances or buildings to improve accessibility, it would better to make all entrances ramped. Ramps are also useful for people with bikes, buggies or who are carrying luggage, so the change would provide accommodations to those who need them and also more broad, unexpected benefits.

Universal design in the workplace provides opportunities for all to access good work and perform well at work. For example, this could include providing quiet spaces, dedicating quiet times of day, or thinking flexibly about communication methods.

²¹ Doyle, N. (2020). Neurodiversity at work: a biopsychosocial model and the impact on working adults. *British Medical Bulletin*, 135, 108-125, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bmb/ldaa021>

²² Centre for Excellence in Universal Design (n.d.). *About universal design*. Retrieved 20 November 2023. <https://universaldesign.ie/about-universal-design>

Business benefits of neurodiversity inclusion

Neurodivergent people are more likely to be under or unemployed than neurotypical people.²³ However, there is evidence to suggest that attitudes towards neurodiversity are beginning to change, with businesses and employers beginning to understand and experience the benefits that having a neurodiverse workforce can provide, as well as the Equality Act and in-house equality, diversity and inclusion agendas having an impact.

Participants in the focus group noted that they have seen differences in how employers perceive individuals with neurodiversity, usually as a result of the increased understanding about neurodivergent conditions and a focus on “challenging the norm”.

‘Once they understand neurodiversity, it’s ok...when they understand, employers begin to focus on the strengths that people can bring. It is about changing that focus. You need to be able to focus on what people can do, and not what they can’t...We have to focus on what people can bring to the table, not mentioning what they can’t do, but how they can do the job, how they operate...’

Focus group participant

‘You find roles that suit people’s strengths and what will work best for them. Look at what benefits they can bring and not let their “weaknesses” hold them back.’

Focus group participant

Neurodivergent employees can bring new perspectives and ways of thinking to the company through increased creativity,²⁴ innovation²⁵ and diversity of skills.²⁶ For example, GCHQ have specifically recruited people with dyslexia for their ability to creatively solve problems.²⁷ It is

²³ Hey, L. (2020). *Neurodiversity: maximising talent in the workplace*.

<https://www.trainingzone.co.uk/lead/culture/neurodiversity-maximising-talent-in-the-workplace>

²⁴ Austin, R.D. & Pisano, G.P. (2017). *Neurodiversity as a competitive advantage*.

<https://hbr.org/2017/05/neurodiversity-as-a-competitive-advantage>

²⁵ Hutson, P., & Hutson, J. (2023). Neurodiversity and inclusivity in the workplace: Biopsychosocial interventions for promoting competitive advantage. *Journal of Organizational Psychology*, 23(2), 1-16.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.33423/jop.v23i2.6159>

²⁶ CIPD. (2023). *Employers need greater understanding of how to manage and support neurodiverse talent, urges the CIPD*. <https://www.cipd.org/uk/about/press-releases/manage-support-neurodiverse-talent/>

²⁷ Wallis, J. (2022). *Changing perceptions of neurodiversity*. <https://geniuswithin.org/changing-perceptions-of-neurodiversity/>

important that employers understand that diversity of thought can benefit businesses²⁸ as shown in the example from JP Morgan & Chase.

JP Morgan & Chase's Autism at Work programme found that autistic employees were 48% faster and up to 92% more productive than their neurotypical counterparts. Their attention to detail, superior ability to focus and strong visual acuity were cited as the reasons why their performance was so different.²⁹

When working under specific conditions, including regulating environments or managing external stimuli, neurodivergent employees can be more motivated and productive, compared to working in conditions that could be distracting or stressful. For example, a noisy, brightly lit workspace may be overstimulating for some.^{30,31} 'Neuroinclusion' enables the full advantages of hiring neurodivergent employees to be achieved, through a focus on these positives, and making changes to the work environment to make them more inclusive. Using the previous example, this might mean providing a quiet room, or allowing people to work near natural light.

Neurodiverse workforces can also help to alleviate challenges faced by employers including workforce shortages and difficult recruitment, but attitudes towards neurodiversity need to be changed before these benefits can be realised. The social enterprise Genius Within, which champions neurodivergent inclusion within businesses, suggests that to achieve business advantages, awareness and action are needed to achieve 'neuroinclusion'. Awareness includes developing peer groups, implementing and talking about neurodiversity, whereas action includes more disclosure and providing reasonable adjustments. However, in the absence of a regular survey to provide a UK benchmark, it is difficult to understand what is happening in practice.³²

²⁸ Bewley, H. & George, A. (2016). *Neurodiversity at work*. [https://www.tourettes-action.org.uk/storage/downloads/1482243777_Neurodiversity_at_work_0916-\(1\).pdf](https://www.tourettes-action.org.uk/storage/downloads/1482243777_Neurodiversity_at_work_0916-(1).pdf)

²⁹ Cooks-Campbell, A. (2022). *Unlock creativity by making space for neurodiversity in the workplace*. <https://www.betterup.com/blog/neurodiversity-in-the-workplace>

³⁰ Bury, S.M., Hedley, D., Uljarević, M., & Gal, E. (2020). The autism advantage at work: A critical and systematic review of current evidence. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 105, 103750. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ridd.2020.103750>

³¹ Hutson, P., & Hutson, J. (2023). Neurodiversity and inclusivity in the workplace: Biopsychosocial interventions for promoting competitive advantage. *Journal of Organizational Psychology*, 23(2), 1-16. <http://dx.doi.org/10.33423/jop.v23i2.6159>

³² McDowall, A., Doyle, N. and Kiseleva, M. (2023). *Neurodiversity at work: demand, supply and a gap analysis*. Birkbeck, University of London, London, UK.

There are considerable benefits of entering employment for neurodivergent individuals themselves. Representation in the workplace can help to boost feelings of respect, confidence and self-value in those who are neurodivergent.³³ However, only 7% of employers have focused on making their organisations more neuroinclusive.³⁴ There is still more to be done to encourage and support employers to make these organisational changes, particularly as the evidence shows that the benefits and gains from neuroinclusion depend on the actual inclusion, not just the presence of neurodivergent people.³⁵

The following sections of the report focus on typical barriers to employment that neurodivergent individuals may experience. It should be noted that there was very little literature available on the role that employment providers could have in helping people who are neurodivergent transition into employment. As such the report uses findings from the focus group and office observation, as well as evidence from other transition points to highlight what good practice exists and how this can be adapted for Restart providers.

Recruitment and selection

Long established recruitment and screening processes can automatically filter neurodivergent people out.³⁶ Typically, employers seek to employ generalists who have a range of skills regardless of the skills that are needed for the role.³⁷ This may be difficult and a barrier for a neurodivergent person with a 'spiky' profile, as outlined in Figure 2.

Knowledge of strengths, experiences and skills

For people who are neurodivergent, who may think, process and perceive information differently, it may be more difficult to recognise and understand how 'job ready' they are, and what employment opportunities they may be suited to. Focus group participants identified the difference that they as advisers can make in this context. A significant

³³ Furr, P. (2023). *Why it's important to embrace neurodiversity in the workplace (and how to do it effectively)*. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesbusinesscouncil/2023/03/07/why-its-important-to-embrace-neurodiversity-in-the-workplace-and-how-to-do-it-effectively/>

³⁴ CIPD. (2023). *Employers need greater understanding of how to manage and support neurodiverse talent, urges the CIPD* [Press release]. <https://www.cipd.org/uk/about/press-releases/manage-support-neurodiverse-talent/>

³⁵ Silver, E. R., Nittrouer, C. L., & Hebl, M. R. (2023). Beyond the business case: Universally designing the workplace for neurodiversity and inclusion. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 16(1), 45-49.

³⁶ Austin, R.D. & Pisano, G.P. (2017). *Neurodiversity as a Competitive Advantage*. Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2017/05/neurodiversity-as-a-competitive-advantage>

³⁷ Neil, T. (2020). Acas future thinking on neurodivergent practice. *Neurodiverse Voices: Good Practice in the Workplace*, 1, 5-9. <https://www.achieveability.org.uk/files/1586122571/e-journal-achieveability-neurodivergent-voices-april-2020pdf.pdf>

proportion of their caseload experienced difficulty in recruitment and employment settings, and it becomes their role to help participants feel valued and respected (whether they are neurodivergent or not).

'A lot of the participants who come to Restart centres have gone through Jobcentre Plus and their strict and clinical procedures and feel repressed by it. We have to take into account what they are experiencing, acknowledge that they have come through a bad experience and encourage them to speak about their experiences and what they may want to do. Take away the neurodiverse bit of it, this should be standard for everyone.'

Focus group participant

Focus group participants also added that it is key to their role to ask sensitive questions of their clients to understand their background, which they would then be able to use to signpost participants to further sources of support (for example, health advisers or training) or to start identifying potential employers.

'It's about not being afraid to ask questions...you can ask gentle questions. I ask questions like: 'What is it that makes finding a job difficult for you? How are you finding job searching? What have you done in the past?' It is important to ask them about their experiences. From that you can paint a picture that enables you to provide the best support available.'

Focus group participant

'I try to ask sensitive questions of our clients. How they organise their day? What hobbies they enjoy? What they do in their spare time? This way you can get access to a lot of information that they may not normally give or offer up.'

Office observation discussion

Job descriptions

Job descriptions can create barriers for neurodivergent individuals,³⁸ particularly as it is not always clear what is essential to the role. It is easier for neurodivergent applicants when job

³⁸ CIPD. (2018). *Neurodiversity at work*. <https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/guides/neurodiversity-work/>

descriptions ensure that essential and ‘nice-to-have’ skills and experience are clearly differentiated.³⁹

An individual who takes information literally needs to have the job explained to them in an honest, clear and concise manner, that avoids jargon.⁴⁰

These needs may require an adviser to ‘translate’ recruitment material for jobseekers. It is critical that the adviser can convey the job as accurately as possible to ensure retention, as research shows this is key to a successful fit and avoiding self-esteem issues and feelings of uselessness if the job does not end up matching with the individual’s strengths.⁴¹

Employment Autism describe how one of the greatest barriers to employment for autistic individuals is the expectation from employers that everyone should be at least average at everything and fit the standard employee description where a plethora of skills are included that are not necessarily relevant or even required for the job in question. According to spiky profiles, matching all of these skills would not be the case for a neurodivergent individual. Employment Autism suggest that roles should be described more specifically, by isolating the key skills that are required to deliver success in the role and removing the ‘nice-to-have’ and unnecessary skills that could be a deterrent to applying.⁴²

During the Restart office observation, an employment adviser explained that job descriptions can be confusing for participants, and employers have an important role in ensuring that they are as clear as they can be about what the role actually requires.

‘As an employment adviser it is up to us to clarify any details that our clients might want to know, or that we think is important for them to know about the role. For example, if the job description contains phrases such as “ad-hoc duties”, we could ask the employer what these entail, so our clients are not surprised and can be as prepared as possible.’

Office observation discussion

³⁹ Wellbeing at work. (n.d.) *Neurodiversity at work – a personal story*. (Retrieved 20 October 2023). <https://wellbeingatwork.eastsussex.gov.uk/blogs/neurodiversity-at-work-a-personal-story/>

⁴⁰ CIPD. (2018). *Neurodiversity at work*. <https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/guides/neurodiversity-work/>

⁴¹ Wharmby, P. (2023). *Untypical: How the world isn’t built for autistic people and what we should all do about it*. Mudlark.

⁴² Employment Autism. (n.d.) *Recruiting autistic employees*. (Retrieved 17 October 2023). <https://employmentautism.org.uk/i-am-a-work-provider/recruiting/>

The CIPD also suggest highlighting neurodiversity and inclusion information in the job descriptions, showing that the organisation welcomes candidates with different identities and thinking styles and that reasonable adjustments can be discussed and made.⁴³ This example by EY shows how policies and programmes can highlight an organisation's inclusive culture. It may be helpful for employment advisers to ask about the culture of an organisation and enquire more generally about wellbeing and neurodiversity policies that are in place that may provide a clearer indication about how an organisation may treat someone with neurodiversity:

EY is actively recruiting neurodivergent individuals and in 2016, set up a Neuro-Diverse Centre of Excellence in Philadelphia where they aimed to create a culture that enables and supports a neurodiverse workforce.⁴⁴

The Neurodiversity Hub Job Readiness workbook⁴⁵ provides a range of questions to consider when deciphering a job advertisement that it may be beneficial for employment advisers to consider with Restart participants. The guide highlights that *'when you can translate what an employer is looking for, you are better positioned to know whether you are a good fit for the job'*. They also provide clear guidance about how to accurately complete application forms and what instructions job descriptions may provide about the application process that jobseekers may also have to consider. Questions to consider include:

Are you familiar with the company? What else would you need to know?
Is the role clear to you? Do you have a sense of what a day in this job would be like?
Have you done something similar in the past?
Are your transferable skills relevant to the duties of this role?

Interviews

Interviews can be difficult for all job applicants, but neurodivergent individuals may have specific barriers or challenges that employment providers can provide support with. For example, the emphasis on social interaction may be difficult for some neurodivergent individuals,⁴⁶ they may have different methods of engaging with interview questions and

⁴³ CIPD. (2018). *Neurodiversity at work*. <https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/guides/neurodiversity-work/>

⁴⁴ Wired. (2023). *Why neurodiversity is a competitive advantage*. <https://www.wired.co.uk/bc/article/why-neurodiversity-is-a-competitive-advantage-ey>

⁴⁵ Kommineni, A., & Whip, S. (n.d.). *Job readiness: a workbook for autistic jobseekers*. The Neurodiversity Hub. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a88ab00f43b552a84c3b7c9/t/618302ecff7e580d76405357/1635975920398/Job_Readiness_Workbook_-_Nov_2021.pdf

⁴⁶ CIPD. (2018). *Neurodiversity at work*. <https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/guides/neurodiversity-work/>

may struggle in unplanned or unfamiliar surroundings. They may require more time to process questions, and any follow up comments on what has been said.

The focus group discussion provided evidence of what Restart providers can do to help individuals prepare for interviews. Many discussed the role that mock interviews have in preparing clients for interview situations.

'I have done mock interviews with many clients before. We can do as many as they want to do until they have made the progress that they want to have made, and not the progress that I feel they should have made. It is about giving them the empowerment so that they can make the decisions about when they feel ready.'

Focus group participant

'It's about helping clients feel comfortable in a setting, and getting them to feel comfortable that they know what they are talking about, because in an interview they will need to do that and be comfortable and confident and so we have to help them do that.'

Focus group participant

'I have done one-to-one training and mock interviews with clients, so that they can better understand any barriers that they may have beforehand and come up with strategies that can help them. This can include mock interviews to practise how they come across with their communication and their body language. I want to help to empower people so they can come across in the best way they can.'

Focus group participant

Restart advisers also noted that participants often felt a need 'to fit' certain job criteria and needed to be supported to become aware of their particular strengths, so they are able to communicate them positively in interview situations. It was noted that these sessions had a positive impact on self-confidence of all Restart participants.

Employment advisers can ask employers to provide detailed information before the interview. This information could include questions or themes that will be discussed,⁴⁷ information about the interviewer(s) and logistical information about office location and the interview room.

It is important that individuals have the opportunity to disclose their health condition if they wish to. The Neurodiversity Hub has guidance for students transitioning into university, providing a number of reasons why disclosing could be a positive experience, including having the opportunity to access resources that will be of benefit for them, the provision of tailored support and the legal requirements for support. There is the recognition that it is hard to disclose, **but advisers play an important role in having conversations with participants on their caseloads about when and how in the recruitment process to disclose their neurodivergence and any workplace adjustments that may arise from it.**

There are a number of reasonable adjustments to the recruitment process that might be helpful for neurodivergent participants,⁴⁸ and advisers are well placed to explore and advocate for these. For some, it may be helpful to see the environment in which the interview will be conducted beforehand, or for the interview to be held remotely.⁴⁹

One of the focus group participants noted that they had a client with ADHD, and found using a 'fidget toy' helped them to concentrate and engage in better and more fruitful conversations. When it came to having a job interview, the employment adviser asked the employer whether their client could take a fidget toy into the interview. This was accepted and the client was successful at interview.

Employers that work with Restart participants may be open to changes in their processes. Clarity HQ found that the term 'interview' was deterring some applicants from applying for a role. They renamed interviews as 'getting to know you' conversations, which made the purpose of the conversation clearer and suggested that they were a more informal meeting removed some of the anxiety associated with a traditional job interview.

⁴⁷ Wharmby, P. (2023). *Untypical: How the world isn't built for autistic people and what we should all do about it*. Mudlark.

⁴⁸ Autistica. (n.d) *Inclusive interviews*. Retrieved 30 October 2023.

<https://www.autistica.org.uk/downloads/files/Autistica-Inclusive-interviews.pdf>

⁴⁹ Wharmby, P. (2023). *Untypical: How the world isn't built for autistic people and what we should all do about it*. Mudlark.

There is specialist information available that providers could use to help make suggestions to employers. For example, inviting an applicant to interview via email may be better to aid those with memory issues and some autistic candidates who may find it difficult to receive an unplanned telephone call.⁵⁰

Employment Autism explain how to tailor the assessment method for the individual: 'If you are looking for someone to do training or coaching, an interview could be appropriate. If you are looking for a data analyst, give them sample data to analyse and see how accurate and effective they are.'⁵¹

There are also examples of ways in which other organisations have successfully adapted recruitment processes, which might be helpful for providers to share with employers they work with.

Auticon, an IT and compliance consulting business where all consultants are on the autism spectrum, do not use CVs or interviews. Instead, they use a range of assessments to understand cognitive profiles and suitability for their roles.⁵²

JPMorgan Chase & Co is an American multinational investment bank and financial services holding company. It recently focused on employing autistic people after considering them to be an 'untapped talent pool'. They launched 'Autism at the workplace', an initiative that focused on hiring people with autistic spectrum disorders. The company looked beyond the traditional interview process and developed partnerships with organisations that work with autistic individuals. As a result, they have hired 30 autistic individuals with plans to hire hundreds more over the coming years.⁵³

Microsoft UK identify and engage individual strengths at the onboarding stage by using an adjustment screener. This gets candidates to think about themselves in different ways, regardless of whether or not they know they are diagnosed or undiagnosed, neurodivergent or neurotypical. As this is provided to all, they know that they are entering an organisation where neurodiversity or thinking differently is not a taboo subject. Additionally, this

⁵⁰ Bewley, H. & George, A. (2016). *Neurodiversity at work*. <https://www.acas.org.uk/neurodiversity-at-work-report>

⁵¹ Employment Autism. (n.d.) *Recruiting autistic employees*. Retrieved 17 October 2023. <https://employmentautism.org.uk/i-am-a-work-provider/recruiting/>

⁵² CIPD. (2018). *Neurodiversity at work*. <https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/guides/neurodiversity-work/>

⁵³ Brinzea, V. M. (2019). Encouraging neurodiversity in the evolving workforce – The next frontier to a diverse workplace. *Scientific Bulletin-Economic Sciences*, 18(3), 13-25.

provides their senior and line managers with a better understanding of their neurodiverse workforce and non-visible disabilities. It also ensures that no one is singled out for working differently – this norm is established early on so embeds itself in the culture early.⁵⁴

Many individuals experience challenges with interviews and applying for jobs so taking a universal design approach for all recruitment could benefit many and show the inclusive culture and values of the organisation.⁵⁵

For some, the support of another person may help during the recruitment process. If so, it is important that they are engaged from an early stage, to help to bridge the gap between employers and neurodivergent job seekers.⁵⁶ This is another area where employment advisers could be a key area of support.

Recommendations

- Neurodivergent individuals seeking work may have had negative previous experiences when searching for and entering employment. Understanding these experiences and what didn't work, alongside their knowledge and skills, will make it easier to identify not only potential jobs, but the best recruitment pathways for them.
- Employment advisers should ensure that the job descriptions are clear and accessible for their clients. This could include requesting that employers provide additional guidance on what elements of the job description are essential for the role, and gaining clarity about the job specification. Employment advisers should also spell out any acronyms that have been used, and explain any terms that may be confusing or written in jargon.
- The more understanding an adviser has of the recruitment tools and assessments in place for a role, the better placed advisers will be to provide training and any other resources to help prepare participants. This may involve communicating with employers about the availability of alternative tools and assessments that are preferable for neurodivergent jobseekers and may better help them demonstrate how they meet employer need.

⁵⁴ Genius Within. (2022, June 16). Dr Nancy Doyle discusses Neuro-inclusivity by design [YouTube]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=89ST8H37g4U&t=6s>

⁵⁵ Bruyère, S.M., Chang, H-Y. & Saleh, M.C. (2020). Empowering Neurodiverse Populations for Employment through Inclusion AI and Innovation Science.

⁵⁶ Bruyère, S.M., Chang, H-Y. & Saleh, M.C. (2020). Empowering Neurodiverse Populations for Employment through Inclusion AI and Innovation Science.

- Provide detailed information before the recruitment process, including information on travel, time of interview and dress code. If employers are open to offering reasonable adjustments, it may be helpful if advisers are able to find out what interview questions will be asked, organisational policies about disclosure, health and wellbeing, or overall organisational culture.

Knowledge and training

The results of a call for evidence from an AchieveAbility commission in 2018 about helping more disabled adults into work found a general lack of understanding of neurodiversity, including skills and ability, by employers, businesses and policymakers.⁵⁷ **This lack of awareness of neurodiversity and its impact on employment⁵⁸ is combined with confusion over terminology and concepts surrounding neurodiversity.⁵⁹** Persistent negative and false stereotypes from employers and other organisational colleagues can lead to issues of discrimination, bullying and exclusion, not recognising talented individuals and preventing individuals with neurodiversity from finding fulfilling employment.⁶⁰ This may also have an impact on the support employment providers are able to provide. **Genius Within report that two-thirds of neurodivergent employees in the UK fear discrimination at work, which may create barriers in searching and applying for employment.⁶¹**

If neurodivergence is not disclosed then behaviours can be misconstrued and cause unwarranted judgement or discrimination from others.⁶² This can lead to misconceptions about an individual's ability to do their job, to work with others and the level of support they might require to undertake job tasks.⁶³ This may have an impact on the sustainability of the job outcome.

⁵⁷ Hewlett, K., Cooper, R. & Jameson, M. (2018). *Neurodiverse voices: Opening doors to employment*. AchieveAbility. https://www.achieveability.org.uk/files/1518955206/wac-report_2017_interactive-2.pdf

⁵⁸ Bewley, H. & George, A. (2016). *Neurodiversity at work*. Acas. <https://www.acas.org.uk/neurodiversity-at-work-report>

⁵⁹ Dwyer, P. (2022). The neurodiversity approach(es): What are they and what do they mean for researchers? *Human Development*, 66, 73-92. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000523723>

⁶⁰ Institute of Leadership Management. (2020). *Workplace neurodiversity: The power of difference*. <https://leadership.global/resourceLibrary/workplace-neurodiversity-the-power-of-difference.html>

⁶¹ Genius Within. (2023). *Two thirds of UK neurodivergent employees fear discrimination at work, research finds*. <https://geniuswithin.org/discrimination-at-work/>

⁶² Bewley, H. & George, A. (2016). *Neurodiversity at work*. Acas. <https://www.acas.org.uk/neurodiversity-at-work-report>

⁶³ Cooks-Campbell, A. (2022). *Unlock creativity by making space for neurodiversity in the workplace*. BetterUp. <https://www.betterup.com/blog/neurodiversity-in-the-workplace>

The impact of a lack of knowledge and understanding about neurodiversity arose during the focus group. Restart advisers spoke about the importance of ‘getting to know’ each individual that comes through their door, building a rapport with them, and allowing each participant to feel comfortable enough to explain their situation and any challenges that they have previously experienced. They expressed that it was their role to ‘champion’ participants.

‘We use a range of techniques and ice-breaker games with participants on the programme to try and understand any barriers that are entrenched in and potentially stopping them getting into work. It is at this point that many disclose a learning disability, or autism, or ADHD that has affected them in the past, and at this point we can think about the training we can give them to increase their confidence, their communication skills and the idea that being neurodiverse is something to champion.’

Focus group participant

‘With neurodiverse participants there are a lot of confidence issues because there is this perceptual barrier, the perception that employers are going to discriminate against them because they won’t get the job done properly. This winds me up! People actually need a better understanding of what neurodiversity is about to champion and create that inclusive environment.’

Focus group participant

‘We are not doctors, therapists or counsellors, but we are here with a special remit to discover what help these people need to get them back into work, so we ask gentle questions about who they are and how they feel and explore what is happening with them, we meet them on their employment journey...’

Office observation discussion

ADHD and autism are underdiagnosed in women and Black and ethnic minority people,⁶⁴ and as discussed previously, age may also be a factor in under-diagnosis. This was considered by advisers during the focus group discussion.

⁶⁴ Barnett, A. (n.d). *Neurodiversity in the workplace: understanding is key*. Retrieved 20 October 2023. Inclusive Employers. <https://www.inclusiveemployers.co.uk/blog/neurodiversity-in-the-workplace-understanding-is-key/>

'It is those who are unaware or undiagnosed that are the ones who probably require even more support, because they don't know how it affects them, and they very rarely understand the complexities and the diverseness of it.'

Focus group participant

'Many don't have an official diagnosis so you have to ask subtle and sensitive questions about why they feel they may have a health or neurodiverse condition. Others do know and they try and hide it from you because they still believe that it will be a barrier to employment.'

Office observation discussion

However, focus group participants also provided examples of Restart participants who were very knowledgeable and aware of their neurodivergent condition and were able to communicate what they needed in terms of support and the environments that they would best thrive in. Advisers noted that when this happens, they are able to learn a lot about how to manage people with neurodivergence that they can try and transfer to future Restart participants.

'I had one customer who at the beginning straight away told us they were autistic. They were very self-aware, a friendly, intelligent man who was aware of their barriers and spoke to us about it earlier on. We were able to accommodate them and when they had a job they were quite upset as they saw the Restart office as [a] haven for them, they were not judged and felt comfortable and happy. He wrote us an article about living with autism...This was helpful to us as providers, as when someone else comes through the door we can learn from that experience. We learn from each experience, and it does make a difference about how we as providers relate to people.'

Focus group participant

The emphasis on certain standardised forms of behaviour in workplaces can create issues.

For example, the literature identifies that neurodivergent individuals are at odds with the 'current corporate fixation on "emotional intelligence"'.⁶⁵ Whilst there are common traits or characteristics among neurodivergent conditions, it is important to be aware that they are

⁶⁵ Sutherland, A. (2016). Time to celebrate neurodiversity in the workplace. *Occupational Health & Wellbeing*, 68 (11), 11.

not universal so care needs to be taken when labelling people.⁶⁶ Having informed and knowledgeable staff will ensure that others do not think a one-size-fits-all approach is suitable.⁶⁷

Focus group participants believed that as Restart advisers it was their role to challenge the 'norm'.

'Language is really important. "What is the norm"? Clients come to us feeling very different and have sometimes been told that they are different. It then becomes up to us to try and explain to them and let them know that everyone is unique and that we all have our strengths and weaknesses. We need to be able to normalise this. Everyone has challenges to some degree.'

Focus group participant

'We find that some employers can be fixed-minded and have person specific roles that they feel all people will need to match – and this just isn't the case here. There needs to be more awareness about how being neurodivergent can bring different things to the table...it's our role to help do this.'

Focus group participant

Training

Deepen your own knowledge about neurodiversity and unpick the assumptions and stereotypes you will have absorbed from wider society.⁶⁸

Following the universal design approach, Bewley and George suggest that there needs to be better awareness and understanding of neurodiversity for all employees and that this can be achieved through increased neurodiversity visibility through employee networks, mentoring and role models.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ CIPD. (2018). *Neurodiversity at work*. <https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/guides/neurodiversity-work/>

⁶⁷ PMAC. (n.d). *How to support neurodiverse colleagues*. Retrieved 6 November 2023. <https://pmac.uk/resources/neurodiversity/support-neurodiverse-colleagues/>

⁶⁸ Barnett, A. (n.d). *Neurodiversity in the workplace: understanding is key*. Retrieved 20 October 2023. Inclusive Employers. <https://www.inclusiveemployers.co.uk/blog/neurodiversity-in-the-workplace-understanding-is-key/>

⁶⁹ Bewley, H. & George, A. (2016). *Neurodiversity at work*. Acas. [https://www.tourettes-action.org.uk/storage/downloads/1482243777_Neurodiversity_at_work_0916-\(1\).pdf](https://www.tourettes-action.org.uk/storage/downloads/1482243777_Neurodiversity_at_work_0916-(1).pdf)

There is confusion as to where to access information and support about neurodiversity, and this can result in engaging with unreliable or misleading sources of information.⁷⁰

The focus group discussed the role that training can have in helping Restart staff and the employers they interact with to understand neurodiversity and how this could then be applied to aid participants' transition into employment.

'If I was casting a critical eye over things, I would say that things have been fairly limited in terms of any training that we have. It does tend to be standard online training that is put on. We find that this is the same with employers and their staff members that we interact with also. We have had clients who have said that among employees in organisations that they have worked there is a lack of awareness.'

Focus group participant

Training was desired on a range of topics relating to neurodiversity at work, including common neurodivergent conditions, along with sufficient support to ensure this training is embedded.⁷¹

Training can come from HR and learning and development teams, but also from external sources including family members or mentors.⁷² In the focus group, the role of 'informal training' or 'experiential learning' was discussed; this was most frequently in the form of learning from Restart participants and applying techniques that have worked in the past to current clients. This was described as 'trial and error', resulting from the differences in neurodivergent conditions and individual reactions. Some participants had personal experience of friends or family who are neurodivergent so were able to bring this perspective to their work. However, they did note the 'individual nature' of these experiences and were keen to know or engage in other training.

'I have had some personal experience due to family and friends at home for example, and through many years in the role. There are things that you learn when on the job, when supporting the various complexities that we do.'

⁷⁰ McDowall, A., Doyle, N. and Kiseleva, M. (2023). Neurodiversity at work: demand, supply and a gap analysis. Birkbeck, University of London.

⁷¹ Austin, R.D. & Pisano, G.P. (2017). *Neurodiversity as a Competitive Advantage*. Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2017/05/neurodiversity-as-a-competitive-advantage>

⁷² CIPD. (2018). *Neurodiversity at work*. <https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/guides/neurodiversity-work/>

Focus group participant

'There is a lot of experiential learning, learning things on the job, and seeing how applicable things are and just trying to recognise what would best support people. But this is something that is perhaps a little limited in terms of proper workforce training.'

Focus group participant

'It's very much based on the experience of the adviser with regards to how much exposure or experience they have with people with neurodiverse conditions. I have lived experience of neurodiversity so I have traits that I tend to look out for, including clients who are good at note-keeping and tracking conversations; keen to discuss hobbies or getting frustrated when you are explaining something to them and they don't understand it...we have had some training in how to manage difficult conversations, and we have to have the IEP level 2 qualification to get the role. We have standard training about EDI and neurodiversity, but these are not always related to health and wellbeing conversations or tailored about how best to help people into work.'

Office observation discussion

There are social partners and experts in the field that provide additional training,⁷³ for example IEP and Genius Within.⁷⁴ The IEP course is short and provides information about neurodiversity as a concept, alongside practical tips for frontline advisers.⁷⁵ Programmes like this are helpful when developing early knowledge of neurodiversity but need to be supplemented by support enabling advisers to tailor interventions to individual needs.

There is also a raft of other training being developed from employers, which it is possible to build on. Some examples are shown in the box below.

⁷³ Austin, R.D. & Pisano, G.P. (2017). *Neurodiversity as a Competitive Advantage*. Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2017/05/neurodiversity-as-a-competitive-advantage>

⁷⁴ Institute of Employability Professionals. (n.d.) *Neurodiversity employability support partnered training from IEP and Genius Within*. <https://www.myiep.uk/page/NeurodiversityLearning?&hhsearchterms=%22neurodiversity%22>

⁷⁵ Institute of Employment Professionals. (n.d.) *Neurodiversity Employability Support partnered training from IEP and Genius Within*. Retrieved 23 October 2023. <https://www.myiep.uk/page/NeurodiversityLearning>

1. Microsoft offer training sessions focusing on working together as a team, job capabilities and skills assessments with software engineers and data scientists. They also provide training on identifying neurodivergent individuals and how to best work together.⁷⁶
2. The Institute for Leadership Management suggest providing unconscious bias and inclusion training for all staff and managers to ensure that they have an awareness and knowledge of the adjustments and support available to neurodivergent staff.⁷⁷
3. At PMAC all mental health and wellbeing training is designed to enable employers to support all employees, not just those who are neurodivergent.⁷⁸ Implementing these programmes can help to increase inclusion, help staff to find out more about themselves and to develop new strategies for being more productive and content at work.⁷⁹
4. The Herbert Smith Freehills Autism Working Group was set up to discuss how opportunities for work experience and employment can be set up to make their workforce more diverse in order to reflect the wider population. They have engaged with external organisations to provide awareness training and highlighted the ways in which employees can disclose their neurodiversity. As a result, they are hoping to see an increased number of neurodivergent starters and will be able to track career progression as well as attrition and retention rates.⁸⁰
5. St Mungo's have a programme called Digital Skills for Life by St Mungo's which provides workshops to neurodivergent individuals to help them better understand their own learning methods, to help them to develop confidence and manage anxiety. They also introduce neurodivergent clients to assistive technology and ensure sustainable life skills through improving digital knowledge which can help to improve employment opportunities.⁸¹

⁷⁶ Hutson, P., & Hutson, J. (2023). Neurodiversity and inclusivity in the workplace: Biopsychosocial interventions for promoting competitive advantage. *Journal of Organizational Psychology*, 23(2), 1-16. <http://dx.doi.org/10.33423/jop.v23i2.6159>

⁷⁷ Institute of Leadership Management. (2020). *Workplace neurodiversity: The power of difference*. <https://leadership.global/resourceLibrary/workplace-neurodiversity-the-power-of-difference.html>

⁷⁸ PMAC. (n.d.). *How to support neurodiverse colleagues*. Retrieved 6 November 2023. <https://pmac.uk/resources/neurodiversity/support-neurodiverse-colleagues/>

⁷⁹ CIPD. (2018). *Neurodiversity at work*. <https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/guides/neurodiversity-work/>

⁸⁰ Herbert Smith Freehills. (2022). *Impact story: focus on autism at Herbert Smith Freehills*. <https://www.lawsociety.org.uk/campaigns/diversity-and-inclusion/features/case-study-focus-on-autism-herbert-smith-freehills>

⁸¹ Hewlett, K. & Pennington, P. (2020). Digital skills for life for neurodivergent homeless at St Mungo's. *Neurodiverse Voices: Good Practice in the Workplace*, 1, 48-51. <https://www.achieveability.org.uk/files/1586122571/e-journal-achieveability-neurodivergent-voices-april-2020pdf.pdf>

There were also good practice examples of training from Restart advisers:

A focus group participant shared how they had arranged team training with an external provider who focused specifically on working with neurodivergent individuals to help Restart staff to understand and recognise the 'tell-tale signs' of certain disabilities, including physical, invisible and neurological characteristics. The aim was to develop a better understanding of how to interact with and advise Restart participants with these characteristics. The training received positive feedback from site staff, a lot was learned from a better understanding about how Restart participants may be feeling in certain situations, and how employment adviser behaviours and interactions could be adapted to meet participant needs.

Another focus group participant had joined an online group called 'Café Neuro', which included sessions speaking with neurodivergent individuals in various stages of their employment journeys to understand from a lived experience perspective what has worked well for them, and what help or support would be beneficial. The employment adviser noted that these sessions highlighted the importance of not being afraid to ask, and of including people with neurodiversity in decision making.

Recommendations for building on existing training

These were developed by advisers in the focus group, during the office observation and the literature.

- Employment advisers, and employers and organisational employees should receive training on multiple topics including neurodiversity awareness, unconscious biases, communication and inclusion. This training could also be applied to other long-term health conditions, as well as other equality, diversity and inclusion areas. Training programmes, such as those provided by the Institute of Employment Professionals, can provide a good introduction to neurodiversity, including definitions and concepts.
- Use case studies (either real or created from composite examples) or scenario planning to discuss what good practice when advising Restart participants into employment looks like.
- Gather feedback from employer engagement teams to understand how advisers, employers and clients could best work together to ensure successful placements into

employment. There should be a particular focus on what has worked well and what further information or support employers may need to enhance the recruitment process for neurodivergent participants.

- To gather feedback from Restart participants about any training they have received whilst looking for placements – relating for example to course content, course delivery, training styles, or the learning environment to see what adjustments are being made and where there is room for further improvement. Focus on understanding from the participants’ perspective what ‘a successful process’ looks like.
- Further training on engaging with employers about their policies and practices, and understanding about legal requirements and current support initiatives currently in place that could help to achieve smoother employment transitions.
- Support for Restart advisers to work with employers and line managers to help them recognise and understand neurodivergent conditions, and to prevent any issues that may arise where an employee decides not to disclose or has not been diagnosed.⁸² This training may ‘filter down’ to other employees and increase awareness. Managers also need to be aware of how to best support employees and be aware of how they can tailor their managerial approach to the needs of the individual they are managing.⁸³
- It is important to engage with experts in the field of neurodiversity to ensure that training is effective and relevant for the organisation and employees. This means that the information is correct and current. This could include those with lived experiences of living and working with neurodiversity, organisations who have successfully recruited neurodivergent candidates and managers who manage neurodivergent employees.
- Restart providers to gather feedback on previous placements to understand what went well, and what training gaps exist to improve the service in the future.
- Restart providers to have the opportunity to assess case studies or scenarios as part of their continuous training and development to be able to plan and discuss potential courses of action for clients with long-term health conditions.
- Avoid following stereotypes of neurodivergent conditions and one-size-fits-all approaches for a neurodiverse workforce; instead, understand differences and how they can be supported or understood better.

⁸² Bewley, H. & George, A. (2016). *Neurodiversity at work*. [https://www.tourettes-action.org.uk/storage/downloads/1482243777_Neurodiversity_at_work_0916-\(1\).pdf](https://www.tourettes-action.org.uk/storage/downloads/1482243777_Neurodiversity_at_work_0916-(1).pdf)

⁸³ Neil, T. (2020). Acas future thinking on neurodivergent practice. *Neurodiverse Voices: Good Practice in the Workplace*, 1, 5-9. <https://www.achieveability.org.uk/files/1586122571/e-journal-achieveability-neurodivergent-voices-april-2020pdf.pdf>

Support policies and practices

As the understanding about neurodiversity and neurodivergent conditions slowly improves, support interventions to help organisations and employees are also being developed, alongside a wider diversity, equity and inclusion movement.

Disability Confident Scheme

The Disability Confident Scheme was developed to help support employers to make the most of the talents that those living with disabilities can bring to the workplace. An employer of any size can sign up to the scheme to help:

- challenge attitudes towards disability
- increase understanding of disability
- remove barriers to disabled people and those living with long-term health conditions
- ensure that disabled people have the opportunities to fulfil their potential and realise their aspirations⁸⁴

The scheme believes that Disability Confident organisations will be able to discover employees that they can't do without, and help employees fulfil their potential and contribute to an organisation's success. The government also state that being Disability Confident also means:

- being able to draw from the widest possible pool of talent
- securing and retaining high quality staff who are skilled, loyal and hardworking
- saving time and money on the costs of recruitment and training by reducing staff turnover
- keeping valuable skills and experience
- reducing the levels and costs of sickness absence
- improving employee morale and commitment by demonstrating that they treat all employees fairly

During the Restart office observation, the Disability Confident scheme was discussed, as employment advisers, when trying to place participants with long-term health conditions, often *'look at the government website to see what Disability Confident employers are*

⁸⁴ GOV.UK. (n.d.). *How to sign up to the Disability Confident employer scheme.*
<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/disability-confident-how-to-sign-up-to-the-employer-scheme>

available in the area, and contact employers that seem applicable and make requests on behalf of the clients.'

Although this does sound like a positive move forward, both focus group participants and discussions at the Restart office observation highlighted that more can be done to ensure that the scheme can be improved to help people with long-term health conditions, including neurodiversity.

'I am on the fence about some of these schemes. It can be easy to throw a badge or a sticker at something to say that they are doing these things when they may not be. There are some places that set certain recruitment standards that mean neurodiverse candidates may still not get employment even though they are disability confident.'

Focus group participant

'Some may not be as inclusive as they say, and they don't like it when we challenge them about it either. There has been some improvement, but we as advisers still need to have proper conversations with employers about what it is that they think makes them inclusive.'

Focus group participant

'I am beginning to question employers a little bit more on behalf of Restart and my clients because some say that they are more Disability Confident than they actually are...We spend a long time trying to find the right employer to place a client, so we recognise that we have to ask the right questions, get an understanding of the office environment, their ability and willingness to make adjustments and understand what has been done for individuals previously.'

Office observation discussion

The Disability Confident Scheme has three difference levels:⁸⁵

- Level 1: Disability Confident Committed, where employers must agree to the Disability Confident commitments and identify at least one action that they will carry out to make a difference for disabled people.

⁸⁵ GOV.UK. (n.d.) How to sign up to the Disability Confident employer scheme.
<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/disability-confident-how-to-sign-up-to-the-employer-scheme>

- Level 2: Disability Confident Employer, where employers are self-assessed around two themes (getting the right people for your business and keeping and developing your people). Disability Confident Employers are recognised as going the extra mile to make sure disabled people get a fair chance.
- Level 3: Disability Confident Leader, when employers will be able to act as a champion within local and business communities.

However, it is not always clear what level employers are, and how well they are acting towards the commitment that they have made. Restart focus group participants noted that they need to do more to understand where employers are on these levels:

‘There are different levels of a Disability Confident employer, and it really pays for us to look into what this actually means. Some say that they are Level 1, committed to make a change, but it doesn’t mean that they have done it yet. So, it is really important that we look into it. Just because the Disability Confident badge is there, it doesn’t mean a person will get a better chance.’

Focus group participant

The Disability Confident Scheme was also discussed in an AchieveAbility report⁸⁶ about employment opportunities for those who are neurodivergent. They reported that the scheme was under-resourced, inadequately organised, inconsistent, poorly advertised and under-used by the neurodivergent community. Very few neurodivergent respondents in the research survey knew what being disability confident meant (74% didn’t know), and they reported not feeling confident applying to roles. Thus, there is still an important role for employment advisers to find out what employers are able to offer participants with long-term health conditions and to support participants to know what they are entitled to in the workplace.

Reasonable adjustments

Only around 30% of employees have formal reasonable adjustments in place at work. This tends to differ by the size of the organisation, adjustments being more likely in smaller

⁸⁶ Hewlett, K., Cooper, R., & Jameson, M. (n.d.) *Neurodiverse voices: Opening doors to employment*. AchieveAbility. https://www.achieveability.org.uk/files/1516612947/wac-neurodiverse-voices-opening-doors-to-employment-report_2018_interactive.pdf

organisations.⁸⁷ Generally, there is poor understanding and execution of reasonable adjustments in workplaces.⁸⁸

Under the Equality Act 2010, employers have the duty to make reasonable adjustments available to those in the workplace who have a disability or neurodivergent condition. This includes applicants as well as employees. Programmes including Access to Work and Disability Confident can help employers to make their workplace more accessible and inclusive and help to identify which reasonable adjustments can be helpful for specific individuals and how to implement them.⁸⁹ Reasonable adjustments can include, but are not limited to:

- access to assistive technology, for example speech-to-text, noise cancelling headphones,⁹⁰ daily planner, dual screens, dictation tools⁹¹
- communication, including giving clear, explicit instruction on tasks and expectations, without using jargon or acronyms, using bullet points in emails to follow up verbal communication⁹²
- asking for personal preferences and considering the benefit of social interactions⁹³
- providing assistance with prioritising and organising tasks⁹⁴
- providing additional support and training, establishing a mentoring or buddy system and one-to-one meetings to provide support⁹⁵

⁸⁷ McDowall, A., Doyle, N. & Kiseleva, M. (2023). Neurodiversity at work: demand, supply and a gap analysis. Birkbeck, University of London.

⁸⁸ Hewlett, K., Cooper, R. & Jameson, M. (2018). *Neurodiverse voices: Opening doors to employment*. https://www.achieveability.org.uk/files/1518955206/wac-report_2017_interactive-2.pdf

⁸⁹ CIPD. (2018). *Neurodiversity at work*. <https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/guides/neurodiversity-work/>

⁹⁰ PMAC. (n.d). *How to support neurodiverse colleagues*. Retrieved 6 November 2023.

<https://pmac.uk/resources/neurodiversity/support-neurodiverse-colleagues/>

⁹¹ Bupa. (2023). *Supporting neurodiversity in the workplace*. <https://www.bupa.co.uk/business/workplace-wellbeing-hub/~media/files/mms/bins-05299.pdf>

⁹² Kindersley, K. (2020). Workplace needs assessment best practice: Enabling successful performance. *Neurodiverse voices: good practice in the workplace*, 1, 16-23.

<https://www.achieveability.org.uk/files/1586122571/e-journal-achieveability-neurodivergent-voices-april-2020pdf.pdf>

⁹³ Autistica. (n.d.) *Making your workplace accessible*. Retrieved 30 October 2023.

<https://www.autistica.org.uk/downloads/files/Making-your-workplace-accessible-short.pdf>

⁹⁴ Kindersley, K. (2020). Workplace needs assessment best practice: Enabling successful performance. *Neurodiverse Voices: Good Practice in the Workplace*, 1, 16-23.

<https://www.achieveability.org.uk/files/1586122571/e-journal-achieveability-neurodivergent-voices-april-2020pdf.pdf>

⁹⁵ Kindersley, K. (2020). Workplace needs assessment best practice: Enabling successful performance. *Neurodiverse Voices: Good Practice in the Workplace*, 1, 16-23.

<https://www.achieveability.org.uk/files/1586122571/e-journal-achieveability-neurodivergent-voices-april-2020pdf.pdf>

- considering sensory sensitivities to light, sounds, smells and temperature⁹⁶

It is important that the process of establishing reasonable adjustments is clear and simple⁹⁷ and employment advisers can have an important role here. As a participant has been out of employment for some time, they may be unaware of what adjustments will be suitable for them. In such cases, advisers can work through job descriptions and job expectations with a client to understand where adjustments may be necessary or helpful. Although reasonable adjustments do fall under the Equality Act, understanding and care needs to be taken around the language used when broaching employers about participants' needs.

'You do need to think about the language around reasonable adjustments. There can be a massive disconnect with some employers about this. Some, if they hear the word adjustment, whether it is reasonable or not, may feel straight away that a person is not suitable to work in that workplace and employers don't want to have to make adjustment, because that means it will be an adjustment to what they do.'

Focus group participant

'Language when approaching employers is important, as if you approach them saying that someone may need a reasonable adjustment, then you may be starting someone off by the back foot straight away. We have to get better about how to introduce participants to employers and let them know this is how positively people can come across. We have to do positive disclosures.'

Focus group participant

'We have to engage in what we call reverse marketing, where we sell the skills of our client to the employer...but there have been times where I have been quite cautious about letting the employer know about a client's health condition...we do have to discuss their skills to an employer and what the employer can best do to support them going forward.'

Office observation discussion

⁹⁶ Autistica. (n.d.) *Making your workplace accessible*. Retrieved 30 October 2023.

<https://www.autistica.org.uk/downloads/files/Making-your-workplace-accessible-short.pdf>

⁹⁷ Furr, P. (2023). *Why it's important to embrace neurodiversity in the workplace (and how to do it effectively)*. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesbusinesscouncil/2023/03/07/why-its-important-to-embrace-neurodiversity-in-the-workplace-and-how-to-do-it-effectively/>

It is also important that participants feel they have any accommodations they need when accessing help in Restart offices. The focus group discussion highlighted a number of ways in which accommodations have been made when working with neurodivergent clients, including:

- working in smaller groups when delivering training
- one-to-one training
- meetings in small rooms to remove distracting sounds
- delivering messages by text, email and phone
- written reminders
- the provision of fidget toys to help those with ADHD
- technological adjustments if computer work was required

With these adjustments, not only did clients feel more comfortable when attending meetings with employment advisers, they also became more aware of the type of adjustments that could be made for them by employers with inclusive cultures.

Environment

Environmental changes can also be part of the reasonable adjustment process. This can include lighting, noise, temperature and textures^{98,99} for individuals who are sensitive to certain stimuli.¹⁰⁰ Wharmby described how using fans or space heaters to adjust temperature, dimmable lighting, and noise cancelling technology can be helpful reasonable adjustments for neurotypical employees too, especially for those with migraines or who have personal preferences for their environment.¹⁰¹

Restart advisers could suggest that working from home can also be a good option for many as this allows the individual to create an environment that allows them to work at their

⁹⁸ Bupa. (2023). *Supporting neurodiversity in the workplace*. <https://www.bupa.co.uk/business/workplace-wellbeing-hub/~media/files/mms/bins-05299.pdf>

⁹⁹ CIPD. (2018). *Neurodiversity at work*. <https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/guides/neurodiversity-work/>

¹⁰⁰ PMAC. (n.d). *How to support neurodiverse colleagues*. Retrieved 6 November 2023. <https://pmac.uk/resources/neurodiversity/support-neurodiverse-colleagues/>

¹⁰¹ Wharmby, P. (2023). *Untypical: How the world isn't built for autistic people and what we should all do about it*. Mudlark.

best.¹⁰² This can also help to relieve the pressures of unexpected interactions and small talk in the workplace, which some may find difficult.¹⁰³ Wharmby further explained to ‘make employment accessible for neurodivergent people, then home-working needs to remain on the table’.¹⁰⁴ This is an option that should be explored with participants, depending on the job role they are looking for, and the environment they have available to work from.

However, Weber et al. explained how reasonable adjustments to the environment are popular in practice and that a combination of small adjustments to address different environmental factors is best. They also suggest that there is insufficient evidence to fully evaluate the usefulness of these adjustments, meaning that further research is required, but they can see their importance and value in improving experiences at work for many.¹⁰⁵

Policies

Neurodiversity is missing from many workplace policies and procedures, and even when mentioned, are not accompanied by support processes.¹⁰⁶ Some employers do not have a neurodiversity policy, but may have a policy that includes neurodivergent conditions under a wider policy on disability.¹⁰⁷ Others that do have neurodiversity support programmes or systems in place are still in their infancy. **When communicating with employers when attempting to place a client, employment advisers may like to enquire with HR or line managers what policies and practices they have in place to support neurodivergent clients**, to try and ask questions about the organisational culture, or seek feedback from previous Restart clients who may be currently working at that organisation. Advisers may be able to suggest a potential visit to the workplace or a trial day if policies and practices are not readily available, to gain a better understanding of what employers are able to provide.

¹⁰² Kalmanovich-Cohen, H., & Stanton, S. J. (2023). How can work from home support neurodiversity and inclusion? *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 16(1), 20-24. <https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2022.93>

¹⁰³ Wharmby, P. (2023). *Untypical: How the world isn't built for autistic people and what we should all do about it*. Mudlark.

¹⁰⁴ Wharmby, P. (2023). *Untypical: How the world isn't built for autistic people and what we should all do about it*. Mudlark.

¹⁰⁵ Weber, C., Krieger, B., Häne, E., Yarker, J., & McDowall, A. (2022). Physical workplace adjustments to support neurodivergent workers: A systematic review. *Applied Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/apps.12431>

¹⁰⁶ Institute of Leadership Management. (2020). *Workplace neurodiversity: The power of difference*. <https://leadership.global/resourceLibrary/workplace-neurodiversity-the-power-of-difference.html>

¹⁰⁷ Bewley, H. & George, A. (2016). *Neurodiversity at work*. [https://www.tourettes-action.org.uk/storage/downloads/1482243777_Neurodiversity_at_work_0916-\(1\).pdf](https://www.tourettes-action.org.uk/storage/downloads/1482243777_Neurodiversity_at_work_0916-(1).pdf)

Tailoring support

It is important that the support provided to employees who have disclosed their neurodivergence is tailored to their specific needs at work. This may involve having clear discussions about support needs.¹⁰⁸ However, this does not account for individuals who have not disclosed or do not think that they are neurodivergent, who may miss out on the specific support that they need. Wallis explained that employers are better suited to 'look at need, rather than diagnosis' for all employees.¹⁰⁹ It is important to remember that support for neurodivergent employees may be different from support for neurotypical employees¹¹⁰ as standard support has been built for people who are neurotypical and may not consider the fact that people think and work differently.¹¹¹

External support

For some employers and employment providers, engaging with external partners to provide support may be beneficial as they may have specific neurodiversity knowledge and expertise. For example, Ambitious about Autism and DWP have an Employ Autism programme that allows companies to commit to identify employment opportunities for autistic people, helping them to enter, re-enter and remain in work. This is done through the provision of tools and information for employers delivered through webinars. Another example is from Macmillan Cancer Support:

At Macmillan Cancer Support, employers had identified gaps in support for neurodivergent employees. In order to support employees, they collaborated with the Neurodivergent Network, core support functions, their private medical insurance provider and their occupational health provider to provide assessments for neurodivergent conditions and further support at work, including access to dedicated support groups.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Bewley, H. & George, A. (2016). *Neurodiversity at work*. [https://www.tourettes-action.org.uk/storage/downloads/1482243777_Neurodiversity_at_work_0916-\(1\).pdf](https://www.tourettes-action.org.uk/storage/downloads/1482243777_Neurodiversity_at_work_0916-(1).pdf)

¹⁰⁹ Wallis, J. (2022). *Changing perceptions of neurodiversity*. <https://geniuswithin.org/changing-perceptions-of-neurodiversity/>

¹¹⁰ Kalmanovich-Cohen, H., & Stanton, S. J. (2023). How can work from home support neurodiversity and inclusion? *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 16(1), 20-24. <https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2022.93>

¹¹¹ Volpone, S.D., Avery, D.R. & Wayne, J.H. (2022). Shaping organisational climates to develop and leverage workforce neurodiversity. In: S. M. Bruyère & A. Colella. *Neurodiversity in the workplace: Interests, issues and opportunities* (pp.16-59). Routledge. https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/id/d77b6b1d-9111-4004-a35d-b2f3257139a9/9781003023616_1043249781003023616-2.pdf

¹¹² CIPD. (2023). *Health and wellbeing: Macmillan Cancer Support*. <https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/case-studies/health-wellbeing-macmillan/>

Recommendations

- Ascertain how ‘Disability Confident’ organisations are, through probing organisations about what they are able to provide for employees with long-term health conditions, including neurodiversity.
- Identify whether potential employers have a neurodiversity policy for staff - this can help jobseekers to understand the culture and support within the organisation.
- Restart participants may be unaware of the support that they may need when entering a workplace. Employment advisers should be aware of language being used when approaching employers about reasonable adjustments, ensuring that Restart clients are positively advocated for, with a focus on the individual strengths’ participants will bring to the role.
- Employment advisers should discuss what reasonable adjustments could be asked for to help match the job role a Restart client may be suitable for. The support should be tailored to the individual so that they are getting the adjustments that they need and that will help them to succeed at work.
- As well as ensuring that Restart clients have access to suitable work environments, it is just as important that Restart offices are also suitable to support the needs of those with long-term health conditions including neurodiversity. Consideration may need to be given to the environment, training needs and methods of communication.
- It may be helpful for Restart providers to engage with external experts as well as experts by experience when developing support processes. This will ensure that the information provided is unbiased, current and relevant to the workplace.

Communication styles

Neurodivergent individuals may benefit from different styles of communication. It is important to be clear and concise as spoken statements may be taken literally or facial expressions or tone of voice interpreted differently. This means that guidance and information given to Restart participants needs to be clear and consistent.¹¹³ It is better to have short and simple statements when communicating important information.

¹¹³ Wharmby, P. (2023). *Untypical: How the world isn't built for autistic people and what we should all do about it*. Mudlark.

When employment advisers work with a new participant, it's key to focus on understanding strengths, any areas of challenge and their working preferences.¹¹⁴ It is best to not make any assumptions and ask questions to find an appropriate communication style. Silver, Nittrouer and Hebl suggest explicitly detailing communication expectations as this can help to reduce any ambiguities. This could involve setting clear guidelines surrounding communication while the participant is on the programme.¹¹⁵ Guidance with communicating in a group is also suggested, especially for helping to interpret non-verbal or social cues, and using plain language that is less likely to be misinterpreted. Using an agenda, communicating verbally and visually or using prioritised bullet points to communicate key points can help to manage group activities or training sessions.¹¹⁶

Recommendations

- Encourage conversation about neurodiversity in a safe and open space. This will help neurodivergent people to feel comfortable disclosing at the recruitment stage and when they start work.
- Neurodivergent people will have different needs, so it is best to understand their personal preferences and use a variety of communication methods when working with a group. Establish their preferences early on in the employment support relationship.
- Communicate in a clear and concise manner, taking care of tone of voice, jargon and facial expressions.

Conclusion and further research

With recent statistics highlighting that there is an autism employment gap, and that people living with a neurodivergent condition have a worse employment rate in comparison with those with other disabilities, it is clear that more support is required to give people who are neurodivergent access to good quality employment opportunities. The Restart scheme helps individuals who have been out of work for at least nine months with the provision of enhanced job support. With a concern that individuals with both diagnosed and undiagnosed neurodivergent conditions are more likely to disengage from support, this

¹¹⁴ CIPD. (2023). *Employers need greater understanding of how to manage and support neurodiverse talent, urges the CIPD*. <https://www.cipd.org/uk/about/press-releases/manage-support-neurodiverse-talent/>

¹¹⁵ Silver, E. R., Nittrouer, C. L., & Hebl, M. R. (2023). Beyond the business case: Universally designing the workplace for neurodiversity and inclusion. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 16(1), 45-49.

¹¹⁶ Hutson, P., & Hutson, J. (2023). Neurodiversity and inclusivity in the workplace: Biopsychosocial interventions for promoting competitive advantage. *Journal of Organizational Psychology*, 23(2), 1-16. <http://dx.doi.org/10.33423/jop.v23i2.6159>

research aimed to understand what the role of employment advisers and providers is in supporting neurodivergent clients into work, and what evidence of good practice exists.

While a lot of the literature uses the terms ‘neurodivergent people’ or ‘neurodiverse groups’, each person is different and will experience the world of work differently, or may have multiple neurodivergent conditions, so each person should be considered as an individual with their own different ways of working.

The research highlights key areas where employment providers can have a positive impact in helping neurodivergent individuals into employment. This includes a number of stages throughout the recruitment and selection process itself. Employment providers have a key role in helping individuals in recognising their knowledge, skills and previous work or volunteering experiences and how these can be used and applied in a new role. They can help individuals understand job descriptions and advocate on behalf of individuals if further information or clarity is required from an employee. Interviews can be daunting experiences for all, but could provide additional challenges for job candidates who are neurodivergent, and consequently there is a role employment advisers can undertake in providing interview preparation and ensuring that potential candidates feel as comfortable and prepared as they can be for any selection process.

There are calls for additional research into neurodiversity and the workplace, to better understand how individuals can be supported to work well. The longitudinal effects of current training, support and reasonable adjustments across different employers, sectors and industries are also areas in which there is currently a research gap. Doyle and McDowall explain that seeing the benefits of this would be evidenced by a reduced disability employment gap.¹¹⁷

Knowledge and understanding about neurodiversity and work will facilitate better support for individuals to gain and maintain a job. For employment providers this means building on existing training, as well as reviewing communication and delivery of provision within offices.

¹¹⁷ Doyle, N., & McDowall, A. (2021). Diamond in the rough? An “empty review” of research into “neurodiversity” and a road map for developing the inclusion agenda. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*, 41(3), 352-382. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EDI-06-2020-0172>

This research has been limited by the lack of published evidence on the role of employment providers and what they can do to best support those with neurodiversity into employment. This has led to a focus on using the expertise of advisers to help adapt recommendations from the literature to an employment programme environment, to help ensure that the findings from this research are as useful and practical as possible. There is value in continuing to collect and share good practice from Restart providers in order to inform better delivery both now and for future programmes.