Future of work

Behind the masks: good work for autistic women

A toolkit for employers, HR, line managers and autistic people

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Foreward

Experiencing good quality work is instrumental in increasing and sustaining good health and wellbeing. Accordingly, our mission at the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) focuses on helping to bring about sustainable improvements in employment policy and HR/workforce management. We achieve this by increasing the understanding and improving the practice of key decision makers in policy bodies and employing organisations. In our latest future of work knowledge exchange, we bring insights on the employment experiences of an under-researched and under-served group: autistic women. The implications from this research focus on what good quality work means for autistic women and what employers can do to better support this group in the workplace.

Improving access to meaningful, high-quality work is a key priority for the current government. Their policy programme has two key strands. Get Britain Working aims to close employment gaps for disadvantaged groups and recognises the need for autism-inclusion in employment support and education. For those already in employment, Making Work Pay aims to tackle employment insecurity, poor working conditions and low pay. However, beyond these knotty problems, employers' knowledge about inclusion must be enhanced to optimise their practice, so the benefits of workplace inclusion can be realised by all.

This output is the result of a knowledge exchange between Stevie Barnes from University College London (UCL), and Claudia Plowden Roberts and myself from IES. It is based predominantly on Stevie's in-depth qualitative research with autistic working women, which was guided by a lived experience advisory group formed of autistic women and IES team members. Claudia contributed insight based on projects she and IES colleagues have led into neurodiversity and work. The messages reported here are grounded in the lived experience of what supports autistic women at work and provide unrivalled access to the changes employers can make to achieve full inclusion.

Publication is timely, given the House of Lords Committee review of how well the Autism Act of 2009 is working. However, the practical applicability of the evidence here is what will make the difference to autistic people at work.

Becci Newton, Director of Public Policy Research

Acknowledgements

I would like to personally thank every individual who has dedicated their time, energy and experience to this research. Creating research that is not only for and about autistic women, but with and by them, was a key aim at the beginning of this project.

This has involved steering from an incredible advisory group, whose enthusiasm and input has been invaluable in ensuring this research is true to its goal of achieving social impact. I am grateful for every individual who shared details of this project to ensure we were able to include the voices of autistic women. Thank you to the women who shared their employment experiences with me. Every interview was humbling, insightful and powerful. Your experiences not only shape these findings, but I hope will make a positive difference to the employment experience of others.

Lastly, thank you the UCL Community Research Initiative (CRIS) for connecting me with IES. This has been a fantastic experience and period of professional growth, and I am looking forward to continuing the journey of co-creating meaningful social research.

Stevie Barnes

What we know about autistic women and work

In the UK, there are an estimated 700,000 people who have an autism diagnosis, including 1 in 100 children. The Buckland Review of Autism Employment highlights the autism employment gap, where just 3 in 10 autistic adults are in work, compared to 5 in 10 of all disabled people and 8 in 10 for people without long-term impairments. Additionally, autistic people face the largest pay gap of all disability groups.

Current research suggests that autism is diagnosed more frequently in males than in females, with an estimated ratio of 3:1. However, this disparity is understood to reflect the limitations of historically gendered research, rather than actual prevalence. Many autistic women and girls are underdiagnosed or misdiagnosed due to outdated stereotypes and a lack of awareness about how autism can present differently across genders. Autistic women and girls may be more likely to 'mask' their traits, adapting their behaviour to fit social expectations, making any challenges in social situations less visible. During education, they may perform well academically or maintain friendships, leading to missed or delayed diagnoses. Additionally, existing diagnostic tools are often based on male-centric models of autism, meaning they may not fully capture the traits more commonly seen in the 'female autism phenotype'.

Gendered diagnosis of autism

The gendered perspective of autism can result in many autistic women and girls receiving a diagnosis later in life. While there is no universal definition of what constitutes a 'late' diagnosis, it can range from adolescence to middle adulthood. An autism diagnosis later in life can be confusing; it can provide understanding and identity, but also mean that individuals may have missed out on early interventions, tailored education, and support services that can improve their long-term outcomes. This delay can also contribute to higher rates of co-occurring mental health conditions, such as anxiety, depression, or personality disorders, which may complicate workplace experiences and support needs.

Alongside this, there has been growing discussion around the 'increasing diagnosis of autism'. While some interpret this as an increase in prevalence, others emphasise that the change is largely due to improved awareness, more sensitive screening tools, and earlier identification, particularly in historically underdiagnosed groups. An increase in measured autism prevalence is likely to reflect the combined effects of an expanded community capacity to identify and support autistic individuals.

Misunderstandings and underdiagnosis of autism in women can create significant barriers to accessing support, particularly in employment settings. Autistic women may engage in masking or impression management at work, which may lead to stress, anxiety and feelings of being stigmatised. However, the limited research that exists highlights that autistic women seek meaningful careers aligned with their interests and strengths. In recent IES research, knowledge and understanding of neurodiversity and work can facilitate better support for neurodivergent individuals to gain and sustain a job. For employment providers this means enhancing existing training, reviewing communication, and delivery of support provision within offices. However, there is also an argument that an individual's talent and skills should be prioritised over any diagnosis. There is a clear business case for having a neurodiverse workforce, but certain provisions are required to ensure that neurodiverse employees can thrive at work.

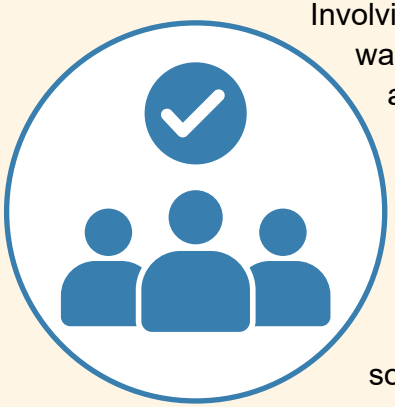
Exploring autistic women's experiences at work through good work frameworks

The Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices ('The Taylor Review') (Taylor et al., 2017) recognised the shifting labour market and the need to address exploitative working practices. It was influential in highlighting the importance of job quality on people's health and wellbeing, and how this contributes to performance and productivity. This review centred on the importance of good work for all, leading the Government to prioritise policies that aimed to enable everyone to have the opportunity for fair and sustainable work (Gov UK, 2018; 2024; 2025). The aim was to influence organisations to expand good work beyond economic measures of job quality, such as employment and pay rates, to recognise broader factors contributing to accessible and sustainable employment, including measures for training, work-life balance, and employee participation. More generally, good work frameworks consider the impact of employment conditions and working environments on job quality, considering how these factors influence wellbeing, development, and productivity (CIPD, 2024; WEF, 2025; Greater London Authority, 2025).

Despite good work frameworks promoting fair and decent work, they often miss the intersectional implications of characteristics such as gender, (dis) ability, race and age. We know from the latest CIPD (2024) Good Work Index that disabled employees are significantly less satisfied at work than employees who are not disabled, and employees who identify as women and/or disabled are more likely to have experienced conflict at work. This highlights the need to address job quality for these groups, but to do this effectively requires further detail on the reasons for these responses and particularly the role and impact of intersecting identities. At an organisational level, good work frameworks can guide a people-centred approach to understanding job quality and developing HR strategies, but what constitutes good work for one person may be different for another.

Through an in-depth qualitative approach exploring the experiences of autistic women at work, this research gained a deep insight into the enablers and barriers of good work for autistic women. In turn, this contributes to the broader knowledge of what constitutes good work and inclusivity in modern organisations.

Project methods



Involving people with lived experiences in shaping this research was key to both addressing the underrepresentation of autistic communities in autism research and ensuring the value of this research for the communities it represents. Sampling prioritised speaking to individuals aged 18+ who identified as being autistic (diagnosed or self-diagnosed), as a woman, and who had experience of paid work in the last 18 months. A range of recruitment channels were utilised, including autism charities and social media.

An advisory group brought together the knowledge of three autistic women with lived experience and five researchers from IES, including specialists in diversity and inclusion research and in health and wellbeing at work. This group met in May and July 2025, guiding inclusive research methods, an understanding of the key factors impacting good work for autistic women, and effective ways to disseminate the findings. The experiences of autistic women at work were explored through 12 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with autistic women in May and June 2025. The research tools were informed by lived experience and there were options for inclusive engagement in the research, such as submitting written answers or speaking by phone or over video-conferencing tools. In the interviews, participants were provided with a safe space to share their past and current experiences of work, contributing their own knowledge and observations of the barriers and enablers of good quality work.

CASE STUDY 1

Angela is a fully qualified therapist. She previously enjoyed a successful and fulfilling career in an area she enjoys. Following a career break to raise her young children, Angela has recently returned to employment. She has struggled to return to a role that aligned with her previous skills and experience. The role she is in now is at a lower level and on lower pay. For Angela, this is a sacrifice she must make for being a mother. She has disclosed being autistic, however HR has advised she needs to ask for specific workplace adjustments to get any support. Since Angela's return to work, she has felt less fulfilled and misses the level she used to work at. She is unhappy at work because the role does not enable her to contribute her talent and interests. It has also taken significant time working in this role to understand the adjustments she needs. In this time, her mental health has been impacted and she is considering leaving her role.

Key messages

1 Understand individual motivators, interests and skills to enable sustainable, high-quality work

The women in this research were motivated by purposeful, meaningful work. They prefer and feel motivated by work that focuses on their specialist interests or particular skills. Colleagues and managers, through their attitudes, approach to relationships and workplace support, were important facilitators of autistic women being able to actualise these motivations, interests and skills in their jobs. In contrast, work disconnected from personal interests or skills could be demotivating.

Action: A tailored approach, considering individual preferences and skills, can be the difference between autistic women surviving or thriving at work. Improve employer understanding of individual motivators, interests and skills as these are important to consider in job crafting, performance management and professional development.

2 Adapt work environments to be inclusive of different individuals' sensory needs and experiences

Lighting, smells, sounds, crowds, temperature, movement and social interaction were all shared as sensory experiences that could be overwhelming at work. The effect of these experiences included feeling unwell from bright lights, overwhelmed in crowded spaces, or pain from cold temperatures, all of which are individual and highlight feelings of being perceived as 'different'. The perception that sensory differences are minority or isolated experiences, which may not be supported at work, often leads autistic women to continue to work in environments that cause discomfort. The effect of these experiences was unique to the individual, including physical pain, exhaustion, and anxiety, which is often unnoticed or misunderstood by colleagues.

Action: Ensure that workplace adjustments and flexibilities respond to individual experiences and preferences for the working environment. The experiences noted by our sample indicate some of the ways autistic people's experiences of their environment can be explored to find out what might be most comfortable for them. Employers may use some of the external links we have provided as a starting point to explore workplace adjustments that may help improve the working environment for their employees.

3 Develop awareness of and provide wellbeing support to prevent the negative impacts of masking for autistic women

Masking for autistic women can include camouflaging autistic traits (including suppressing sensory needs and sensitivities) and performing feminine behaviours, both due to a fear of prejudice or stigma. Autistic women sometimes feel their autistic characteristics mean they are less likely to conform to feminine ideals. Those who made a conscious decision to be authentic or unmask often experienced stigmatising behaviours from others.

Action: Many autistic women's needs go unnoticed. While masking can help them 'fit in' (from an external perspective), this often leads to burnout (felt from an internal perspective). As autistic women feel they must choose between stigma or hiding, this masking can harm mental health, performance and productivity. Employers should make a conscious effort to provide inclusive working environments that are open to different ways of working, whilst demonstrating zero-tolerance to all forms of discrimination. This includes considering ways to identify, acknowledge and address forms of ableism, sexism, racism and ageism in the workplace.

4 Improve understanding and avoid assumptions of autistic women's preferences for social connection at work

A need for social connection was distinguished from a dislike of group social interactions or feeling overwhelmed by social communication. Many autistic women in this study shared a preference for not socialising at work or collaborating as part of a large team. This typically related to individual sensory experiences of group socialising. However, many still desired social connection, and good work could facilitate this. Note a clear distinction between group social interactions and smaller, meaningful social connections.

Action: Assumptions about autistic people's social preferences should be avoided. Employers and colleagues need to understand individual preferences for social connection, be aware of different types of social interaction, and the impact these can have on an individual. The best way to achieve this is to speak with and listen to individual employees.

Together, these key messages provide a strong foundation for understanding what good work means for autistic women within all workplaces.

5 Reframe knowledge and understanding about autism away from a 'disorder' or 'superpower'

The women in this study perceived their employers to either lack an understanding of autism or to act based on outdated perceptions. This was often grounded in deficit-based thinking, viewing autism as a medical problem to be fixed, or is centred around knowledge of autism in boys, which neglects to understand the nuanced characteristics of autistic women. Thinking based on autism as either a 'disorder' or 'superpower' was felt to be both damaging and misrepresenting. Autistic employees receive detrimental treatment for characteristics or behaviours perceived as different.

Action: When employers or colleagues lack knowledge and awareness about autism, this is damaging to autistic people's experience at work. Deficit-based thinking or workplace support focuses on fixing a problem rather than enabling performance, can lead to poor support and, in some cases, prejudice and bullying. This prevents psychological safety at work and often means autistic women are less likely to share a diagnosis or request support. Instead of viewing differences as deficits, we recommend employers adopt a neurodiversity inclusive approach. This instead normalises autism and other neurological differences, enabling employers to be curious about how to adapt the workplace to accommodate them.

6 Ensure autistic women have access to the workplace support they need to enable performance

The support autistic women need is often very individual. Barriers to accessing support include a lack of employer knowledge, the need to self-advocate, and mistreatment from employers. In addition, many interviewees shared a conflict between individual needs and employers' focus on creating one-size-fits-all solutions. This often led to the prioritisation of brand image, tick box processes, and the creation of inclusion initiatives that segregate, ultimately leading to unequal outcomes. For example, employee resource groups (ERG) and community fundraising activities that were celebrated by employers were perceived negatively by some employees. It was felt that such initiatives were prioritised over individual support needs.

Action: Develop employer policies and procedures which prioritise individual need over reputation, so they achieve people-centred outcomes. This can enable performance and productivity for those needing specific adjustments. Involving people with lived-experience can help to ensure that solutions benefit those they are designed to support, whilst also benefiting broader strategic objectives. Regularly seeking feedback from employees can help ensure that solutions remain fit-for-purpose as the workplace and individual needs continue to evolve.

7 Recognise line managers as people who can "make or break" the employment experience

The line manager relationship was considered the most important to participants. However, line managers can act as a barrier to good work by deficit thinking, destructive criticism, and being ego-driven. In contrast, inclusive line managers who enable good employee performance demonstrate aspirational leadership skills by challenging deficit thinking, creating safe spaces and adopting strength-based techniques.

Action: The attitudes, knowledge and awareness of line managers have a significant influence on autistic women's experiences at work, which have implications for workplace policies, hiring practices, training and development. Inclusive, strengths-based management styles and managers who bring an open mind, who are curious and foster an inclusive team culture were preferred by the autistic women who contributed to this study.

8 Consider the impact that others' attitudes can have on autistic women's experiences at work

The attitudes of others influence good work experiences. Stigma related to autistic preferences and gender identity was experienced by interviewees, which was compounded for individuals with multiple marginalised identities, whether related to race, age or parent status. When attitudes toward autism are negative, they prevent disclosure, support and opportunities to work in fulfilling careers. When attitudes to autism are positive, they enable support and scaffold development, promoting safe, healthy and productive workplaces.

Action: Solutions for improving workplace inclusion, both for autistic women and other disadvantaged groups, need to start with how we approach and think about differences. Changes to policies, procedures and training programmes will benefit from curiosity and an open mind. Rather than providing support and solutions that align with specific identities, we recommend listening to individual experiences and addressing structural barriers. Providing opportunities for involvement in decision-making, training design, or policy development, can help identify and address areas of bias or stigma. Organisations in a position to work with external expertise may benefit from bringing together internal and external knowledge.

CASE STUDY 2

Jolie is a data analyst. It is a profession they excel at and enjoy. However, it has not always been this easy. In their last role, Jolie found the open plan office and social expectations in meetings overwhelming. Jolie's manager was unsupportive following requests for help. They felt they were getting into trouble at work and didn't fit in, frequently overwhelmed by the environment and social demands. Jolie feared being sacked, so they quit before this happened. Now in a new job, Jolie is fulfilling an almost identical role, but has a supportive manager. It has made a world of difference. They are recognised as the top performer in the team and are now in a position where they can advocate for other team members.

What are the real-world implications…

For employing organisations:

- As 'culture setters', leaders should act as role models for inclusion and share their own practices and needs to embed a culture of neuro-inclusion.
- Improve understanding and awareness of autism by implementing and monitoring inclusive practices and policies in the workplace.
- Establish a strengths-based approach, focusing on individuals' skills, interests and potential and ensure that support is in place regardless of a diagnosis.
- Develop inclusion strategies based on knowledge and understanding, rather than brand image, focusing on longer-term impact and starting from the inside.
- Ensure that workplace adjustments are available to all from day one of employment.

For HR:

- Enable access to workplace adjustments, providing examples of what has previously been possible as a starting point.
- Ensure that workplace adjustments are accessible to all new starters, even if not neurodivergent.
- Ensure training on neurodiversity is informed by updated knowledge and practice.
- Develop listening mechanisms to tailor approaches, training and support.
- Make sure that inclusion training is available to managers and colleagues.
- Create a neurodiversity policy and a workplace adjustments policy.
- Develop a 'diversity and inclusion passport', but allow individuals to decide what information can be shared and with who.
- Look at inclusion needs for all employees (don't wait for diagnosis to act).
- Live organisational values and train and monitor line managers for inclusion.
- Facilitate conversations to understand individual preferences for experiences at work, with guidance on discussion points and sources of support.

For line managers:

- Create psychologically safe spaces, where staff feel comfortable talking about their preferences.
- Live and challenge company policies where necessary.
- Bring curiosity and personalisation to each line manager relationship, with support and guidance for these discussions.

When taking ownership of your own professional development, ensure that you consider how you can best support the diversity of your team. Be open to new sources of knowledge and reflect openly with your team members.

For autistic women:

There is a lot of existing research focusing on what autistic people can do to improve their experiences, outcomes and interactions with others. It is often created by non-autistic individuals. With this research, we wanted to explore an alternative approach. Instead, autistic women were involved throughout the process, and the recommendations here are focused on what employers can do.

We hope that autistic women feel confident to share these findings with their own employers, communities and networks. It may be that our findings spark conversations that lead to greater support and advocacy. Ultimately, we hope that these findings contribute to a growing awareness and acceptance of the experiences of autistic women.

CASE STUDY 3

Katya is an academic with a passion for social justice. She has lived in the UK for 10 years and in that time, balanced work with volunteering in her community. In her workplace, she is challenged due to her communication style as well as her sensory preferences. As a woman, she feels her ideas are not taken seriously. As an openly autistic adult, assumptions are made about her intellectual abilities. In addition, she has found that colleagues do not consider her accent professional. These intersecting prejudices create barriers that prevent Katya from demonstrating her full potential in her current role, let alone progress. She is more productive working from home, away from colleagues and sensory barriers. Due to a growing understanding of how to best accommodate her own needs, Katya is exploring options for self-employment.

Links to resources

Ambitious about Autism: Toolkits and resources (for professionals supporting autistic colleagues in the workplace)

BeyondAutism Employability Toolkit

Discover Autism Research and Employment (DARE) Adjustments Toolkit (see pp.17-20)

National Autistic Society (NAS): Advice and Guidance > Employment

UCL Centre for Research in Autism and Education (CRAE)

Quotes from participants

"I knew I had to pretend to be someone else when I was talking to other people like that. And so that obviously took a huge toll on me. It was like this additional level of exhaustion at the end of the day. But there were some days where I was just, like, so overwhelmed by that, where I ended up walking out of work because I was like, I can't talk to one more person today. I just cannot do it."

"Because I'm autistic, I tend to be a bit more blunt and I tend to behave in a way that women are not really expected to behave. I think there is always a shock to the system when I respond. I do something and it's not in a way that someone would expect a woman to do it."

"We're not going to achieve anything because we need to start from the baseline, and the baseline is the society view about autistic people."

"I didn't realise how much effort I was putting in to masking until I found a job where I didn't have to."

"I have to mask a lot in my emails to sound a little bit fluffier. Like I hope you're well, exclamation marks, that sort of thing. Otherwise, they're intimidated. I think men get away with a lot more than women because I was never rude. I just know what I want, and they will ask for it, kind of thing. There's a lot more struggles being autistic woman in terms of masking in terms of like how you present yourself so, what am I going to wear, my makeup. Just trying to look normal, neurotypical. There's a lot more pressure on women than men in that regard. I also feel like people are more forgiving of men."

"There was a noticeable difference in the way that I was spoken to by managers [after disclosing autism]. Basically immediately. They went from recognising and speaking to me like an equal to using phrases like 'thank you for that response, it was really mature' in like meetings and stuff it was weird. I kind of felt like I'd suddenly been infantilised."

"I think they just said, OK, what reasonable adjustments would you like? And I'm like, thinking well, I've been out of employment for like, 10 years. I have no idea. I was hoping you as HR would have a few ideas."

"I do have a little bit of a fear that I won't be seen as competent or like able to do my work or something if I disclose just because of the way that they kind of talk about and view autism as like a deficit."

"Now I understand that it could have been easier with adjustments, but I didn't know what adjustments to ask for."

"If there's someone who is different from you and it's really important not to let that colour your perception of the work that they are doing. Good work means recognising good work when it's being done like that combination of accountability, giving people locus of control to actually fulfil the things for which they're accountable and giving them the flexibility to do it their way."

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“Most people’s idea of autism is based on stereotypically male traits. Many people don’t know what it’s like for an autistic woman or know that it can look very different.”


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