

Guest editorial

Hilary Fertig, Nicola Martin and Mitzi Waltz

This important special edition of *Advances in Autism* focusses on employment. It is designed specifically to be of practical use to autistic and non-autistic readers alike when considering what good employment practice might look like and how this may be achieved.

What I find particularly striking about this volume is the commonality between authors in their identification of barriers to employment, enablers to circumvent these barriers and the benefits of employment both to autistic individuals and to society. Road blocks identified in the quest to find employment include lack of decent work experience on the one hand and recruitment and selection processes, which do not play to the strengths of autistic potential employees, on the other. Once in work, progress can be hampered by a range of environmental factors, such as sensory overload and stressful levels of ambiguity. These could be effectively altered, often at low or no cost. Co-workers and managers can be enabling or disabling but often lack understanding of how best to work effectively with autistic colleagues, making social interactions stressful. While training is sometimes positioned as the solution, it remains a complicated idea, because helping neurotypical people to develop their understanding and empathy towards autistic people is a subtle process that can be shrouded in stereotyping, although it does not have to be.

The term “disclosure” is also contested, and for some autistic people, it represents a Catch-22 because of the potential for stereotyping – and the fact that once a diagnosis is known in the workplace, it cannot be undone.

Mentoring can be effective, but only if it is based on nuanced understanding rather than autism stereotypes.

As long as obstacles litter the paths of skilled and highly motivated individuals in their quest to find, retain and progress in work, everyone misses out. Some of the studies included in this issue provide alarming quantitative information, substantiating unemployment rates in the range of 80% among autistic people, as well as high rates of underemployment, which constitute a waste of talent. The authors of this special edition acknowledge these concerns, and set out to contribute to a rigorous, research-informed evidence base that identifies the reasons behind the statistics, and ways in which the barriers identified might usefully be circumvented for the benefit of individuals and society. Often solutions appear simple on the surface, but a deeper dive into the findings of the various studies included here reveal greater complexity, especially around the need for cultural change in the workplace to address multiple forms of often subtle oppression and discrimination that make work unnecessarily difficult.

This volume is also informed by the insights of autistic participants and scholars, whose insider perspectives illuminate the discussion with extreme clarity, shining a bright light on what could be done to address inequalities in the workplace for autistic people.

While reading through this volume, please ask yourself this question: “what can I usefully do with this information to improve every stage of the working lives of fellow autistic citizens?” We hope that in the near future, we can report on effective responses that deliver on the high potential of autistic people as employees.

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Note: In the UK, identity first language is generally preferred by autistic people. The papers included in this special edition have been written by authors from a number of different countries. We have preserved their language preferences.

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