# Reflection on Employability Skills – Ambitious about Autism

The aim of the online discussion was to focus on the very real, pressing issue of employability and autism in an ever changing employment market. From personal experience, there are currently a great deal of challenges that need to be overcome in order to readdress this social issue. There has been for quite sometime, a huge gap in quality provision between the transition of education into employment, regional inequality (in terms of opportunity) and specifically where you should go for help.

Having been invited to join the conversation from a fellow friend and patron of Ambitious about Autism and also being reminded of it from Autus and Hao2, I was keen to really get involved as it is not only a topic I feel hugely passionate about, but I was also keen to get involved with Ambitious about Autism for quite sometime.

The myVoice chat, was aimed at employability and autism, that coincided with the launch of Ambitious about Autism’s Employ Autism Campaign. The chat was also joined by Dave Moore from Santander UK and Oli Monks from Place with Purpose, who were on hand to answer any pressing questions we had about how autism and employability skills can more often than not, easily work with each other.

Dave Moore introduced Santander UK, stating that the organisation adopted an integrated approach to sure colleagues can access all the help they need in one place. He talked about how this approach means that the organisation looks to support a colleague’s safety at work, their physical health and psychological wellbeing. He described how all of these elements are looked at so that reasonable adjustments achieve a set range of objectives, that continues with not just new applicants but also existing colleagues. He also acknowledged the importance of being prepared to review any given support measure as per each individual and to make all changes where necessary to the working environment.

Oli Monks introduced Place with Purpose, that aims to provide both interest and industry-based programmes, to help ensure talented people with disabilities are able to access employment. He also runs a business called BagSee and has worked for Unilever in HR, demonstrating his experience in employability from what larger companies look for and can provide.

As the discussion went on, it was interesting to hear the wide range of perspectives from the participants of the myVoice chat. It was harrowing to hear quite early on in the conversation, that one participant felt that she knew people who either let their voices heard on what they think of their lives and those who simply suffer in silence. This particularly struck a nerve with me, as I know just how much that rings true, not just in my own life but in that of so many others. It was also established, from quite early on an agreed consensus amongst the participants that there are still employers who are not yet on a level with Santander to support people with autism or other disabilities (though there may be a range of factors besides not wanting to make any given change). It was established that they simply don’t understand that autism is actually an advantage in many circumstances and all it takes is to invest in that individual through reasonable adjustments.

It was later established and agreed that being exposed and introduced to a number of different workplaces, either whilst in 6th form/an apprenticeship or whilst at university, is vital in building resilience (helping with psychological wellbeing and dealing with uncertainty) from an early onset. It also encourages candidates to always want to learn beyond just subjects that gain paper qualifications with a grade on.

This way of thinking, also gives perspective candidates the ability to really explore the importance of ‘universal skills’ and gives perspective employers the opportunity to recognise the **ability** in disabled candidates and bringing about a positive ethos throughout. There was also a recognition from David Moore about the emphasis is now towards values and behaviours rather than purely academic qualifications. Values include passion for the role, what you can bring to the table (your unique skills/playing to your strengths), being able to collaborate with others, straight talking, being able to demonstrate how you’re proactive/aspirational (volunteering etc), emphasise the positives out of any negative past experience (no-one is perfect and employers get that), speaking up and taking an active role. He also talked about tackling mental health stigma and breaking down this stigma across society and not just within the confines of any given employer.

It is hoped when this process is adopted amongst all employers and indeed schools/colleges, it will help alleviate the ‘Catch22’ and the further challenges autistic people face by poor support and employer discrimination against them. There was a mention of the ‘Two-ticks’ accreditation, although I think this still doesn’t necessary guarantee you an interview and more needs to go into how the ‘positive about disabled people’ ethos can be improved. I cannot express the importance of prompting, teaching and encouraging all of these factors. We currently live in a society (including the education system) that does not understand the importance of this and it is crushing the millennial generation (who already have to face lower/stagnating wages even after they manage to get a job/career, whilst the older generation enjoy bigger pensions). Whilst it is argued that older generations have it far cushier than young people (with jobs for life and comfortable pensions), the advantage the younger generation have is the wider scope of opportunity and being able to move from job to job, career to career more often. But with this drives a lot of uncertainty, stress and continuous change.

It was agreed that currently, young people are pressurised to apply for any old job, regardless of whether they will enjoy it or how stressful they will find it. This is not only unfair but often dangerous way of trying to get people back into work, it isn’t productive, it damages people’s health and there is no ‘quick fix’ to this problem. It also fails those who have low incomes and have no choice but to be forced by the Jobcentre to go into a low skilled job and it also affects those in areas of the UK where the support is poor and woeful at best. Indeed, the way in which it is being tackled currently is actually making the problem **worse**, the whole issue about the wider economy (which is already turbulent), people doing jobs/careers not relevant to their degree (because of being pressurised into making life changing decisions they weren’t ready to make (too young, not enough experience, values change as people get older) and regardless of all this ‘competitiveness’ in the job market) and employers struggling to find skills candidates (despite what some say about it being ‘very competitive’) all of which is **only going to get worse unless this changes now.** It was agreed that it is about putting the right person in the right role, but surely that’s what all of us want right? But we’re completely getting our priorities wrong with the system we have at present.

During the discussion, there was also a mention on balancing between stereotypes (a system very similar to that of the UK education system putting people in boxes) for when some employers do recognise and want to support disabled candidates into work, one such employer being [Microsoft](https://news.microsoft.com/en-gb/2016/02/26/microsoft-extends-autism-and-inclusive-hiring-programme-to-uk/). Again, this falls on the wider argument about the current system generalising far too much and putting people in boxes far too much.

I was very inspired by what was covered and whilst it was difficult for me personally to talk about such frustrating experiences, it was inspiring to know that there are many organisations (and that number is growing all the time) is recognising there is a problem and positive steps are being taken to address that problem. I hope that in time, that the private/third sector, will eventually force both the public and the government to wake up and shake up the outdated failing system into something that allows all individuals to be themselves and to be happy in themselves when contributing their talents to a career, job and/or employer.

I look forward to these exciting debates and what will happen in the months ahead.