

**How could Ireland improve their Autism Unemployment Rate?:  
An Analysis of how Specialist Supported Employment Programmes, Autism  
Recruitment Consultancies and Government Legislation Worldwide are addressing  
Employment Challenges for People on the Autism Spectrum.**

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## Submission of Thesis and Dissertation

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## **Abstract**

This research is based on supported employment programmes that are focused solely on people with autism (also known as autism spectrum disorder or ASD) and what these programmes are doing to support them. I will be discussing in this section what autism is and how certain characteristics of autism can cause struggles if they are unsupported in the workplace. As part of this literature review, I am going to identify problems that are evident in Ireland around the issue of high unemployment in people with autism spectrum disorder. The main area of focus in this paper will be examining the reasons of the high level of unemployment in the autism community and how supported employment programs are addressing this issue. The methodology section which will be made up of philosophical assumptions based on opinions, aims and objectives on the topic of employment programmes and information on the research question. The analysis and finding section will include a discussion on government policies within Ireland and abroad.

## **The Introduction**

During the 1950s, 63 people in Ireland had received a diagnosis of being on the autism spectrum, with only 3 of these people being in paid employment. Adult autism outcome research states that 11 out of 96 individuals in their 20's had found work. Only one person who had a diagnosis of autism out of 20 people with an educational background had found a job. (Lenus, 2000)

From then on to this day employment outcomes for people on the spectrum are still considerably low. There has been a small increase in employment over a small number of decades with only 20% of people in employment throughout the world as of 2017 (Theirishtimes, 2017). Supported employment programmes within a company or agency are helping employers to see the benefits in hiring people with autism. These programs also help career development for people who have autism.

This research will discuss autism spectrum disorder itself, as well as the autism unemployment rate from a worldwide view. This is to highlight the issue of unemployment as most countries have a worryingly high rate. Next this paper will investigate the obstacles for autism employment that may be linked to the high rates of unemployment. The obstacles will include communication barriers, sensory issues, job advertisements and the interview process from the perspective of an autistic person. Following that will be a discussion on what supported employment is doing to try and help these issues. This discussion will include financial aspects, a deeper insight into what supported employment programmes are doing for people on the autism spectrum, theory of mind, examples in the workplace and support for managers in helping autistic employees.

The data collection will discuss secondary and primary sources of data in the literature and analysis. Limitations and ethics will cover the covid-19 situation and the limits it has caused this research, limitations in data available to undertake this research and the limited time and resources available. Data analysis methods will include information regarding an analysis into government strategies on autism employment.

The last chapter of the analysis and findings will discuss and analyse government documents on autism employment. Various bills including the most up to date bills and older bills and legislation will be analysed. A comparative analysis will show how in Australia a higher rate of employment has come to be.



## **Section 1: The Literature Review**

### **Autism Spectrum Disorder.**

According to The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders fifth edition (2013), in terms of change, Autistic adults may struggle to be independent due to the difficulty that is faced with new changes every day. People on the autism spectrum struggle to adapt to new institutes, new routines and new environments. People with autism may have difficulty with a new task if there are elements which are unfamiliar or unknown to them. In employment this may cause the individual to require a longer period of time getting to know and perfecting the new task. This is part of the poor psychosocial functioning such as gaining employment and living independently which many autistic adults face. These are a contributing factor to social isolation and lack of good communication (e.g., not being able to seek help.) Giving the correct support structures can have positive mental health consequences as the person on the autism spectrum reaches adulthood. Restricted interests and strict patterns of behaviour are present in the very early stages of an autistic person's life. This means that the person with autism will focus on one particular interest.

“Autism is a lifelong developmental condition that affects the way a person communicates and relates to people around them. The ability to develop friendships is impaired, as is their capacity to understand other people's feelings. All people with autism have impairments in social interaction, social communication and imagination.” (Irish Society for Autism, 2012-2019).

Autism is a condition that may affect a person's social interaction and may create challenges in terms of communication and restricted interests. People with autism experience the world in a much more different and complicated way compared to people who do not have the condition. They find it difficult to relate to people around them and they experience greater difficulty socialising and understanding the social norms in society (National Autistic Society, 2018). Due to these challenges, people with ASD ask themselves why it is that they feel they are so different and why is it that people do not understand them (National Autistic Society, 2018). People on the autism spectrum have a very different way of thinking compared to people who do not have an autism diagnosis. According to Autismspeaks

(2020) Sensory issues accompany an autism diagnosis. Sensory issues involve an autistic person responding to different stimuli in a hyper sensitive way. Some of the stimuli include sight, smell, sound, touch, taste and body awareness. A person with autism may find a light is extremely bright compared to people who are neuro-typical. This is due to their senses becoming overwhelmed or over sensitive.

### **Autistic traits**

In this section I will discuss some examples of the different autistic traits present in someone with a diagnosis of autism. The autistic traits which I will be explaining throughout this research are; sensory overload, communication issues with neurotypicals and non-verbal traits in autistic individuals.

According to The Autisticsociety (2020) neurotypical is a term used within the autism community. A neurotypical is someone who is not on the autism spectrum and who does not possess a neurological disorder such as autism, ADHD or dyslexia. This term has not been used in popular media outlets such as the press.

According to Autismspectrumnews (2019) neurological differences between autistic and non-autistic, or neurotypicals, can create unique challenges when it comes to both sides communicating. Usually when an autistic and non-autistic person has a discussion it can feel as if the other person is speaking in a completely different language to one another. Unique communication styles between both people in this discussion are one of the biggest challenges when holding down the conversation. A person on the autism spectrum may take more time to process the conversation. They may need more time to consider the topic that was discussed and what was discussed.

## **Unemployment: A World View.**

The aim of this paper is to look into what employment support programmes tailored to help people with autism are doing to reduce the high levels of unemployment in different areas of the world. Therefore, in this section I will be discussing employment levels using an example from a small number of developed countries. It is important to note the economic impact of employers not hiring people with autism to help them develop their careers. I will be emphasizing this in this section, as the implementation of employment services can offset the costs of autism on the economy.

According to Scott. M. et al. (2019), The United Kingdom contains as little as 15% of people on the autism spectrum who are in employment which is a very low rate. The types of jobs that autistic people take up in this country include independent work, self-employed work or employment gained through a supported employment programme. It was estimated that autism spectrum disorder had cost the UK up to 32 billion pounds per year, one of the most expensive mental health conditions to have in line with cancer and heart disease.

80% of people with autism in Ireland are unemployed. The high unemployment rate for people with ASD (autism) in Ireland may be due to difficulty in companies not having the required support structures to accommodate people with ASD's individual needs (Miley, 2019). There is a problem for ASD people experiencing gaining employment considering there is a rapid number of them unemployed in Ireland. According to Siliconerepublic, (2018) the higher number of people with autism that enter the workforce means that the state will have more taxpayers that are coming off benefits. A person in Ireland returning or entering employment can value 1 million to the state. (Asiam, 2019), (DCU, 2019), (TheIrishTimes, 2019), (RTE,2018) and (Miley, 2019).

According to Scott, M. et al. (2019), just over 42 percent of people with autism that are resident in Australia are employed. This is compared to the other 83% who are employed in Australia who do not have a disability. This has come close to costing Australia AUD\$ 939-1,375 million a year. Using supported employment schemes in Australia will lower the cost on the country and help people on the spectrum gain employment.

According to the CBC (2019) the unemployment rate for autistic people is very high with only 14.3% of these people being in employment compared to the rest of the population who do not have a disability. The employment rate for those without disability is 93%.

According to Scott, M. et al. (2019), In the United States of America only 21% of people on the autism spectrum are in a full-time job. Up to 58% of autistic people aged between 18-25 are working or have worked for pay. In terms of the economic cost, according to Hedley, D. et al. (2017) Americans with autism cost the United States US\$236 billion a year.

The figures shown above demonstrate a high rate of unemployment in the autism community throughout different parts of the world. It is evident that there is a problem with getting work for autistic people overall and that the current employment outcomes are of high concern in the autism community in general. One of the reasons behind the high costs incurred in these countries associated with autism is due to people with autism missing out on employment opportunities. This leads to more unemployment and less money injected into the economy in many parts of the world. This could be helped by supporting autistic individuals into employment and meeting their needs. The individual can avail of employment supports and allowances. Many employers who are autism aware, especially in the IT industry, are discovering the potential of employing people on the autism spectrum. Employing people with autism could reduce the economic costs and help in terms of economic growth, but more importantly help get autistic people into competitive employment. Now I am going to discuss the obstacles with autism employment that may be causing high under-employment.

## **Obstacles for Autism Employment**

As shown above there is a clear high unemployment rate which also contributes to a high economic impact amongst the autistic community in many developed countries. Autistic people are facing a much higher unemployment rate than any other disability bracket throughout many parts of the world due to barriers and obstacles faced in employment as shown in the section above. In this section I will discuss some of the obstacles that have contributed to these high rates of unemployment.

According to The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders fifth edition (2013) characteristics of autism such as communication barriers between people with autism and neuro-typical and sensory overload are the main autistic characteristics. These characteristics bring with them challenges, individually or together, especially if they go unsupported or overlooked in the workplace and cause obstacles for autistic people. In this section I will be discussing how these relate to one another as a contributing factor to the high unemployment levels among individuals with autism globally. Other factors outside of the condition itself are the skills needed in a job advertisement and how they are described. I will also view supported employment obstacles from the employer's view.

## **Communication barriers**

What are the numerous Communication barriers causing obstacles for autistic people in the workplace? Lopez and Keenan (2014) suggests that a lack of social communication from autistic people has led to them losing employment even though they are more than capable of performing a job correctly and to a great standard. This isn't necessarily to do with their skills but rather the level of socialising and the level of communication that is needed within a job, especially if the job requires teamwork and presentations. If an autistic person is non-verbal it can cause them greater difficulty to participate and communicate in work related tasks such as projects and team assignments. There's also an issue that autistic people tend to face problems getting their points across appropriately in the workplace. Another barrier to communication in the workplace, according to the National Disability Authority NDA (NA) is that at times people on the autism spectrum may not want to socially interact or know how to do so in the workplace. They may prefer to speak in a small amount or they may even prefer not speak at all. This may come across to others that they are not focused or interested with what others may have to say, but this isn't the case and in fact they actually understand what people are saying more than they express but may have difficulty holding down a conversation. According to this research people on the autism spectrum may actually be very direct and to the point when they are speaking at times, to a point where they may come across to others as very blunt. When conversations like this occur it may come across to other colleagues in a negative or hostile tone in regards to this particular style of communication. Whilst the person with autism means well, this is down to differences in communication style which appears differently in autistic and non-autistic people and may cause a clash.

## **Sensory Overload**

Communication is one characteristic of autism and sensory overload is also another characteristic. Sensory overload for a person with autism may feel similar to having 50 TV programmes on at the same time. If this is overlooked in the workplace it may create obstacles for autistic people to gain employment. According to Lopez & Keenan (2014) many people on the autism spectrum face sensory overload such as increased sensitivity to noise which can cause distractions and lead to lower productivity. According to Autismhelp.info (NA) Smell, touch, sound and brightness are the main sensory issues amongst autistic people. This means that for example, an autistic person with heightened sensitivity to noise may need noise cancelling headphones or they may need the employer to give them a corner in the office which is further away from noise and distractions to help them fulfil their job requirements. Sensitivity to noise is usually unbearable and in many cases very uncomfortable for a person with autism. People with autism may find the taste and texture of many foods overwhelming. This will mean they will limit themselves to only eating certain foods. Many sensory overloads tend to lead to a meltdown. Smells can be very intense such as perfume. This can be a problem in an enclosed work place setting with many people. If people are eating at lunch time it may be best for the individual to take up lunch outside of work. This is to avoid not only smell but also the loud noise from people chatting in one space.

According to Autism.org (2020) a person on the autism spectrum may experience sensory overload in the form of too much information (information overload). Too much intake of information can result in high levels of stress, anxiety and a meltdown. A meltdown may appear as a “tantrum” to someone who is not on the spectrum. An autistic person will experience a meltdown due to a situation becoming overwhelming. A meltdown can appear in the form of crying and lashing out at other people. Some meltdowns may be less severe, instead coming in the form of not interacting with peers or withdrawing from socialising with other people at events. Sensory overload may also cause distractions and a decrease in productivity in work for people with autism.

## **Job Advertisements**

An employment barrier that autistic people face regarding a job search is the requirements on a job advertisement. According to Scott, M. et al. (2019) A barrier autistic people face before even entering a job is to do with the job advertisement itself. Many job advertisements state that the right person for the job needs team skills to work within a group effectively, good communication skills and good eye contact. These are just a few requirements to name however these can cause people on the autism spectrum to avoid applying for a job as the nature of their condition means they may be really lacking in these types of skills. People on the autism spectrum may find it very uncomfortable when it comes to forcing eye contact with people, and in an interview they will be focusing on making eye contact which may cause a stressful situation which in turn will distract them from conducting the interview as smoothly as possible. If they have had this experience before and they find it's a mandatory or essential part of a job that will be looked for in the interview stage and the job itself, then stating in the job description or advertisement that it is needed in terms of the communication skills required may result in them avoiding filling out the job application. This also can be said for team skills and good communication skills. If these traits are being monitored in the interview and job process and the person on the spectrum is highly aware of it, it can cause stress and anxiety. This is especially so if they have had a negative experience and no support in this regard before, which will then result in them avoiding filling out the job application that is related to the advertisement and job description. This causes a huge employment barrier for them.



## **Hiring someone with autism from the employer's perspective.**

According to Journals.plos.org (2017) employer's attitudes towards supporting and employing autistic people is another barrier to employment for people on the spectrum. When the idea of hiring a person with a condition such as autism is presented to an employer they may appear conflicted and very reluctant to the idea of doing so. Usually this is due to the idea of the costs associated with hiring autistic people outweighing the benefits, which is down to the lack of knowledge of employing autistic people and the misconceptions around the condition. Employers may assume that hiring a person on the spectrum may incur a very high cost and that they will perform poorly. This issue must be addressed as it will result in employers rejecting autistic people in their companies. Cost efficiency is a major concern in regards to supported employment.

According to Georgechambersresourcecenterinc (2009) employees going through the supported employment programme have achieved a greater net benefit to the company and stayed in their jobs 3 times more than non-disabled workers. These benefits need to be addressed to employers.

In this section I have discussed the barriers from the point of view of the person with autism, and also the employer's point of view. I will now go on to discuss what it is that supported employment programmes and consultancies are doing to help people with autism get a job with their traits being understood in the workplace, allowing them to be themselves and have more freedom.

## **What are supported employment programmes and consultancies and what are they doing**

In the previous sections we have outlined what autism is and how it affects an individual's overall life by demonstrating and emphasizing on the difficulties they face in leading an independent life. We have also highlighted the positive elements the condition can bring to the person on the spectrum. Autism has caused difficulty in terms of struggling with making friends and self-esteem issues but mainly worryingly high unemployment. I have therefore illustrated the high unemployment rates in various countries using real world examples. This then created a discussion in the following section around the obstacles in autism employment that may be linked to the high unemployment rates in the autism community globally, and what the causes of this are. The title of this paper is based on how supported employment schemes will reduce the problem of high unemployment in the autism community. Therefore, I will now go on to discuss how these problems are being tackled with the use of supported employment programmes and recruitment consultancies. I will be discussing what these consultancies/programmes are doing to address these issues and help autistic people build their careers and lead a better work life.

Supported employment programmes are a service that are customized to offer unique support structures in order to meet the needs of not only the employee on the autism spectrum, but also a recruiter's management and staff in a working environment. This is in order to support people with autism and to help them achieve their short term and long term work goals. (Brooke. V., et. Al. 2018). An example of a supported employment programme would be Specialisterne which is a recruitment consultancy agency that is set up to help integrate employees who have different needs such as autism spectrum disorder and to help adapt them to the working environment by offering individualised supports. The company also does autism information related training to ensure that staff understand that people on the spectrum may take longer to do certain tasks requiring more help. According to Specialisterne.ie (2020) the agency also helps give employers and staff autism awareness training on their differentiated and unique patterns and styles of communications and areas that autistic people may struggle with more than others without the condition. One uncomfortable experience for people on the autism spectrum is eye contact which needs to be addressed with the company they are going to be integrated into by the employment agency's support staff. That's if that person on the autism struggles with eye contact as not every person on the spectrum tends to have the same struggles. According to The National Autistic Society (2019) who implement training courses for employers, they give employers and staff in-depth recruitment training on how to give the right adjustments in the workplace to ensure that the company will know how to support the individual throughout employment. Autism understanding is crucial for people with autism to succeed almost anywhere as employers, stakeholders and staff will be more understanding and understand their vulnerabilities which often are overlooked.

## **Financial independence**

The use of supported employment schemes has resulted in people with autism having more money through the scheme paying a higher wage and the scheme noticing that people on the spectrum can work. Social integration through entering a job via an employment programme has resulted in peaceful relations between fellow autistic and non-autistic workers when settling into the social structure of a new job. This is important for people on the autism spectrum as they can notice the achievements these employment schemes have brought on for other people on the spectrum. Being financially unstable is a struggle for people on the spectrum.

(A&L Goodbody, 2019).

## **Autism support systems**

The National Autistic Society (2019) wants managers and staff to be highly confident in being in charge of an employee on the autism spectrum as this will be beneficial to everyone involved. According to NDA.ie (NA) it is important that everyone involved has awareness around autism so they have a good capacity to support autistic people. It may be beneficial for line managers to ask the person with autism how they learn best. By doing so the person on the autism spectrum can learn how to perform the job to the best of their ability. The charity makes sure that autistic people understand the complications that may arise in the workplace and give them strategies that they can use if any obstacles were to arise. This can also eliminate anxiety and stress in the employee as it will allow the new employee to take comfort in knowing themselves that they are aware of this information. It is important that employees can go to a peer in either the company such as management or the support worker for advice and support if they are distressed and unsure.

## **Expressing unique capabilities and strengths**

According to IBCCES.org (2019) some companies such as Microsoft and Intel for example, have set up their own support systems for autistic people to integrate them into their company as smoothly as possible. A lot of companies who have implemented employment programmes are not taking advantage of the unique capabilities, strengths and talents autistic people can bring to their organisation. Microsoft and Intel are recognising autistic people and in doing so their aim is to help them build their career by offering support structures that will help them really fit in and be comfortable which in turn will allow them to work to the best of their ability. According to the BBC.com (2019) one particular software company in New York sees neurodiversity as a competitive advantage in the business world. This company sees that there is a huge talent pool of autistic adults who have been overlooked and haven't had the fairest shot or opportunity to succeed in a job. This is due to business practices and workflow causing damage to someone who thinks differently. This company has taken a different approach in their hiring efforts in order to hire people with autism and manage more neuro-diverse teams to develop talent.

“Difficulty in ‘theory of mind’ may contribute to originality in autism spectrum conditions. Individuals who do not automatically ‘read other minds’ may be better able to think outside prevailing fashions and popular theories.” – (Francesca Happé and Pedro Vital, 2009) – People on the autism spectrum may lack the ability to read social cues however this can contribute to originality in autistic people when it comes to thinking outside the box. This can be a great contribution to the workplace in terms of generating new ideas and unique ways of solving problems. Certain speciality skills in many autistic people usually include having the high ability to quickly point out prime numbers. They also may be able to multiply at a very fast rate and they have the ability to remember short term or long term calendar dates and the days associated with them.

The National Disability Authority NDA (2014) are an individual statutory body who aim to develop employment for people with disabilities in the public service. Activities include conducting research based on relevant statistics to aid in developing the standards and improving codes of practice whilst ensuring that the progress and quality of the implementation of these standards are being met. (NDA.ie, 2014). According to The National Disability Authority (NA) a high number of work related strengths are present in people with autism.

## **The Conclusion**

To conclude, one of the main barriers for autism employment is communication barriers and a lack of individualised support structures. Working can be rewarding and can contribute to people feeling happy. Supported employment is designed to help people who are of disadvantage in the job market such as autistic people.

Supported employment programmes have strategies to try and break the communication barrier between autistic and non-autistic people in the workplace. These programmes do not only help bring employment opportunities for autistic people, they also allow them to independently gain more money, become more independent and bring them a sense of belonging.

The next section of this research is the methodology section. This section will discuss the methods of analysis including the research question and how my findings and analysis will be carried out.

## **Section 2: The Methodology.**

### **Research design**

As part of my research I am going to be looking at the outcomes of a supported employment programme in assisting people with autism (ASD) in finding meaningful employment. This topic will be based on “The social sciences which is scientifically investigating human beings in society, their relationships to one another and how they function within institutions such as schools and jobs.” (Merriam-Webster, 2019).

My method of study will be done through qualitative research which will be referring to descriptive answers and concern around understanding of human conduct from the perspective of the person giving the information. The analysis and the jargon and language will be reported based on what the person with autism uses. (McLeod, 2019.)

As part of my analysis and findings section I will be analysing written government policies. I will be comparing Ireland's policies alongside some other policies within the EU against countries such as Australia, who have a higher outcome of autism employment. I will also be looking into strategies that supported employment programmes implement when integrating an autistic person into employment that the government could use. The research question is based on what supported employment programmes are doing to increase autism employment. These strategies developed in these supported employment programmes have helped to increase employment for people on the spectrum however these may only apply to a certain number of businesses. These strategies and more need to be implemented into the law to allow it to be applied to most businesses as not every autistic person uses supported employment. So far many bills have been put into place but have not been passed yet. Certain bills such as the employment act are not individualised enough to meet the needs of autistic people. This research will allow me to analyse the language of these bills and make recommendations as to which strategies could be implemented to result in a greater outcome for people with autism in the employment market.

## **Aims and objectives**

This research aims to explore how employment supported programmes and consultancies are impacting employment outcomes for people with autism spectrum disorder. The main hypothesis around this thesis is that the autism specific services provided by supported employments, such as providing unique supports and communication coaching, will reduce

unemployment for autistic people. It is assumed that the benefits to hiring an individual on the autism spectrum will outweigh the costs incurred on a company. It is also assumed that autistic and non-autistic people gaining an understanding of how one another perceives the world differently to each other will play a big role in terms of autistic people gaining employment. Overcoming communication barriers for people with autism such as lack of rapport, inability to hold down conversations, low amounts of eye contact, and being unable to speak or read others body language will impact employment outcomes. Another factor in autism employment is adjusting the sensory needs for the individual whilst ensuring that the companies costs do not exceed the benefits of doing so.

### **Research Question**

This research is investigating how the use of an autism employment programme or scheme is helping people on the autism spectrum fulfil their employment needs. This research aims to understand from the perspective of both autistic and non-autistic people the strengths and weaknesses caused by these programmes. Do these programmes deliver enough autism awareness strategies that ensure that employers and co-workers understand the condition to benefit everyone? Is the use of raising awareness helping to break communication barriers between people with autism and people who do not have the condition? If so, is it helping to adjust people on the autism spectrum into a more comfortable work environment? Is adjusting the environment in the workplace helping them to an extent that they can excel in a job?

### **Philosophical Assumptions**

This research is leaning towards a more interpretive approach and style rather than numerical based. This research will be carried out in a qualitative and exploratory nature as it is gaining an understanding of autism unemployment through present reasons and opinions. One of the main methods of qualitative research in my literature review will be carried out through participant observation with the use of autistic people in the working environment. The



placement of a supported employment programme will be implemented to find out whether they are successful or unsuccessful. These programs will include autism training for both staff and employees, interview training, workplace supports and a social worker.

The aim of this type of trial using autistic individuals and neuro-typicals in a workplace setting is to achieve a more gaining full understanding into the differences in communication between the two groups. This type of research carried out in the literature review has indicated an importance of sensory issues, communication barriers between both autistic and non-autistic individuals and faced by autistic people in the workplace. The research in the literature review suggests that sensory issues if they are left unsupported or overlooked by employers cause a loss of production and a loss of autistic employee retention. Information from people with autism themselves, their co-workers, managers, stakeholders and the observers will be used in finding out how they experience the working environment from their perceptions.

### **Data Collection methods**

The research design for this study includes different sources of data. The main source of data will focus on analysis around government policies here and abroad and specialist employment programmes. As part of the analysis and findings section I will conduct an analysis on European government policies and legislation. Outlines will include an agenda and strategy.

Bills such as the Irish 1998 - 2015 Employment Equality Act and The Disability Act 2005 are centered around protecting all people with a disability. Most legislation includes steps on how to support all people with a range of disabilities yet there is none based on autism in any legislation. This legislation states the meaning of a disability yet does not state the meaning of each of these disabilities.

The Autism Spectrum disorder bill 2017 in Ireland is one of the most recent strategies with its main purpose being to integrate autistic people into society. These most recent bills include the voices and opinions of autistic people. This bill discusses autism traits in more detail than other legislation such as the employment equality act.

I will be discussing the points made in Dáil Éireann surrounding autism employment. This bill not only discusses how autistic people need to be included in today's society and jobs market but also discusses increasing autism awareness amongst the public. Dáil Éireann communicates autism awareness to the public however employers need to be taught about autism with a deeper understanding to ensure there is a higher autism employment rate.

Lastly, I will be looking into the Australian policy on autism and comparing it to Ireland's autism legislation. Australia has an autism employment rate of 42% compared to Ireland. Other countries such as Ireland have a 20% or less autism employment rate. I will be researching what it is that Australia is doing that has allowed them to achieve a higher rate of employment. Ireland may not be implementing some of the same policies or strategies in their autism legislation when it comes to employment. A comparison will allow me to really see what it is that Ireland is not considering and what they could consider to help autistic people achieve employment.

### **Limitations and Ethics.**

Originally before I undertook research on autism unemployment I hoped to interview adults on the autism spectrum who were employed and unemployed to gain their experiences on this topic personally. However, during my time in class I learned about ethics and certain types of training which I would need to possess if I wanted to carry these interviews out with autistic people. I came to learn in class that interviewing people on the autism spectrum directly is against ethics as autistic people are vulnerable in terms of the risk associated with their

communication. I am also not trained or qualified to carry out the interviews with autistic people correctly.

The second option as part of my analysis and findings was to conduct interviews with human resources and personnel in companies that implement autism training programs themselves. This was to obtain primary data by gaining insights from recruiters who manage employees in these specialist programmes. This method would have allowed me to pinpoint and also gain a deeper understanding of the way programmes are run successfully. Some of the top companies for hiring people with autism are Microsoft and Intel. There are many independent specialist recruitment agencies which source and pool jobs for people with disabilities. Some of these specialist agencies to name are Specialisterne Ireland and Employability which are larger government funded organizations.

There is a restriction set on the amount of time there is available in order to carry out this research and write a thesis. Other factors that have contributed to the limited amount of time we have to carry out research on this thesis literature review is having other classes scheduled and other exams and continues assessments to attend to. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic which is upon Ireland right now, I have had more time to focus on my methodology, analysis and findings.

Originally this analysis and finding was to consist of interviews however due to the limitations caused on behalf of the pandemic I have had to write up a discourse analysis instead. In this section I will be analysing policy documents and the initiatives companies and agencies are using to hire and source employment for people on the autism spectrum. I will be investigating what these policies that are put into place are doing to higher the unemployment rate for people on the autism spectrum. In this section I will also be analysing Ireland's policies and initiatives and comparing them to other countries. Skyping and video calling would not have been available during this pandemic as companies are closed and employees are not available to take calls.

Another limitation in this study is the limited number of resources and funding available to travel and gather larger samples. Limited resources in my research is the limited training on interviews in regard to the autistic community specifically. Due to ethics if a researcher wants to conduct interviews on vulnerable people they need training which takes a lot of time and

funding. Due to the covid-19 there is a limitation on the use of the library. The library is very useful compared to doing work at home as there are many distractions and less access to books.

A restriction I came across in my research was the limited information in regards to the numbers in unemployment in the Irish workforce. I have looked up how many adults in Ireland have autism. There were not many reputable sources of information on the internet or in the library. With this being the case I have reached out to Asiam.ie who are a government funded agency in Ireland. Asiam.ie stated in their email that *“The recognised answer is 1 in 65 but there is no fundamental research into the number. It is not a census question and not one that someone has to reveal or disclose to anyone.”* With this being the case maybe research should be carried out in Ireland in the appropriate and best way to reveal the answer. There are also adults in Ireland and other parts of the world who have gone undiagnosed. According to The National Council for Special Education (2016) press release *“The report found that one in every 65 students or 1.5% of the school population has a diagnosis of autism”*. This information, though somewhat helpful, is limited as there are a mix of school pupils who are adults and children. According to The Department of Health (2018) in their study using the Autistic Disorders Diagnostic checklist, they found that 272 (4.9 / 1000) people who are aged 6 – 25 had met the diagnostic criteria for Autism spectrum disorder. The DSM-111-R and the ICD-10 states that there are 4-5 per 10,000 autism diagnoses in Ireland and similar rates in other parts of the world. This information has limitations in that it does not specifically apply to adults but rather children and adults. This is causing a limitation in regards to much needed information in adult autism employment research studies. However, there is still relevance in the data as autistic children will eventually become adults who may depend and excel from supported employment programmes in the future. According to Lenus (2000) there is no epidemiological based studies into how much autism spectrum disorder prevails in Ireland. This causes limitations for researchers who want to investigate why people with autism face high levels of unemployment and collect large samples of data to provide to the public and other researchers.

### **Data Analysis methods; Analysis into policy on autism**

As part of my research I will be conducting an analysis into policy on autism as the opportunity to collect primary data was not possible due to the closure of businesses. I will be doing a comparative analysis on policy documents in Ireland and abroad to find out what other countries are doing that Ireland could learn from. This could then be something the government could write into their legislation. I will be looking into some of the strategies that are used in specialist recruitment programmes which could be written into Ireland's legislation on autism.

I will be looking into discourse used in the analysis of autism policy documents. I will be looking at the meanings implied in a speech or written communication. This type of analysis is often applied in social science research, such as autism unemployment studies in this case. It will allow me to analyse the language context, construction of sentences and meaning of the language that is used in government. The most up to date autism legislation in Ireland is the Autism Spectrum Disorder Bill 2017. This bill has been produced by Senator James Reilly. This bill has made it into the Seanad Éireann but has not been written into law. This bill uses more up to date language than the Employment Equality Act of 1998. I will also be analysing autism and the language used in the Dáil Éireann.

The next part of this research is the analysis and findings section. This part of the research will apply the methods discussed in the methodology and put them into practice.

### **Section 3: Analysis and findings**

#### **Introduction**

Supported employment programs have caused an increase in autism employment, however a government policy based on autism supports will strengthen employment outcomes even further. In this section I will be taking points from the literature review on supported employment programmes that the government can use to improve policy on autism. I will then analyse autism and employment legislation. The legislation I will be analysing is the Autism Spectrum Disorder bill 2017, the 1998 – 2015 employment act and the Dáil Éireann.

According to Asiam (2020), an Irish autism advocacy charity, there are no strategies in Ireland that deal with the challenges people with autism face. Such challenges include social inclusion, independence for autistic people and employment supports. In the past people with autism have had no say in how they want support services and programmes to be carried out. Australian policy includes autistic people's opinions and voices which is something the Irish legislation should consider to include more of. (Oireachtas.ie, 2020)

### **Strategies from Specialist employment programs implemented in legislation**

A lot of discussion in the literature review surrounds autism employment programmes. These programmes hire autistic people into a job and will help them gain permanent employment into a company. Once the person on the autism spectrum gains employment a social worker will give autism training to the company and all the staff to ensure everyone is autism aware. These employment programs are already supported and co-financed by the Irish government. These autism employment programmes have very useful strategies which can be written into autism legislation. (Specialisterne.ie, 2020)

A very useful strategy that autism employment agencies implement that the government could write into the law is that it is mandatory that all companies offer a level of autism training. This could apply to companies who may already have even as much as one autistic employee and may have autistic employees in the future. This is important as not every

person with autism uses these programmes and for various reasons. It is also another way for the public to be educated on autism. It is recommended that people on the spectrum use as many supports as possible such as supported employment programmes however they may want to try and find work independently. This may also speed up the process in terms of making companies autism aware if it is written into legislation.

Supported employment programmes provide support in the interview process by stating the interview support structures an autistic individual may require to the interviewer. Each person on the autism spectrum may require different support structures in an interview as the condition and the support structures required are unique to each person on the autism spectrum. According to the IHREC (2020) The Disability Act 2005 states that companies must give support structures and reasonable accommodations to someone with a disability or condition. The interview process is one of the reasons people with autism tend to have difficulty in making it into the selection stage of a job due to their condition. Legislation should be made available where there are interview supports made available for people with autism should they want to avail of such.

### **The Employment Equality Act, 1998**

The employment and equality Act (1998) the employment agencies section in accordance with a disability; employment agency act, 1971. Regarding employment agencies, this act states the agency will help a person with a disability find employment. The act states in one section the meaning of disability.

According to the Employment Equality Act (1998) two meanings part (d); a learning condition where a person may learn differently from other people and part (e); a condition which impacts someone's thought process and emotions, may only relate to different people on the spectrum. This bill does not state autism spectrum disorder under the list of disabilities. Autism is a condition which affects everyone differently and these conditions listed may not impact certain people on the spectrum. According to the National autistic society (2020) autism spectrum disorder is more closely related to a lifelong development and

to neuro-diversity, which means autistic people view the world differently to non-autistic people. According to Understood.org (2014-2020) neuro-diversity means certain people who may have autism simply have a brain difference. People on the autism spectrum think differently, may communicate differently and work differently. In an employment situation this can benefit the employer and employee if autism is referred to as a neuro-diversity issue rather than a disability. This holds such importance not only in legislation but used as a term. According to Taylorandfrancisonline (2019) when it comes to employment, employers tend to perceive disability as “not being able”. In the workplace employers want staff that are able to carry out a job effectively. People on the autism spectrum, once fitted to the correct job role, can carry out a job to a high standard. For this reason, labelling people with autism as disabled may hurt their chances of labour market participation. It is important to have legislation that highlights autism as a neuro-diversity and that points out each person can bring different strengths with the correct help.

### **Introducing The Autism Spectrum Disorder bill 2017**

The introduction of the Autism Spectrum Disorder bill 2017 will give an outline about devising a strategy to deal with challenges and new opportunities regarding autism law in Ireland. This is crucial as there is currently no strategy put in place to address the condition and the needs of autistic people. There is also currently a huge lack of sufficient data in regard to autism throughout the island of Ireland. This bill will provide autistic people with much needed recognition that needed to be put into place a long time ago. This means that autistic people have not had a voice in any policies to date. This bill was devised in 2017 aiming to have an “autism empowerment strategy” in place by 2019. (Asiam.ie, 2020), (Oireachtas.ie, 2020)

Part 4 of the bill states that the minister will monitor the bill every 3 years and its implementation of the strategy. According to Asiam (2020) as of January this bill has not yet been put into any law.



The perception, voices and inputs of people with autism are crucial when writing up this piece of legislation. This legislation should be centred around autistic people's thoughts, how they have experienced day to day life and their contributions to the bill. As the autism strategy has not taken place we cannot measure the input from autistic people into the law. (Asiam.ie, 2020), (Oireachtas.ie, 2020).

## **The Dáil Éireann**

According to Asiam.ie (2020) Dáil Éireann has acknowledged that there are many barriers that people on the autism spectrum face in terms of gaining employment. Social exclusion is also mentioned in the document which includes excluding autistic people from participating in a job. This document also agrees with literature that being on the autism spectrum is not what is getting in the way of employment but the differences and lack of understanding and support structures in the workplace. It also states that with support, people with autism can make a valuable contribution to society, including contributing to job participation. Dáil Éireann also acknowledges that autistic people are excluded from society. This includes the workplace along with schools, colleges and from society in general. This is down to a lack of understanding as to why people on the autism spectrum act differently. Public education and Autism awareness needs to discuss how autism is a difference in brain development and difference in communication to people who are not on the spectrum. This is

something that should be written into more legislation and made common knowledge amongst people in society.

According to the Health Service Executives (2012) the current vision and objectives section of the services for disabled Irish people in partnership with the Taoiseach 2006 government policy states that;

- People with autism will be able to achieve a sufficient income in order to have an acceptable standard of life. People with autism will have access to employment, training and education with their needs taking into account. People with autism will be able to live life as independently and fully as possible if they wish to do so. They will be able to take up work and be included in society to achieve their potential.
  
- The department of social protection grants people with autism a disability allowance of 203 euro a week. This disability allowance provides income support and also acts as an incentive for people with autism to find employment. According to Citizens information (2020) This activation measure can support people with physical and/or mental conditions back into employment by allowing an individual in receipt to work full time whilst still receiving a full payment. Autism is a condition which restricts one in retaining a job therefore the work taken up must be rehabilitative, i.e., is helping to improve the individual in performing better and also helping them mentally.

According to the National Disability Authority (2006) 2 key elements were found in the policy recommendations for people with ASD for obtaining employment report;

1. That the government policies be implemented in a person centered process meaning that each individual with autism has their goals, needs and desires be the core element of the approach. With this being said, the person with autism must have control when it comes to the people giving them support, what they want to do day to day, being heard and making decisions about their lives themselves. This type of approach is to be implemented into government policies in autism employment in order to achieve meaningful employment.

2. Employers will be included in this policy as they are a key player to supporting autistic people in gaining the right employment. Employers will be included in this policy by being trained accordingly and given the correct support to recruit and retain autistic people in the workplace.

Next I will be analysing policies set out by the government in Australia with regards to autism employment. According to Scott, M. et al. (2019) over 42% of people with an autism diagnosis are employed in Australia. This is higher than the rate in Ireland which stands at an 80% autism unemployment rate. Many other developed countries presented in the literature review are also much lower than Australia.

### **Australian Vs Irish Policies**

According to the Autism association of Western Australia (2020), the Australian government employs local non-profit employment services to assist people with autism into employment. According to Amaze (2018) the Australian government include autistic people and stakeholders to:

- Working on a comprehensive strategy that will decrease discrimination in the workplace and ensure companies hire, retain and support autistic people.
- There are many myths around autistic people in general in that they may be less productive in the workplace for example. It is important that employers who receive autism awareness training are told real facts. There will be an educational campaign for employers that is set up to resolve this issue.

- Allow the maximum capacity for autistic employees to communicate not only their skills but also any adjustments they may personally need.
- Autism centered career programmes in schools to help transitioning from educational life into adult working life.
- Hiring autistic people and employing leadership strategies to create a more positive work culture.
- National Disability Recruitment Coordinator programme – This programme is designed to educate employers in larger companies. They will be advised about disability employment services in order to support and work with autistic people. Staff training and support is also implemented.
- The I CAN Organisation which is managed by people with autism to champion people with autism into the working world. This is accompanied with mentoring programmes and support groups to allow young people participate and have a voice in the workforce.
- According to AIHW.gov.au, (2018-2019) the Australia mental health budget consists of 6.0 billion in which 2.3 billion was spent in community services which include employment support services. Expenditure on mental health programmes and support is updated every year in Australia as new data comes through.
- The Disability and Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth) and equivalent state and territory law states that employers are banned from discriminating against employees by failing to make “reasonable adjustments” to staff with a disability. Reasonable adjustments are processes in a work environment that will let disabled individuals work safely and be as productive as possible. (Humanrightscommission.vic.gov.au, 2010)

In comparison, Ireland and Australia have very similar sets of government policies. Both countries policies include autistic people advocating and making decisions in how they want to be supported in the working world. Both countries have autism charities and autism

employment agencies and programmes set up to incentivise autism employment, with support for employers to ensure they are aware of the condition which will in turn help support them accordingly. In Australia there is a much larger expenditure on services and support regarding mental health whereas in Ireland there is a lack of spending and also spending cuts resulting in closures of charities. (Irishtimes, 2019). It is important that there is a budget set in place for Ireland to allow the government policies on services such as employment services to go ahead if autistic people are going to attain employment. In Australia, people on the autism spectrum have more of a voice in terms of how they want things to be run. This is important as they go about life communicating and doing everyday tasks in a different way compared to non-autistic people. According to Mentalhealthreform.ie (2010), Ireland, much like Australia, has an enterprise funding scheme for smaller firms to stop unemployment within different disability groups who may have problems sourcing a job. Australia has had legislation in place for an already long period of time. Ireland is still behind on bringing legislation into law. Ireland has bills in place with a plan for including autistic people into society. Ireland as of 2020 has no legislation officially in the law with regards to autism employment, which is a major issue that needs to be addressed.

### **Recommendations for autism policy implications**

In this section I will be discussing policy implications which may improve autism employment outcomes. According to Policyschool.ca (2015), research suggests that individual characteristics of an autistic person may put a restriction on their success. Many people on the autism spectrum struggle with a lack of social skills, independence and self-confidence. These challenges are linked to unemployment. Through an autistic person's childhood, they will receive support to manage these factors. At the age of 18 a person on the autism spectrum will lose these supports going into adulthood. According to NDA (2017) Autism Services for adults on the spectrum in Ireland are highly lacking. According to Policyschool.ca (2015) It is important that support structures are written into legislation with programs that target areas such as developing social skills, how to manage behaviour and help with functioning independence.

According to the Irishexaminer (2018) People with autism are lacking mental health services and treatment. People who are on the autism spectrum usually have other mental health

conditions. According to Policyschool.ca (2015) suggests that even people on the autism spectrum who are qualified and have a high IQ will still struggle to find employment without access to professionals and treatment. Policy initiatives that allow autistic people to talk to psychologists trained in the area of neurodevelopmental conditions and related mental health issues will warrant them access to treatment. This will increase a person with autism's success in gaining employment.

Including early and paid work experience for autistic people into government legislation is something to consider. According to Policyschool.ca (2015) research suggests that early and paid employment interventions for a person with autism has led to successful employment. Jobs that are carried out while in later secondary school years have helped as autistic people gain skills and can gain a higher income as they progress throughout their adult life. Research suggests that gaining employment during school years will help people with autism find jobs more successfully later in life. This will mean that they are not starting out in the working world with uncertainty while learning about real world working situations. Research has also shown that unemployment from an early age has a serious impact when it comes to gaining employment in the future as the odds will be lower. Regardless if the individual has third level education or not, if they do not have work experience from an early age it may cause a huge impact on them gaining employment. Types of employment for the autistic individual could be paid employment during the summer and winter periods of the year and/or paid employment outside of school on a part time basis. These types of employment have contributed to employment success. This may really help with raising the unemployment rate within the autism community.

## **The Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is evident that compared to other countries Australia has a higher employment rate of 42% for people with autism, and that other countries could make amendments to their own legislation in order to raise their own employment rate in regards to autism employment. Australia's autism employment rate shows that people on the autism spectrum are capable of gaining employment with the help of the correct support structures and legislation put in place. Ireland and many other countries could implement legislation similar to Australia as it shows better employment outcomes for autistic people. The government need to push for the Autism Spectrum Bill 2017 or a form of legislation could be written into law that protects autistic people's rights when it comes to employment. Other countries have more autism legislation which is something Ireland is behind in. By not correcting this, it will not only be a loss for people on the spectrum but also a loss for companies looking to gain uniquely talented, reliable and great problem solving individuals to contribute new ideas to their businesses. Lastly, Ireland needs to include more data around the numbers of people with autism in and out of employment and how many adults on the island have a diagnosis. This type of information needs to be published to provide data for researchers who study the issue of autism unemployment in Ireland. Without important

information like this it will be much more difficult to address and come up with solutions for better employment outcomes for those with autism and other neuro-logical disabilities.

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