National
College of
Ireland

*The employer gap when hiring neurodiverse talent, specifically autistic talent, compared to neurotypical talent. Understanding the challenges and solutions from both an employers' and employees' perspective*

**By**

# Ailish O'Hara

Master of Arts in Human Resource Management

National College of Ireland

School of Business, National College of Ireland, August 2022

# Abstract

As the area of neurodiversity talent hiring propels into the spotlight more and more and countless number of both academics and employers call out the benefits around such talent, employers display quite notable hiring, onboarding and training gaps when compared to neurotypical talent. The term neurodiversity is certainly relatively new only being coined in 1997 by Judy Singer, an autistic sociologist.

This dissertation aims to equip employers with knowledge around how to employ autistic talent, often referred to as a sub-category of neurodiversity. It does so by focusing on getting the fundamentals right such as the interview and onboarding process. Once successfully onboarded, the critical area of training for both employees and line managers is explored as well as the pivotal role Human Resource (HR) Professionals need to play, which can be quite contentious due to their perceived lack of knowledge working with autistic talent. The study is unique as it interviews employers, autistic employees and specialist recruitment agency bringing all their viewpoints together to inform rich data sets that can be used to bridge the hiring gap for employers. The autistic talent focused on throughout the dissertation are those who live fully independent lives and meet academic entry requirements. Nevertheless, this does not take away from other challenges, such as hiring and social difficulties that continue to exist for an autistic person.

This dissertation finds that large multinational enterprises (MNE) appear to be leading the way hiring autistic talent and, in some respects, the results contradict the literature review which predominately shines an overall negative light on employers when hiring autistic talent. Some limitations in terms of the research include the fact that no small-medium enterprises (SMEs) took part in the study so further research could include such organisations. However, the research has found that even MNEs are in their infancy in this space and have more work to do, particularly in Ireland.

An interesting concluding observation is perhaps whilst policies, procedures and diversity goals may be important and viewed as inclusive, they can often serve as nothing more than tokenistic. Real value is only added when organisations hire autistic talent for the right reasons for them, often quietly doing so, by partnering with experts who can help them achieve in this space.

# Acknowledgments

It is hard to believe I am writing the acknowledgement section of this dissertation after two unprecedented years in terms of the Covid-19 pandemic.  And what a journey it has been.

I would like to say a sincere thank you to my supervisor, Dr Kesiena Ebenade, for her support and guidance. She was the much-needed driving force behind my chapter deadlines which encouraged me to keep going but she also had a calm, approachable, light-hearted manner when at times I perhaps didn't feel so calm.

To my husband and my kids who, for the past two years, gave me nothing but support and encouragement to keep going, even when I wasn't available to go on many weekend outings with them because I was studying.  To my 10-year-old son who, each night when I was writing this dissertation, came into my room, gave me a hug and kiss before he went to bed and kept saying you are almost finished Mummy. And my 7-year-old daughter, who drew me pictures and left them under my pillow. Perhaps the roles were reversed for a while, but their support and love pushed me through to the end. I have no doubt my husband looks forward to 'having me back'.  His support, love, guidance, and encouragement were amazing.

To everyone who took the time to meet me for interviews, I really really appreciate this.  Because of your valuable input, this dissertation produced rich results for consideration by employers.  Thank you.

Finally, to my friends and family, thank you for your understanding and support, we can plan all the events we put on hold and now celebrate each one of them together.

**Submission of Thesis and Dissertation**

**National College of Ireland**

**Research Students Declaration Form**

*(Thesis/Author Declaration Form)*

**Name:**  Ailish O'Hara

**Student Number**:  x 20174209

**Degree for which thesis is submitted:** Master of Arts in Human Resource Management (CIPD)

**Material submitted for award**

A.  I declare that the work has been composed by myself                                           ✓

B.  I declare that all verbatim extracts contained in the thesis have been distinguished by quotation marks and the sources of information specifically acknowledged          ✓

C.  My thesis will be included in electronic format in the College Institutional Repository NORMA (thesis reports and projects)                                           ✓

D. I declare that no material contained in the thesis has been used in any other submission for an academic award                                           ✓

**Signature of research student:  Ailish O'Hara**

**Date:**  6 August 2022

# Library Submission Form

**Submission of Thesis to Norma Smurfit Library, National College of Ireland**

**Student name:** Ailish O'Hara          **Student number**: x20174209

**School:** School Of Business          **Course**: MAHRM

**Degree to be awarded:** Master of Arts in Human Resource Management

**Title of Thesis:** *The Employer Gap when Hiring Neurodiverse Talent, Specifically Autistic Talent, Compared to Neurotypical Talent.  Understanding the Challenges and Solutions From Both an Employers' and Employees' Perspective*

An electronic copy of your thesis will be lodged in the Norma Smurfit Library and will be available for consultation. This electronic copy will be accessible in NORMA norma.ncirl.ie the National College of Ireland's Institutional Repository. In accordance with normal academic library practice all theses lodged in the National College of Ireland Institutional Repository (NORMA) are made available on open access.

I agree to an electronic copy of my thesis being available for consultation within the library. I also agree to an electronic copy of my thesis being made publicly available on the National College of Ireland's Institutional Repository NORMA.

**Signature of Candidate:** Ailish O'Hara

**For completion by the School**:

The aforementioned thesis was received by _____

Date:_____

This signed form must be appended to all copies of your thesis submitted to your school.

# Contents

# 1. Introduction

The area of neurodiversity or the term neurodiversity is gaining much traction over the past number of years.  (CIPD, 2018, p.2) define neurodiversity as:

"Neurodiversity, is, ultimately, a biological fact of the infinite variety of human neurocognition".  CIPD further describe the fact that neurodiversity is being used to represent a sub-category of organisational diversity and inclusion that aims to represent the talents of people who think differently.  This incorporates autistic people which is where this dissertation will focus on throughout.  'Autism spectrum disorders' (CIPD, 2018, as cited in the DSM-5) are "forms of a developmental disability characterised by rigid thinking, restrictive and repetitive behaviours, and social communication challenges".

Whilst there appears to be little doubt in the literature that autistic talent enables competitive edge with (Ortiz, 2020), outlining that employers frequently report their neurodiverse teams are more efficient and high yielding than teams without neurodiverse individuals, it is however quite daunting to soak up the reality of the literature review presented in this paper. That is not to say there is no consensus around the benefits of such talent. However, from an employers' hiring processes, which ultimately appear to favour neurotypical talent, the reality of onboarding an autistic employee alongside some accounts of line managers experience working with such talent, it appears something somewhere is fundamentally broken.  This is against a backdrop whereby there is also a debate in the literature around what is meant by an individual being neurodiverse – is it simply an issue whereby autistic people have difficulty interacting socially or is neurodiversity in fact a medical disorder?  Further insights around this debate are analysed in the literature review section.

According to (Praslova 2021), a staggering 78% of autistic people are unemployed in the UK with that number increasing to 85% in the U.S.  It is further outlined in the same report that an eye watering 50% of managers admitted they would not hire autistic individuals, when surveyed. These reasons/bias appear to range from systemic issues such as the employers job application process favouring neurotypical talent only, with (Quinetta, Narda, Quigley, Vickers, Bruck 2021), proposing that while knowledge/understanding may very well be increasing around neurodiversity, leadership theory and research has not yet integrated into this space. Exploration around these issues and many more will appear throughout the next section, literature review.

Finally, whilst there is research identifying barriers to hiring and employing autistic talent, it predominately focusses on single aspects such as hiring processes, line manager experiences, lack of diversity initiatives, little or no leadership theory in this space and the role HRM should play.  There appears to be no research obtaining a holistic view from both an employers' and employees' perspective. This allows scope to explore such a study in further detail and garner fundamental rich data from both employers, employees' and a specialist recruitment agency to ultimately equip employers when hiring autistic talent.

## 1.1 Research Aims and Objectives

The overall aim of this research is to fill the gap in the literature in terms of understanding how to employ autistic talent and where employers need to start. It incorporates the interview process, onboarding, critical training considerations and integrating autistic talent so they can work towards their long-term career objectives just like neurotypical talent. Moreover, the research aims to simplify the process for employers by calling out what has worked for other organisations by equipping them with information gathered through the methodology section, and ultimately helping employers understand employing autistic talent is perhaps not as daunting as it may seem. This research further aims to fill the literature gap as it garners important practical perspectives from autistic employees, employers and a specialist recruitment agency thereby enabling a rich informative overall data set with broad perspectives.

To arrive at the aim, the researcher focused on the following three objectives:

1. To probe the commitment levels of organisations when hiring autistic talent
2. To understand what accommodations can be made from an employers' perspective when hiring autistic talent so they may be easily integrated into the organisation
3. To explore societal barriers when hiring autistic talent

The research questions posed for this dissertation are:

1. *What is the organisations level of commitment to hiring autistic talent?*
2. *What are the necessary accommodations needed to make hiring autistic talent successful within organisations?*
3. *Do societal barriers prevent employers hiring autistic talent in the workplace?*

The hypotheses proposed for this research study are as follows:

1. To understand if employers do not show strong commitment levels when hiring autistic talent or if indeed employers display encouraging signs and motivation around hiring autistic talent?

2. To understand if employers are not prepared to make the relevant necessary accommodations when hiring autistic talent or if employers are eager to learn and understand what accommodations need to be made when hiring autistic talent?

3. To understand if societal barriers cause employers to shy away from hiring autistic talent or despite societal barriers around hiring autistic talent, employers remain encouraged to hire autistic talent as they understand the benefits in doing so?

## 1.2 Research Structure

This dissertation was divided into six chapters.  Each section follows through to the next with a logical flow and ultimately focusses on answering the Research Question and objectives.

Chapter 1 centers around the introduction, the aim and rationale of the research.

Chapter 2 is the literature review bringing together available secondary research on autism. It describes the gaps that exist for employers when hiring autistic talent such as their interview and onboarding processes. Once onboarded, it outlines further gaps when training employees and line managers. Finally, what future accommodations are needed for employers to truly embed inclusivity in their organisations is outlined with section 2.3 covering the most critical piece of research for employers.

Chapter 3 consists of the research methodology which shows how the primary research was gathered and in turn how the data was analysed.

Chapter 4 is the data analysis section comprising the findings from the primary research.  It discusses themes identified from interviews in relation to hiring autistic talent with five senior diversity and inclusion professionals, one specialist recruitment agency who place autistic talent into organisations and two autistic employees.   It outlines key insights from all three groups with different but insightful considerations when hiring autistic talent that can be used to inform rich insights and overall links the findings to the research objective.

Chapter 5 focusses on the discussion of the findings.  The hypotheses are also explored and compared with both the literature review and the views from employers, employees and the recruitment agency from the data analysis and primary research.

Chapter 6 outlines the conclusions of this dissertation, further recommendations, and implications of findings.

# 2. Literature Review

## 2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present secondary research findings about the difficulties experienced when hiring autistic talent and the reasons around this. A critical analysis is also engaged throughout this chapter. It focusses on answering the Research Question and Objectives stated in this dissertation.

Neurodiversity is a relatively new term and autism is considered a sub-category of neurodiversity. The literature review debates societal views around autism from the point of view of understanding what is meant by being autistic. Some academics refer to autism as a social disability whilst other views incorporate autism as a medical model of disability. From there, the literature review looks at employment challenges for both autistic talent and from an employers' perspective. These include an organisations policies and procedures around diversity and inclusion and whether they have any real meaning or if in fact they simply look good on paper and are a tick the box exercise. The hiring process such as the interview process, onboarding, critical training considerations and integrating autistic talent so they can work towards their long-term career objectives just like neurotypical talent are many considerations discussed at length with an aim to simplify the process for employers and help them understand employing autistic talent is perhaps not as daunting as it may seem.

The third section and it is proposed the most critical section outlines what accommodations and programmes employers need to put in place to truly embed inclusion and autistic talent into the organisation.

## 2.2 The Neurodiversity Debate

Although neurodiversity is wider than autism, and typically covers many neurodiverse individuals incorporating but not limited to ADHD, dyslexia and dyspraxia, as mentioned earlier, the literature review will focus on autism as, to date, this is where the literature places a stronger focus around.

Neurodiversity, or otherwise known throughout the literature as the neurodiversity movement or paradigm, grounds itself in the idea that first and foremost, autism is a natural occurring social disability combined with attitudinal and environmental obstacles as opposed to a medical model of disability characterising psychological deficiencies/disorders. Between the two concepts, this is what predominately what gives rise to debates around the meaning of neurodiversity (Barnhart, Dierickx 2021). Through her research of autism therapists (Jaysane-Darr, 2020), highlights that indeed tension can even exist between autistic individuals, their doctors, parents' and therapists between this dichotomy of autism as a disorder that must be medically treated or autism as a normal occurring social disability. It certainly appears as though autism is a particularly diversified condition and even the literature can, at times, struggle to contain the various elements that need to be considered when contextualising autism between a social or medical disability. There are those individuals with autism who would prefer not to be characterized with a disability versus those individuals who may not have a choice due to how restrictive their lives are living with autism. (Fuentes, J; Hervas, A; Howlin, P, 2021) outline that individuals with autism, at one point or another throughout their lives, will seek to rely on government departments or community agencies as playing a pivotal role in terms of health, education, equality rights and of course gaining meaningful employment. It is further highlighted that others such as researchers and those involved in technology and culture also play a much-needed role to ensure autistic individuals can benefit all round, just like everybody else. The findings section of this dissertation will probe the current government services for autistic employees by interviewing a specialist recruitment agency to understand any gaps that may exist for employers hiring autistic talent.

So while the debate tends to center around what is natural or normal versus autism being a disorder, various pieces of literature seek to outline ways of distilling it down a little further with Hughes (2021, cited in Jaarsma and Welin, 2012), outlining that allies of neurodiversity call for autism to be part of an autistic individuals' identity and suggest the idea that autism could be categorised narrowly into 'high' and 'low functioning' individuals. Those who are 'high functioning' autists or have a normal or above IQ versus those who are 'low functioning' whereby it has been suggested should perhaps fall into the disorder category. This view, which is not necessarily surprising, is also quite controversial with many neurodiversity allies. (McLoughlin, 2021), launches a scathing attack around what neurodiversity is and that while the term regularly appears in practitioner reports as well as in the media, this does not make it in any way clearly defined and calls out that it is merely used as a slogan. Instead, McLoughlin talks to the point that individuals know how to advocate for themselves rather than be defined by an ill-defined term that does not work for everyone.

Given the stark data in relation to unemployment rates of autistic individuals, as outlined earlier, and the narrative around the neurodiversity movement, it gives rise to an important question from an employers' and employees perspective in trying to understand if there is any correlation between the neurodiversity

movement and unemployment rates when hiring such talent. It is proposed as part of the dissertation methodology section this will become somewhat clearer following the proposed interviews.

While varying opinions continue to exist around this movement, it is recommended that neurodiverse individuals should be part of the scientific process and research communication and that ultimately both clinicians and neurodiverse individuals should engage in honest and respectful communication (Barnhart, Dierickx 2021).


## 2.3 Autism Employment Challenges

This section of the literature review aims to understand some of the challenges from an employers' perspective potentially contributing to the exceptionally high rates of unemployment amongst autistic talent and what employers need to focus on to curb this.

A common theme throughout the literature at policy level within organisations is the debate around Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) policies/initiatives and their overall effectiveness. (Beardwell, J; Thompson, A, 2014) call out that criticisms tend to center around the fact D&I policies do not really mean anything at organizational levels as predominately no real action is taken even if a matter is raised under such policies. It is further outlined that some managers, even if matters are raised, will find ways to circumvent the policy. And finally, even if managers are adhering to such policies, they can exercise their own discretion around how they apply the use of policies leading to much bias and inconsistent treatment of employees. With autism being categorised under a disability, it is highlighted by (Torrington; D, Hall; L; Atkinson; C; Taylor; S, 2017) that individuals with a disability, even though such disabilities can vary from being mild to severe, face common challenges being accepted into society and are more likely to face unemployment when compared to those without a disability. One of the challenges when managing D&I is most likely that organisations have various ideas around what good looks like in terms of effective D&I management. However, D&I is not a one size fits all and takes much time to get it right, even some of the time. Finally, (Wilkinson; A, Redman; T; Dundon; T, 2017) call out that from an academic perspective, in terms of tangible results, there is much more research needed to truly understand and evaluate the outcomes of diversity programmes, policies and initiatives.

(Whelpley, Perrault 2021), have defined an insightful model for hiring autistic talent that essentially keeps pressure on the employer and gains satisfaction from autistic employees. Their 'high internal support-high external pressure' model talks to those organisations, such as Microsoft, who seek public forums to discuss their model for hiring and managing autistic talent. The idea is to create pressure on themselves to keep successfully hiring which also results in job fulfilment from autistic employees as they may view such organisations as going above and beyond the norm. Of course, there is certainly an argument around why organisations go to such lengths to pose this external pressure on themselves when hiring autistic talent which, in turn, raises the real debate if organisations are going to such lengths perhaps purely to be seen to be inclusive. Being naturally inclusive without making a distinction between hiring autistic and neurotypical talent is most likely where all organisations need to place their aspirations. The problem appears to be that potentially organisations get wrapped up in what looks like the right thing to do as opposed to just doing it right.

In terms of challenges for organisations, a lack of awareness and understanding throughout the employee lifecycle has led to workspaces only being designed for neurotypical individuals. Yet those organisations who have embraced hiring neurodivergent talent, such as JP Morgan, advise that autistic individuals working in the technology division were completing, within three to six months, the same work that others took almost three years to come up to speed on and in fact were 50 percent more productive (CIPD, 2018). Therefore, it is useful to delve into challenges uncovered at the neurodiversity debate section, starting with social norms in the workplace for autistic talent.

(Bury, Flower, Zulla, Nicholas, Hedley 2021), through a study conducted between supervisors and autistic talent, identified social challenges for autistic individuals such as gaps in being able to analyse other people's intentions and emotions, coupled with being expected to be able to predict and conform to social rules in the workplace, created real distress for such individuals and in some cases, resulted in being fired by the employer. It is further outlined most of the social challenges were attributed to the individual with autism as opposed to perhaps the organisation lacking in relevant supports to accommodate the employee. Such support will be discussed during the next section of the literature review. Closely linked to an autistic individuals' social challenges is an employers' hiring processes. Hiring processes tend to place a real reliance on social interactions when interviewing candidates, something that causes fear amongst autistic individuals owing to their social challenges. (Agnieszka, Edyta 2021), outline that autistic talent often do not pass the first stage, the job interview, despite the huge amount of time they have spent preparing for the role. This can be perhaps owing to cumbersome, stressful unexpected questions, the use of recruiters perceived ambiguous phrases and ultimately the employers lack of flexibility stepping away from traditional methods of recruiting. Moving beyond traditional methods, even when more innovative recruiting methods are considered, they too are imperfect. (Haley, 2021), considers while Artificial Intelligence (AI) seeks to streamline and lower costs associated with recruitment and hiring, it has had a one-sided effect on job seekers with disabilities. This is owing to, amongst other things, the fact an algorithm scores one of the aspects of the application that is most likely best scored by a human: social challenges such as an individuals' body language and facial expressions.

## 2.4 Future Employer Insights/Accommodations for Hiring Autistic Talent

Arguably, one of the most critical areas an employer should focus on when hiring autistic talent is gaining an in-depth understanding of the necessary accommodations needed to successfully hire, onboard, and integrate autistic talent into the organisation. The next sections focus on such accommodations and discusses the role of Human Resource Management (HRM) professionals and the organisation in terms of policies and procedures, how to truly lead inclusively integrating disabled talent successfully into the organisation and, from there, how to essentially start small and grow big when hiring autistic talent by building out both training programmes for managers and working in partnership with those organisations who are already leading the way in this space.

### 2.4.1 The Role of Human Resources Management Embedding Autistic Talent

Firstly, it is essential to highlight the vital role HRM professionals need to play to truly embed inclusive practices in organisations. Interestingly, but also perhaps quite alarming is the fact there is generally no consensus within the literature around a definition for the role of HRM. (Boxall, Purcell, 2000, p. 184) outline an exceptionally broad definition of HRM:

"HRM includes anything and everything associated with the management of employment relationships in the firm. We do not associate HRM solely with a high-commitment model of labour management or with any particular ideology or style of management". This potentially poses the question if all HRM professionals are merely meandering through day-to-day activities solely relying on a good leader to hopefully guide and align the HR agenda to strategic business imperatives such as an organisations Inclusion and Diversity (I&D) agenda. Furthermore, arising from their studies, (Procknow, Rocca, 2016, p. 381) pinpoint the fact that Human Resource Development (HRD) literature ignores the area of disability with "long-standing traditions of disablism, against people labelled disabled, have divested them of normative citizenship and employment". So, whilst other areas such as gender and race may be given prominence under Learning and Development agendas, disability is essentially swept under the carpet and, in some cases, only assessed from a medical perspective, as discussed earlier. HRM professionals are arguably responsible for driving the inclusion agenda throughout their organisations, yet the literature outlines few are successful in this space. (Reichwald, 2021) candidly discuss that unless employers are genuinely going to invest in an inclusion first agenda, as opposed to a diversity first agenda, any so-called progress is fruitless. And whilst the difference between the two may appear minimal, the reality is quite different. Diversity can often be about organisations meeting their targets on paper, but inclusion is essentially where an organisation is making strides to naturally integrate inclusive behaviour patterns day to day. However, perhaps as straight forward as this may seem, it appears as though the negative connotation associated with hiring disabled individuals is far reaching. (Hidegh, Csillag 2013), share their belief, through a study aimed at helping HRD professionals, that negative perceptions around hiring disabled employees and diversity initiatives in general can be ingrained in both students and teachers from within their own personal beliefs. Such beliefs can be referred to as confirmation bias where people would essentially like a certain idea to be true and they end up convincing themselves it is in fact true thereby confirming their own idea or bias. This can be difficult to reverse resulting in opinions spreading (Heshmat, 2015). Overall, the journey around being truly inclusive starts with those HRM professionals who are responsible for this agenda, but they too must firstly reflect on what it means to act inclusively and what initiatives, which will be examined next, should be rolled out before cascading the agenda to everyone else within the organisation.

### 2.4.2 Initiatives for Employers Working with Autistic Talent

(HBR, Thomas, Ely, Hewlett, Williams, 2019) outline seven initiatives specifically linked to hiring autistic employees. These were derived from Specialisterne, an expert organisation in hiring neurodiverse employees. Such initiatives, outlined in detail below, include working with other organisations who are

already competent in this space to find new and innovative ways to move away from typical employer assessments.  Once hired, employers should focus on training and upskilling their managers and ultimately there should be an overall focus on growing the programme and setting the mantra of hiring autistic talent as part of normal processes and hiring initiatives.

### 2.4.2.1  Partner with other specialist organisations to hire autistic talent

Teaming up with other organisations, perhaps specialist recruitment agencies or non-profit organisations can really help build core knowledge even around some fundamentals of hiring autistic individuals. (Lynas, 2014) highlights, through research based around the ABLE (Autism: Building Links to Employment) programme that by partnering with various organisations through a support scheme to secure employment for people with autism, 68% of individuals were successful in securing permanent employment that matched their skills and academic level.  This idea will be further probed at methodology stage through interviewing a specialist recruitment agency who place autistic people into employment that matches both their experience and academic record.

### 2.4.2.2 Deviate from traditional-based assessments and training programmes

Setting up group chats or a meeting area whereby autistic candidates can showcase their abilities in a laid-back setting with potential manager groups takes the stress out of the social interaction piece which can be a real blocker for autistic employees.

### 2.4.2.3 Upskill other employees and managers

Training sessions to help employees understand what to expect from their new colleagues.  This could include potential accommodations needed and any individual preferences.  It is also extremely important the right time and effort is allocated to choosing managers who are really going to make a difference to an autistic person work experience.  Too frequency organisations choose to promote managers perhaps who are technically quite competent, however, some such managers people management skills leave much to be desired.  This can have a worrying knock-on effect for autistic employees if, for example, their manager insists they need to socialise better with their colleagues. It is therefore critical that organisations hire and promote the right managers to such positions (Honeybourne 2019).

### 2.4.2.4  Build out extensive support networks

Such networks include team managers, team buddy, job and life skills coach, a work mentor and support from HR, which can be a HR business partner or a specialist working within I&D. Scandura, (2017, as cited in Autism Speaks, 2016), calls out those organisations who have been successful in hiring autistic individuals have provided a mentor, champion or job coach for that person.  These relationships may form either through formal or informal programmes within organisations.  Through the methodology

section of this dissertation, areas such as coaching and mentoring will be examined through the eyes of the employer to understand if such accommodations are offered for autistic employees.

### 2.4.2.5 Focused programmes for managing careers

Autistic employees, just like neurotypical employees, need mapped out long-term career paths. This generally requires time to understand exactly what is needed from their perspective. It is reported that over time managers and supervisors usually become familiar with employees' talents and limitations. (Hillier; A, Poto; N; Schena II, D; Dorey; J, Buckingham; A, Santangelo; M, Frye; A, 2022) talk through a life- skills coaching programme specifically tailored for autistic adults with one of the main aims including job satisfaction for autistic individuals. The report outlines that coaches placed a deep focus on goal setting, progress towards those goals, setting new ones and rethinking current goals. The overall results advise those individuals who were most successful were open to making changes and were perhaps more self-aware around their overall ambitions. On the flip side, it appears those who were less successful did not display the mindset to work on goals independently.

### 2.4.2.6 Grow the programme

Understanding where an autistic employees' strengths lie can bring a wealth of benefits to an organisation. Areas such as data analytics, software testing and cybersecurity are typically such areas. Focusing hiring efforts into these areas by understanding the talent gaps that may exist can see real value add for an organisation.

### 2.4.2.7 Normalise the programme

For anything to become 'the way we do things around here' there needs to be real investment. As outlined earlier, HRD professionals must be aligned and understand what it takes to be an inclusive organisation. This means reviewing HR policies and processes, particularly I&D policies specifically relating to disability for any gaps that exist which may inevitably exclude hiring, developing and managing autistic talent.

## 2.4.3 Line Managers Role Embedding Autistic Talent into the Organisation

Whilst HRM, employer accommodations and investment into talent programmes play a crucial role onboarding and embedding autistic talent into an organisation, arguably most of the responsibility rests with line managers given their roles. This section of the literature review will therefore aim to focus on practices that line managers should start engaging with and utilising to help truly help embed autistic talent throughout organisations.

Waisman-Nitzan, Schreuer, (2019, cited in Lopez and Keenan, 2014), outline the greatest barriers to gaining employment for autistic individuals is predominately a lack of understanding amongst employers and colleagues around autistic talent in terms of what reasonable accommodations look like which can ultimately serve to inhibit their employment. (Richards, Sang, Marks, Gill 2019), give a deep insight, through their study of line managers, how challenging lived experiences can be from their perspective managing autistic talent alongside normal day to day duties. Key findings reveal that so called reasonable accommodations can often be complicated, take up much of their time during the day and emotionally draining for them. These include conflict resolution between neurotypical and autistic talent and overall indicated that high levels of emotional labour were needed to effectively manage autistic talent. Employers need to think deeply about solutions that will help manage difficult interpersonal communications for employees with autism and advocate for them.  These include electronic forms such as chatbots, group discussions (via Teams, Zoom etc.) and group emails.  Such straight forward means of communication will serve to potentially reduce the stress that builds up for employees with autism as it does not require eye contact or trying to decode use of body language (Tomczak, 2021).

Ultimately, organisations may need to strategically select those line managers who they believe are perhaps stronger at managing autistic talent. An article in (HBR, 2015) featuring Daniel Goleman outlines the concept of Emotional Intelligence (EI) linked to line managing and whilst every person is born with certain levels of EI, EI is in fact a skill that can be developed through perseverance and practice and Goleman is adamant that EI, as opposed to IQ or technical skills is the differentiator between a great leader or simply a good leader.  EI attributes include self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills with social skills, as outlined, being an imperative skill in terms of managing autistic talent.

Following through and understanding the critical area of accommodations in more detail in terms of recruiting, hiring and training, (Austin, Pisano 2017), advise to use nontraditional interview methods such as organising half day sessions whereby autistic individuals can showcase their strengths and abilities throughout casual interactions with company managers.  This then serves as a positive starting point or perhaps round one which equates to the traditional interview process.  Once hired, it is advised to train other workers and managers organising half or full day sessions, so everyone knows what to expect from each other. Such sessions should essentially be tailor made to suit each new hire, which requires quite a bit of planning and careful consideration. (MariaSzulc, Davies, Tomczak, McGregor 2021), advise this training could take the form of on-the-job interpersonal skills training or skills coaches specialising in individual support in addition to team sessions incorporating a buddy support system.

(Whelpley, Perrault 2021), build further around the idea of people managing autistic individuals and the fact that, to date, there is a real lack of management literature around autism with the emergence of such only seeping through recently as large organisations begin to realise the value of hiring more neurodivergent talent. The lack of literature appears to originate at universities with (Johnson, Demetria, Bonhamgregory 2020), calling out a much greater need for the inclusion of diversity courses on curriculums.  Johnson et al. advocate for a particular focus on Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) which will serve to properly educate students, and in turn, future leaders, on the difficulties individuals with ASD experience gaining employment.

## 2.5 Conclusion

To conclude, there are several observations at play throughout the literature review. Firstly, the neurodiversity debate or paradigm does not appear to yield any real answers, apart from several different views as to what is truly meant by being neurodiverse. On the other side, in terms of accommodations needed for autistic employees, whilst arguably most accommodations such as changing hiring processes to reflect the non-traditional interview process, ensuring talent development programmes are adequate and line managers are both trained and engaged in socially challenging situations, all appear quite straightforward, there still appears to be a wide gap between what employers say and what they do. HRM practices are notably lacking with wide gaps around policies and procedures and even with the right policies and procedures there is a question mark over how ethically such policies are utilised. Technical knowledge from HRM practionners, especially in relation to disability leaves much to be desired. Overall, progress is further hindered by the lack of thought leadership literature for managers who are tasked with managing autistic individuals.

(Remington, Pellicano 2019)**,** through observing an autistic internship programme, convey the benefits of hiring autistic talent calling out their loyalty, trustworthiness, and reliability as key attributes. However, it is once again highlighted that communication struggles between interns, managers and colleagues are noteworthy with Remington, Pellicano (2019, cited in Milton, 2012) referring to the double empathy problem, whereby the so-called natural empathy of a neurotypical individual is not always considered when interacting with autistic people. This again speaks to a real lack of training and carving out time for managers to engage in training to equip them to work with autistic talent.

It was highlighted how, with a clear focus on specific initiatives such as partnering with other organisations, investing time into on-the-job training, especially with line managers, investing in skills coaches, starting out slowly initially with hiring programmes and then growing them and normalizing them can be the key to beginning a success story hiring autistic talent.

The methodology section, next, will consider the process around how rich insights were garnered from employers, employees, and a specialist recruitment agency in relation to hiring autistic talent with a view to understanding and addressing the existing challenges from all three sides. This paper has identified a gap whereby insights from all sides do not co-exist within the literature, but rather single issues are addressed throughout various pieces of literature.

# 3. Research Methodology

## 3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide the background to the primary research conducted for this dissertation. Whilst organisations are certainly leaning towards hiring autistic talent and understand there is a real business case for such talent, the gap around the reality in doing so is still notable. This dissertation aims to contribute to and build upon existing research to help further bridge the gap by providing practical knowledge for employers in terms of how to successfully employ autistic talent. It does so by uniquely gathering additional never previously probed research by interviewing from three different perspectives – employers, autistic employees and a recruitment agency who specifically focus on placing autistic talent into organisations. This chapter also includes the methodology and methods used to gather the data including how the data was analysed. Lastly, ethical considerations and limitations are discussed to show any potential challenges to the study.

## 3.2 Research Questions, Objectives and Hypothesis

The researcher will aim to address the following research objectives:

1. To probe the commitment levels of organisations when hiring autistic talent
2. To understand what accommodations can be made from an employers' perspective when hiring autistic talent so they may be easily integrated into the organisation
3. To explore societal barriers when hiring autistic talent

The research questions posed for this dissertation are:

1. *What is the organisations level of commitment to hiring autistic talent?*
2. *What are the necessary accommodations needed to make hiring autistic talent successful within organisations?*
3. *Do societal barriers prevent employers hiring autistic talent in the workplace?*

The hypotheses proposed for this research study are as follows:

1. To understand if employers do not show strong commitment levels when hiring autistic talent or if indeed employers display encouraging signs and motivation around hiring autistic talent?

2. To understand if employers are not prepared to make the relevant necessary accommodations when hiring autistic talent or if employers are eager to learn and understand what accommodations need to be made when hiring autistic talent?

3. To understand if societal barriers cause employers to shy away from hiring autistic talent or despite potential societal barriers, employers remain encouraged to hire autistic talent as they understand the benefits in doing so?

The overall aim of this research is to fill the gap in the literature in terms of understanding how to employ autistic talent and where employers need to start. It incorporates the interview process, onboarding, critical training considerations and integrating autistic talent so they can work towards their long-term career objectives just like neurotypical talent. Moreover, the research aims to simplify the process for employers and help them understand employing autistic talent is perhaps not as daunting as it may seem. This research further aims to fill the gap as it garners important practical perspectives from autistic employees, employers and a specialist recruitment agency thereby enabling a rich informative overall data set with broad perspectives.

## 3.3 Research Philosophy and Approach

Mukhles, Ababneh (2020, as cited in Crotty, 1998) advise there are four basic elements to the research process, namely, epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology and methods. These four elements essentially inform each other from the top down via a funnel process, as shown in figure 1 outlined below. Epistemology is the backbone of any research and centers around what is known and how it is known. Theoretical perspective incorporates the logic behind the chosen methodology with the third element, research methodology, depicting the plan of action and finally, methods outline the reason around the choice of the research method used. This dissertation will utilise epistemology as a core element to the research to help analyse the interviews.
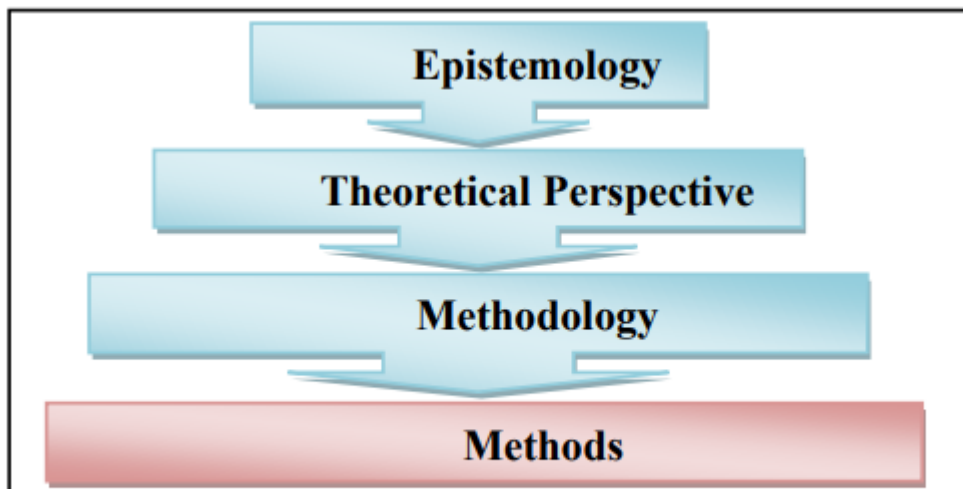


Figure 1: The Basic Elements of Research Process (Crotty, 1998, p.4).

## 3.4 Research Design

This dissertation will rely on a qualitative methodology approach. Smith (2021, as cited in Guba & Lincoln, 1989), highlights the qualitative researcher analysis is brought to life through the lens of the participants in the study with patterns and theories emerging during the interviews. (Yildiz, 2020) discusses that to effectively analyse data using a qualitative approach, there is a large reliance on how thorough and engaged the researcher comes across. Yildiz further outlines that carrying out qualitative research epistemologically means, in so far as possible, being honest and in tune with the interview participants.

Upon reviewing studies around hiring and employment practices within neurodiversity, specifically autism, it appears whilst this is a relatively new area in terms of studies, useful appropriate studies to date are (Albright, Kulok, Scarpa, 2020) and (Waisman, Gal, Scheuer, 2019). These studies reference in depth analysis around both hiring practices and an employers' perspective in terms of reasonable accommodations for individuals with autism, both of which are key features of the literature review presented in this paper and are discussed in detail at chapter 4, analysis and findings.

Utilising a qualitative approach, the methodology will seek to garner critical perceptions and feelings from employers, employees' and a specialist neurodivergent recruitment agency which should ultimately help inform deep overall insights when hiring and making reasonable employee accommodations for autistic talent.

## 3.5 Population and sampling

(Salkind, 2012), defines the population as the entire existence of the population an individual seeks to understand during research and outlines that when a population is small, they can be officially counted meaning participation can be measured for every member or individual who took part in the research. The population for this research is 5 senior level Diversity and Inclusion employees, 2 autistic employees and one recruitment agency who specialise in placing autistic employees into employment with organisations. The targeted organisations are Multinational Companies (MNC), all of whom have a presence in Ireland. The employees are working in these multinationals and the recruitment agency is also in Ireland, with a global presence. So, whilst the population size is neat, it has allowed for an overall in-depth data set from specialists within their fields. Qualitative studies can be advantageous whereby sampling strategies focus on the content of the input rather than the amount of input which can result in new information from the overall analysis. (Malterud, Siersma, Guassora, 2021).

The general themes for the interview questions, as referenced within the studies mentioned above included potential employer reservations when hiring autistic talent, benefits around hiring such talent, training provided, 'on the job' challenges, particularly social challenges, an employers' understanding of autism, manager training and insights into potential lack of hiring in this space. From the literature review, it did not reveal studies from an employee and agency perspectives, which is the aforementioned gap. However, the same themes will be probed/analysed, albeit from a different viewpoint enabling a holistic review arising from the overall result, as opposed to single points of research.

### 3.6 Data analysis

(Theophilus, 2018), outlines when analysing qualitative data, both deductive and inductive approaches can be considered. Using a deductive analysis is essentially centered around themes that arise from research while using in inductive approach is a more in-depth analysis of raw data. A deductive approach will be used to analyse the interview data for this dissertation as various common themes have emerged and can be grouped accordingly.

Individuals were recorded and interviewed by going through a series of 10 pre-determined questions as referenced at 3.4. Interviews took the format of one-to-one conversations. Limitations around adopting a qualitative approach include relying upon being able to interview the targeted audience to obtain rich data sets. Other limitations include such a process can often seem subjective so it will be important to identify themes and trends coming through in so far as possible.

### 3.7 Ethical Considerations

(Hennessy, Dennehy, Doherty, Donoghue, 2022), outline there are many ethical considerations to think through for the qualitative researcher in terms of audio transcription. Often the emotional needs of the transcriptionists and researcher are overlooked as it is generally just noted by authors that interviews were transcribed sometimes without any real thought around how the experience may have made someone feel, depending on the context.

Upon inviting the participants to interview, it was signposted through the consent form the whole process is on a voluntary basis and participants can withdraw at any stage without incurring any penalties. The data collected will be held for no longer than five years. Whilst two autistic employees were interviewed, such employees are not regarded as being vulnerable given they are employed in roles whereby they met the qualifying entry academic criteria alongside relevant workplace experience and are therefore not intellectually challenged but may experience impaired social communication. However, like all other participants, participation was completely voluntary and whilst one employee opted to hold a face-to-face interview, the other employee typed their responses to the questions and sent it back to the researcher via email with the accompanying consent form.

### 3.8 Limitations

Limitations in research are essentially the impediments that arise from the methodology within a study and can often be ignored by researchers rather than working with them given every study will have a certain number of limits (Pro Academic Writers, 2022).

The limitations to consider for this study include:

1. The organisations that took part in the interviews were all MNCs. This was largely due to the fact these organisations are perceived to be knowledgeable in terms of hiring autistic talent and therefore the information garnered form the interviews could be relied upon as informative for any potential employers hiring autistic talent. However, this also means that no small-to-mid size (SMEs) organisations participated thereby perhaps omitting valuable information from such companies. It is recommended that further research should potentially include SMEs for a completely rounded output

2. Whilst no known previous research has included the participation of autistic employees from an employment perspective combined with employers and a specialist recruitment agency, the number of autistic employees who participated in this study was two. And whilst having this input is invaluable, it is recommended further research should include more autistic talent in the workplace to ensure their voice is heard to inform even more reliable information for employers making accommodations in the workplace for autistic talent

## 3.9 Conclusion

The research methodology can be likened to the heartbeat of the overall aim of the research and answers the research question, objectives and ultimately tests the hypotheses. It is vitally important to understand how the research was conducted, the methodology used, sample population, ethical considerations and the make-up of the organisations that participated so the reader has a thorough understanding around all the various elements that help inform the overall results. While there were limitations to this study, these did not impede the findings, which are discussed at length during the next chapter, chapter 4, analysis and findings.

# 4. Findings and Analysis

## 4.1 Introduction

This chapter will present the findings of the primary research which was obtained through a qualitative methodology approach by conducting eight interviews (five females, three males) with five senior diversity and inclusion professionals, two autistic employees and one specialist recruitment agency across MNCs in Dublin. Their profiles are shown below at 4.2. Each participant answered ten structured questions with a copy of the questionnaire shared in advance of the interview. A copy of the questions and a sample answer is outlined at Appendix 1.

To begin with, the chapter describes the participants profiles. From there, emerging themes around the interviews are analysed which will test the research objectives. The views of the interviewees are discussed at length in terms of the employers' current approach to hiring autistic talent, the autistic persons view about how employers can hire successfully in this space, an honest interpretation around how employers can do better, lived experiences of barriers faced by autistic talent when being hired and views from a specialist recruitment agencies experience of placing autistic talent into employment. Finally, any societal barriers that may exist for both employers and autistic talent at pre-hiring, onboarding and 'on the job' experience are discussed. The agency also outlines many successful initiatives that employers should utilise to hire autistic talent. All themes are grouped and coded according to the research objectives.

## 4.2 Research participants profile

To gain an informed understanding of this research, it is important to outline the profile of the participants, shown at Table 1 below. Following the interviews, the data was categorised according to the research objectives, out of which various themes emerged. The themes will be discussed at length throughout the next number of sections. This then allowed analysis of the data around the Research Questions which is ultimately all linked back to the literature review, discussed at length in chapter 5, Discussion.

*Table 1 Participant profile*

| No. | Name | Job Title | Years of experience in D&I | Public Trading/Private industry | Industry | Company size |
|-----|------|-----------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|----------|--------------|
| Company 1 | Olga | International Inclusion, Diversity, Equality, Accessibility (IDEA) Lead | 25 years | Publicly Trading Company | Technology | 7,500 globally 250 (Ireland) |
| Company 2 | Sadie | Senior HR Business Partner, Diversity & Inclusion Lead | 20 years | Publicly Trading Company | Software | 10,000 + globally 1,700 (Ireland) |
| Company 3 | Alison | Head of Employee Relations | 20 years | Private | Consultancy | 10,000 + globally 3,500 (Ireland) |
| Company 4 | Tom | Diversity and Inclusion Lead – UK, Ireland and Western Europe | 17 years | Publicly Trading Company | Software | 180,000 globally 1,900 (Ireland including contractors) |
| Company 5 | Dave | CEO of an Autism Charity | 22 years | Voluntary | Charitable Incorporated Organisation | 20 |
| Employee 1 | Emmie | Software specialist | 5 years | Publicly Trading Company | Software | Employee of 1,700 employees in Ireland |
| Employee 2 | Paul | Data Analytical Consultant | 5 years | Private | Consultancy | Employee of 3,500 employees in Ireland |
| Recruitment Agency | Isla | Lead Assessment and Support Executive placing autistic talent into organisations | 7 years | Voluntary | Charitable Incorporated Organisation | 15 employees in Ireland |

## 4.3 Research Objective 1: To probe the commitment levels of organisations when hiring autistic talent

*"Like, I almost don't want to say anything beyond that because there is no qualifier. Like, the answer to that question is no, I would have no reservations hiring autistic talent".* Olga

During the interviews, the organisations who participated all responded with a resounding 'no' around having any reservations to hiring autistic talent and the benefits around hiring such talent. This does not mean there is still not lots of work to be done in this space (discussed next at accommodations, objective no. 2) but it does mean there is a genuine commitment from these employers to continue doing even better work hiring autistic talent.  Both Tom and Alison were particularly adamant that given their specific niche sectors, such as data analytics and software technical roles, persons with autism can absolutely thrive and excel within these industries and such skillsets are in high demand. Isla outlined *"the first year I was working in this agency, it was the end of 2018 into 2019, I'd say we placed very very few people. I'm not even sure what it was. However, a week ago, we had eight people hired/placed in a two- week period".*

Below are four themes that emerged during interviews which describe the reasons commitment levels are high around hiring autistic persons and in turn the associated benefits in doing so (Table 2).

*Table 2. Research objective no. 1 – themes and coding*

| Themes | Coding |
|---|---|
| Diversity of perspective | Enables a more equitable organisation, enhanced product and market service offerings, diversifying skills within the organisation, diversity of thought |
| Unique strengths | Sharp focus, strong mindset, attention to detail, brand loyalty, problem solving, atypical thinking, novel solutions |
| Inclusive | Makes a better company, providing meaningful opportunities, increasing self-esteem, empowering people |
| Non tokenistic approach | Hired due to skill demand, meets entry criteria for role, treated like neurotypical colleagues |

### 4.3.1 Diversity of Perspective

Four out of five employers directly referenced that having "diversity of perspective", "seeing things in a different way" is one of the main reasons why hiring autistic talent is a standout reason around why they do so.  Tom comments *"autistic persons can bring those different perspectives and different ways of*

*looking at problems, which is what we want from a tech point of view with some specific tech roles lending themselves to autistic people in general*" while Olga mentions *"if I think about what the ultimate aim of a lot of diversity programmes are, it is to get a diversity of perspective, it's the primary aim of any programme, so we're trying to hire diverse cohorts and Neurodivergent persons really bring that diverse perspective simply because of their abilities and how they think about and see the world"*.

All the interviewees were ultimately adamant that unless you have different views in a room, innovation and seeking various solutions to problems will not come to fruition for your clients, or, if they do, they will not bear an overall holistic answer without diversity of thought.

### 4.3.2 Unique strengths

Whilst both neurotypical and neurodivergent individuals possess different strengths, as outlined within the literature review, arguably neurodivergent employees in terms of their concentration and attention to detail, often surpass neurotypical employees depending on the work they are doing. Those organisations who have embraced hiring neurodivergent talent, such as JP Morgan, advise that autistic individuals working in the technology division were completing, within three to six months, the same work that others took almost three years to come up to speed on and in fact were 50 percent more productive (CIPD, 2018).

Emmie, from an employee perspective, calls out the benefit of hiring autistic talent "*includes diversity and it's kind of showing other employees that you can be autistic or have any disability and still be able to work and the like, the other benefits are sometimes they have skills that other employees might not have, such as we pay huge attention to detail, that's one of my strengths and sometimes I spot things that others may not"*.  Also, from an employee perspective, Paul comments "the atypical ways that neurodivergent people process information can often lead to unique perspectives in problem-solving, coming up with novel solutions and insights into problems". And finally, all five employers called out the unique strengths autistic talent can bring to the table with Dave advising *"so I think what we're seeing is that those autistic people who are well matched to the skill requirements can sometimes be a lot more productive.  They can be incredibly loyal.  They could be your longevity of employment and continuity"*. Such unique strengths are perhaps not always considered by employers as the first barrier can often be the interview process, which will be discussed at length under section 4.4 under accommodations, objective no. 2.

### 4.3.3 Inclusive

All five organisations, both employees and the recruitment agency spoke to the importance of hiring in an inclusive, meaningful manner. Sadie comments *"the benefits for us and it comes from our board down, is that we know that hiring someone with autism makes us a better company"* while Olga stresses *"a corner stone of inclusion is giving people opportunities, start with the small goals and I think*

*particularly around disability inclusion for me is giving people opportunities and empowering persons. That's where real empowerment generates from".*

Even though inclusion may appear relatively straight forward, there are often multiple struggles for an employer in this space. This can be perhaps because they do not know/have not invested time into truly understanding what it means to hire autistic talent.  Isla, from an agency perspective, calls out the difference between those employers who are truly ready and those who are perhaps hiding behind a process.  The organisations who are ready tell their managers "*look, we're doing this, we have the experience to do it*" and they get their managers on board whereas those who are not ready/not willing, for one reason or another typically call out "*oh, we'd have to put a process in place now for that to happen and there will have to be a designated person there for that*".  Finally, Alison believes that inclusion starts small and grows big, commenting *"we hire one autistic person at a time as the right roles arises to suit their skillset and of course one leads to another, and we have hired four autistic persons over the last 18 months".*

### 4.3.4 Non-Tokenistic Approach

The literature review took quite a critical view of those organisations who perhaps believe diversity is all about meeting their targets on paper and don't invest in an inclusion first agenda calling out that such organisations will make little progress (Reichwald, 2021).  Four out of five employers mentioned hiring autistic talent should be because there is a genuine need on the organisations behalf with Isla calling out *"I would say that in terms of hiring it isn't supposed to be tokenistic.  So as long as the person was going for a job, they had skills in, that they maybe had their education they had studied an area in, then it should be they are judged as their peers are judged with minor accommodations*". Dave also mentioned that "*my experience of what works best is actually rather than a kind of a tokenistic awareness program where a small number of people around that autistic person actually get some training on what autism is and it's a one off, and then they go away….what actually works best would be ongoing job coach type support whereby an independent person comes in or potentially a suitably trained person within the firm and provides some real, meaningful examples of accommodations or adjustments that that autistic person actually needs based on their unique experience and unique perspectives".*

## 4.4 Research Objective 2: To understand what accommodations can be made from an employers' perspective when hiring autistic talent so they may be easily integrated into the organisation

Understanding the accommodations an employer needs to make to successfully hire autistic talent is a critical component of this dissertation. Without the correct, meaningful accommodations with a genuine plan to execute what is needed for the right reasons, the whole process will fail. The literature review spoke at length about the importance of accommodations and the output of the interview results in terms of accommodations will be analysed against the literature review at Chapter 5, Discussion. However, before that, below are five themes that emerged during the interviews incorporating views around the accommodations that are needed to successfully hire, onboard, and integrate autistic talent into any organisation. The themes are outlined at table 3 and then discussed in more detail.

*Table 3. Research objective no.2 – themes and coding*

| Themes | Coding |
|---|---|
| Training Programmes | Autism at work programme, tailored programmes, broaden programmes, remove stereotyping, train talent acquisition, recruiters and talent development, create real awareness around programmes, Employee Resource Groups, myth busting, bias training, autism specific accommodation training programmes, buddy programmes, coaching programmes, don't stand still – constantly refresh programmes |
| Manager Training Programmes | Disability 101 training, disability 201 manager training, specific resources for managers, e.g. Business Disability Forum, set managers up for success, e.g. manager readiness programmes |
| Interview skills | Train talent acquisition, recruitment consultants, refine interview criteria, direct interview instructions, limit nuance |
| Partner with specialist teams | Recruit through specialists, raise awareness through external events, allow specialist agency to attend employee interview, hyper care/partnership for first 6 months, team enablement sessions, employer briefings |
|  |  |

| Meaningful Careers | Field experts, non-traditional careers, remove barriers/stereotypes, move away from 'cookie cutter approach', coaching, feedback sessions |
|---|---|

### 4.4.1 Training Programmes

"*But I think that there's a lot of work that needs to be done on like making sure that the teams have the readiness to be able to manage somebody, whether it's autistic or other neurodiverse individuals…so panel acquisition and then recruitment need to be ready so it's not oh, my, God, we've got an autistic person, what do we do kind of thing and they're ready to do it, like just off the bat*" Tom

Eight out of eight participants agreed that there is essentially a gaping hole when it comes to training both employees and managers around autism, what it means, what accommodations are typically needed and why it is so important to keep on refreshing employee and manager knowledge.

Olga commented *"in the first instance you just need that disability, what I would call disability 101 training. So that's just about disability etiquette, the do's and don'ts and this is for the general population….so people know how to focus on positive language….and they've got this sense of this is about equity and equality"* while Isla outlined "*An autistic person is not the typical thing you see in Hollywood films. It's not this. In terms of training, a panel type question and answer with candidates is actually the most effective as well as information sessions for people, we do these kinds of things all the time…myth busting is also a big one to start with a general kind of explanation". Finally, Paul comments from an employee perspective "employers/coworkers may have preconceptions about autism based on stereotypes, which could be countered with more accurate information and how it manifests".*

### 4.4.2 Manager Training Programmes

Many participants were candid in their views that training for general teams versus training for managers are two very different things in terms of managing and understanding an autistic persons' true accommodations.

Olga believes whilst you need what she called disability 101 training for the general population; she would say *"it is probably disability 201 for managers…it has to be more granular for managers in terms of practical accommodations"* and Tom outlines *"there are lots of resources out there so whether a company does like in-house staff training or whether it draws on things like I'm thinking like the Business Disability Forum, my organisation actually sponsors their neurodiverse and autism resources and toolkits".*

Sadie advises that in her organisation she *"drives the programme around Autism At Work…there may be managers who would have reservations or concerns (about hiring autistic talent) but we enable them and train them as part of our support network in terms of driving the programme"* while Emmie, from an employee perspective, commented *"like I'm really lucky, I work in a company that has implemented an Autism At Work programme, like it literally changed my perspective from like previous employments because the barriers we face"*.

Barriers, such as interview skills will be discussed next.

### 4.4.3    Interview skills

Interview skills are a crucial component for an employer to understand when hiring persons with autism if they wish to succeed in this space.  Everything starts with an interview, with those first impressions.

Sadie talks about the interview process and outlines a number of accommodations *"is around the interview process and how we can help….and you're talking about things like if the someone is sound sensitive, for example, that you buy a pair of headset that is sound canceling or your communication style…you need to be very clear, be specific and not literal…the employees and managers might need a workshop explaining these barriers and accommodations".*  Both Emmie and Paul, from an employee perspective, feel quite strongly around the interview process with Emmie commenting *"people on the autism spectrum may have smaller social networks than most neurotypical candidates or less ability to leverage their networks, reducing their opportunities for learning about potential roles…features of autistic people's communication, such as aversion to eye contact or monotone speech, can also be misinterpreted by interviewers as disinterest".*  Paul outlines *"in interviews especially we can just talk off topic or sometimes we just might not know what to say and then we panic…people on the autism spectrum may lack interview skills which prevents them from entering roles they would otherwise be competent in"* and finally, Isla notes from an agency point of view *"when it comes to interviewing, there is assumptions over what is actually expected…but the question is, to be in that role, does the person need to have eye contact for example all the time?  No. So why are you asking about it? So it's kind of like the traditional assumptions that come with a traditional interview can completely railroad our guys"*

It is therefore important that those responsible for conducting interviews with autistic persons are fully informed and trained accordingly so there are no surprises, and all accommodations are considered and made in advance.

### 4.4.4    Partnering with specialist teams

Interestingly, partnering with specialist recruitment agencies has not been too widely considered by employers with two out of five employers really advocating their services.  However, for those employers who were asked about such services during the interviews, all were very supportive and sought to garner more information around such offerings. This will be discussed further at Chapter 5 as it is an important piece for employers to understand so they can potentially be fully equipped around hiring.

Alison mentioned *"without the support of an autism recruitment agency, we simply could not and would not hire autistic talent as we don't have that expertise in house, I doubt very many organisations do, to be honest"* while Sadie outlined "*we don't have any reservations around hiring autistic talent because we actively recruit individuals with autism through Specialisterne…we use Specialisterne which is a recruitment agency specifically for individuals with autism…they support us so well"*.  In terms of essentially getting the 'word out there' about the support agencies can offer Isla commented "*there is definitely an increase in organisations using specialist recruitment agencies and it's very interesting but, for example, if one competitor is hiring in this space, we will see other competitors wanting to do it"*.  An example of the support offered by Isla's organisation is discussed under meaningful careers, next.

### 4.4.5    Meaningful careers

Dave outlines for neurodivergent employees, *"learning and development would need to be a more kind of intelligent route than just your standard route of training programmes which a neurotypical employee would have…we would want to focus on what a person would actually be doing for the firm rather than trying to build out an incredibly well-rounded individual…organisations are increasingly waking up to the fact of we don't have to have a cookie cutter approach and actually it's perfectly okay to have a technically minded internally focused person who's absolutely great at the subject matter but wouldn't necessarily be someone who wants to go out there and pitch for new work, right?"* And Olga comments *"we've got to ensure that our career development frameworks and performance measurement systems work for neurodivergent individuals. So are they actually empowered in the first place to showcase their abilities? And then are those abilities rewarded through our systems?  We've seen it time and time again with performance systems that literally only reward the extroverted, vocal half of the population.  So whether you're autistic or you're just outside that realm for any reason, then the performance system has got to recognise that"*.  In terms of other support, Sadie outlines within her organisation *"IT support is the predominant role and then people might want to become a developer.  So we will ask our recruiters to have a conversation with the employee around their skill set, where they might go, what courses they might take with loads of opportunities for people and just to get them on the right path"*. From an employee perspective, Paul outlines *"picking up tacit knowledge can make it*

*difficult to integrate into the culture of a new workplace and form working relationships".* And finally, feeding into Paul's point, Isla, from a *recruitment perspective, talks to some of those day-to-day challenges she helps with and outlines "with body language, like if I was talking to you and I was looking at my watch and I was trying to kind of make it obvious that I'm trying to leave the conversation, sometimes an autistic person would not typically be able to read that situation…so it's kind of like the unsaid, invisible points that perhaps autistic persons maybe always don't read…and sometimes then, unfortunately, that can lead to procrastination and non-action because they don't want to do something wrong".*

## 4.5 Research Objective 3: To explore societal barriers when hiring autistic talent

Societal barriers, whilst they may be viewed as contentious by some, it is important to probe their potential existence in relation to persons with autism to understand if there is any correlation between hiring autistic talent and societal barriers. The barriers that came through during interviews were at government level.

The two themes and coding at table 4 help to understand that there is more work to be done by those who are responsible for advocating and legislating for autistic persons within society.

*Table 4.  Research and objectives no. 3 – themes and coding*

| Themes | Coding |
|---|---|
| Government supported funding | Disabling schemes, employer grant, non-supportive, proof neurodiverse employee operating at 20% less capacity than neurotypical employees, non-inclusive, morally incorrect, not the right thing to do, need to do much better, equity, equality |
| Civil/Public Service Accommodations | Self-identifying challenges, more government support, lack of progression for many years, non-progressive quotas |

### 4.5.1    Government supported funding

Both Isla and Alison outlined how the Workplace Support Scheme (WSS) grant for employers to avail of when placing neurodiverse talent into organisations is a cumbersome, non-inclusive scheme, in their opinion. Isla commented "I *think there's great will at government level, but I do think the schemes they have in place are completely disabling…the wording on the government grant application basically outlines you need to sign this because you operate at 20% less than your colleagues and you need to get a doctor to sign and verify it also".*  Alison stated, "*as an employer, the WSS scheme really goes against creating a level playing field around equity, equality and values based on doing the right thing when hiring neurodiverse talent as the whole*

*scheme feels morally incorrect and we would rather not complete it at all…we have and will continue to hire autistic talent because we really do believe it is the right thing to do for our business".*

### 4.5.2 Civil/Public Service Accommodations

The barriers within the civil/public service in terms of hiring neurodiverse talent are around the lack of progress that appears to have been made over many years and the fact that the process for accommodations for neurodiverse persons are, like the WSS forms, cumbersome, not self-empowering and can feel like perhaps it a system first approach/tick the box approach rather than a person first system.

Isla comments "*I would nearly go as far as to say in the public service there is an issue with kind of people being able to self-identify challenges and being believed in that sense…the employer will say okay, you need this, this and this rather than the employee being able to advocate for themselves and outlining what they require*"

Olga finds the lack of progress within the civil service around hiring neurodiverse talent is quite concerning outlining *"we saw in the civil service for years where people came in, you know, a quota of persons with disabilities came in you know, 35 years later, we're at the same level which is, I think it's absolutely criminal".*

Further discussion and analysis around societal barriers are outlined at chapter five under hypotheses no. 3.

## 4.6 Conclusion

The data analysis chapter gave a detailed overview of participants views in terms of commitment levels to hiring autistic talent, accommodations needed and societal barriers that exist for autistic talent from an employer, employee, and specialist agency perspective.

In terms of the objectives of this dissertation, the results outlined, for the first objective, that each of the organisations interviewed all displayed high commitment levels to hiring autistic talent. However, whilst there is little doubt around the desire to hire such talent, it will be discussed during the next chapter there is still more to be done in this space, specifically in terms of hiring in Ireland within many of these organisations. It will also note the limitations, as outlined earlier, that all organisations interviewed were MNCs, thereby omitting the views of any SMEs. Moving into objective number two, in terms of understanding accommodations, this is an important piece for employers to embrace. The participants outlined what it takes to truly make such accommodations work in a meaningful, inclusive way with a no 'half measures' approach. Training for managers and colleagues, a critical area, still needs much work within organisations but with the help of partnering with expert organisations, it can be much smoother

than employers may think.  And finally, the last research objective around societal barriers calls out there are perhaps unnecessary stumbling blocks that autistic persons must endure to gain employment within the public/civil service and from an employers' perspective, there are certainly concerning views around the Workplace Support Forms that almost cross an ethical line, in their view.  Chapter 5, next, will discuss these findings in comparison to the literature review and, in turn, test the hypotheses and research questions for this dissertation.

# 5. Discussion

## 5.1 Introduction

The findings of the research analysis will be discussed in this chapter.  The results of the primary research will be compared to the secondary data collected, meaning the findings from the participants who were interviewed will be compared against the literature review to understand if there are any disparities between the two.

The purpose of this research was to understand the employer gap between hiring neurodivergent talent, specifically autistic persons, when compared to hiring neurotypical talent and to outline the challenges which exist but more importantly how employers can be equipped with solutions to these challenges. Whilst the objectives were outlined and analysed against the findings at chapter 4, the hypotheses will be critically evaluated throughout this chapter, alongside the literature review comparison and in turn, answering the research questions.  The hypotheses proposed for this research were as follows:

1. To understand if employers do not show strong commitment levels when hiring autistic talent or if indeed employers display encouraging signs and motivation around hiring autistic talent?

2. To understand if employers are not prepared to make the relevant necessary accommodations when hiring autistic talent or if employers are eager to learn and understand what accommodations need to be made when hiring autistic talent?

3. To understand if societal barriers cause employers to shy away from hiring autistic talent or despite societal barriers around hiring autistic talent, employers remain encouraged to hire autistic talent as they understand the benefits in doing so?

The next section discusses the findings against the hypotheses and literature review.

## 5.2 Discussion

### 5.2.1 Hypotheses no. 1 – To understand if employers do not show strong commitment levels when hiring autistic talent or if indeed employers display encouraging signs and motivation around hiring autistic talent?

The literature review outlined a critical stance around how employers navigate their D&I policies, with some finding ways to circumvent them, specifically disability policies which in turn questions their overall effectiveness (Beardwell, J; Thompson, A, 2014). It is further highlighted that those persons with disabilities are more likely to face unemployment when compared to those who don't have a disability (Torrington; D, Hall; L; Atkinson; C; Taylor; S, 2017). Arising from the interviews conducted for this research, not one presented with this challenge due to the fact all participants already hire autistic persons. However, what did emerge is due to the fact all participants work for MNCs who hire autistic talent and therefore all policies, processes, onboarding mechanisms are already in situ, there is still a notable gap when it comes to hiring autistic persons in Ireland. This was also the view of both employees. Of course, there are advantages working for a MNC as resources and procedures can be leveraged quickly but perhaps this then means there are few excuses for not delivering more at a local level, in this case, Ireland, which does not appear to be consistently happening presently. Tom explained "*there's a big neurodiversity hiring programme in the US which we're trying to gradually kind of propagate out, out beyond the US…often things will start there and move outwards…and I know there's work in the UK and Ireland's looking at some stuff at the moment as well…there is a big engineering community in Ireland so they're looking at specific roles, but I'll be pushing them to make sure they broaden".* The same theme emerged for Olga "*out of the 3.3% globally who identify as disabled, over half, so 57% indicated they have a cognitive learning or neurodevelopmental disdability…and that is without ever having any particular programme in place yet".* And finally, Alison outlined, "*we are doing good work locally in Ireland hiring autistic talent, however, we need to do better…a general benchmark from those organisations who are perhaps best in class is 1% of your hiring should be neurodivergent talent which means we certainly have some distance to travel".*

So, whilst the answer to hypotheses 1 is yes, those participants who were interviewed showed encouraging signs and motivation around hiring autistic talent, however, whilst not intended to overshadow progress, but more a gentle nudge in the right direction, the reality is organisations have much more work to do in Ireland to actively embed hiring autistic persons. There is a silent point too that is worth mentioning around active neurodivergent hiring programmes versus those organisations who already have neurodivergent talent hired but not necessarily because they were aware at the time of hiring. Progression will mean consciously hiring in this space to truly embed inclusion. Overall, however, there are encouraging signs in terms of hiring autistic persons in Ireland moving forward.

The literature review in terms of hiring autistic talent largely focused on an organisations policies and procedures being underdeveloped, D&I goals not clearly defined and rather a diversity first approach as opposed to an inclusion first approach. When comparing the interview data analysis to this, in terms of

hypotheses number 1, it was found the participants views did not align to this due to the fact such organisations already have the foundations in place to hire autistic talent, albeit more at a global rather than local level.  The limitation around this research, as previously identified, is worth calling out as all views obtained were those from MNCs meaning that if there were participants from SMEs, the reality could be quite different and indeed align to the literature review given SMEs may perhaps be further behind on their journey then MNCs. For example, their policies and procedures, their HRM departments capability/understanding of working with autistic persons etc.   It is recommended however, that further research should incorporate SMEs which would provide an informed answer to this hypothesis for SMEs. Finally, this also answers research question number 1 in terms of what is the organisations level of commitment to hiring autistic talent?

### 5.2.2    Hypotheses no. 2 – To understand if employers are not prepared to make the relevant necessary accommodations when hiring autistic talent of if employers are eager to learn and understand what accommodations need to be made when hiring autistic talent?

Accommodations are one of the most, if not the most, critical aspects of successfully hiring autistic talent.  There was a direct correlation between the literature review and the participants views around what success looks like in terms of accommodations for autistic persons with all eight participants calling out the significance of employers understanding the accommodations and most importantly, implementing the accommodations.

According to Waisman-Nitzan, Schreuer, (2019, cited in Lopez and Keenan, 2014), the greatest barriers to gaining employment for autistic individuals is predominately a lack of understanding amongst employers and colleagues around autistic talent in terms of what reasonable accommodations look like which can ultimately serve to inhibit their employment.  Outlining the importance of accommodations Olga commented *"it's the awareness of the specific accommodations that are needed but it's also ensuring they're in place and there's no half measures…there's no point in saying, oh, well, we've got eight out of the ten they've asked for but actually you don't know that the two out of ten that you're not providing aren't the linchpin and the super important thing for them"* From an employee perspective Emmie called out that there are "*especially gaps in the interview process, like with autistic individuals, we don't interpret some things the same….employers ask us sometimes we have to ask them to repeat the question or tell it a different way because our brains just don't comprehend what they're actually trying to ask".*  The analysis section spoke at length about the importance of interviews and employers providing training for those interviewing so they can pick up on signs such as no eye contact or monotone speech.

(HBR, Thomas, Ely, Hewlett, Williams, 2019) through their seven initiatives, derived from recruitment specialists, Specialisterne, outlined partnering with other organisations, thinking about innovative ways around the traditional interview, upskilling employees and managers, support networks, building out long term careers, growing the programme and finally normalising the programme were all fundamental areas for an employer to focus on.  Every participant focused on the importance of most of these seven initiatives with the standout initiatives being training for employees and even more granular training for managers.  The importance of this training cannot be over-stated.

A call out area that employers were not overly familiar with, apart from two employers, was the support and expertise working with a specialist recruitment agency can bring to employers and employees. Both employees called out their overwhelming support for working such an agency and for those employers who did not have the knowledge in this space, all of them were interested in learning more. The analysis section of this dissertation outlined the critical support a recruitment agency can provide from coaching the employee for interviews, coaching the employer about the candidate, staying in touch once the employee has started and working with the employer and employee to identify any challenges that may arise to overall enable a long-term career with their organisation of choice. It is suggested this support is vital for employers commencing recruitment for autistic talent. And whilst there are some contentious views around utilising this support with people perhaps believing individuals can advocate for themselves, none of the participants shared this view during interviews when asked.

Finally, in terms of hypotheses number 2, all employers were exceptionally knowledgeable around accommodations needed but they also acknowledged the time and effort into realising these accommodations should not be underestimated and fundamentally, everyone called out there is little point engaging in this process if the accommodations are only going to be half implemented as it will result in a hugely negative experience for all involved.

This also answers research question number 2 in terms of what are the necessary accommodations needed to make hiring autistic talent successful within organisations?

### 5.2.3 Hypotheses no. 3 – To understand if societal barriers cause employers to shy away from hiring autistic talent or despite potential societal barriers, employers remain encouraged to hire autistic talent as they understand the benefits in doing so?

The biggest debate encountered during the literature review was all around how autism should be defined. There is no consensus amongst researchers, medical professionals or autism allies and it appeared as though all three are generally, at one point or another, disputing what the other believes. The argument falls between autism being known as medical model of disability displaying psychological deficiencies/disorders or autism being a natural occurring social disability combined with attitudinal and environmental obstacles (Barnhart, Dierickx 2021). It is further called out there are autistic persons who would prefer not to be characterised with a disability compared to those autistic persons who may not have a choice due to the fact that their lives are quite restrictive living with autism (Jaysane-Darr, 2020).

Given this is the state of play within the literature, there is perhaps then little doubt around how employers might be confused by autism and what is it/what it is not. And whilst it will take more research in this space to truly gain further informed knowledge, let's focus on what this dissertation research uncovered in this space. It became apparent there are two main barriers facing autistic persons at government level. One is around how autistic persons are accommodated should they become successful obtaining a role in the civil/public service with quite a cumbersome process in relation to obtaining accommodations and an employer led approach as opposed to an employee led approach advocating for what they need as opposed to being told what they need. The other barrier is all around the Workplace Support Form (WSS) employers need to complete should they wish to obtain a grant when hiring

neurodivergent individuals.  It was found this form feels almost unethical to complete from an employers' perspective with employees having to get their doctor to sign that they operate at 20% less capacity than their neurotypical colleagues before the grant will be given to their employer.  This certainly appears to contradict what was called out in the literature review with  (Ortiz, 2020), outlining that employers frequently report their neurodiverse teams are more efficient and high yielding than teams without neurodiverse individuals.  Additionally, both employers who have hired autistic talent, as outlined throughout the analysis section, and indeed employees themselves all advocate that autistic persons can perform to the same standard as their neurotypical colleagues with the right accommodations.  And for the avoidance of doubt, such accommodations are not cumbersome for employers with examples already mentioned including noise cancelling earphones, different employer led ways/initiatives to interview autistic persons and training both employees and line managers.

(Fuentes, J; Hervas, A; Howlin, P, 2021) outline that individuals with autism, at one point or another throughout their lives, will seek to rely on government departments or community agencies as playing a pivotal role in terms of health, education, equality rights and of course gaining meaningful employment. Given autistic persons will seek to rely on government support as outlined and due to the limitations in this research in terms of the limited but useful knowledge called out from participants who were interviewed, it is strongly recommend further research should be garnered around the role society plays hiring autistic talent successfully, starting with the paramount role of government.

Finally, in terms of hypotheses number 3, this dissertation concludes that despite societal barriers for autistic persons that very much exist, employers remain encouraged to hire autistic talent, however, there is an urgent requirement for society/those who are responsible in this space to do much better. This also answers the final research question, do societal barriers prevent employers hiring autistic talent in the workplace?

## 5.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, this section outlined two out of the three hypotheses aligned to the literature review.  It also found that whilst MNCs are doing encouraging work in this space, it is largely more at a global level rather than in Ireland.  All organisations did however display a desire to start hiring more autistic persons in Ireland.   It was found there is exceptional knowledge from research participants in terms of accommodations that are needed whilst also calling out employers must put the time and effort into such accommodations for them to truly work. Finally, it was outlined there are indeed societal barriers that have the potential to disrupt hiring autistic talent and whilst this dissertation mentioned some of these barriers, it is recommended more research is needed in this space given the disparity outlined at literature review and at societal level around understanding what is truly meant by autism.

# 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

## 6.1 Conclusion

The main purpose of this research was to equip employers with an understanding of the challenges and solutions needed to successfully hire autistic persons.  The term Neurodiversity, of which autism is a considered a sub-category, is gaining much momentum and traction over the past number of years with employers eager to understand more to enable successful hiring of autistic talent. Despite this fact, it has been outlined throughout this dissertation the dial simply has not moved to where it should and there is still a gap between the rhetoric of what some large organisations are perceived as doing, even within the literature, and what they are doing in this space, especially in Ireland.  Additionally, there are societal barriers at play which can further hinder the progression of hiring autistic persons.  For example, the findings carried out within this research highlighted that although there are positive intentions within the organisations that took part in the research, predominately most of their hiring programmes for autistic persons are based in the US which not have not yet been replicated in Ireland.  This is not the case for all organisations; however, it is for the majority and even those organisations who are hiring in Ireland, called out the fact they still have more work to do.  In addition, the research also called out there are societal barriers at play whereby accessing grants for employers to hire such talent, if they wish to do so, is a cumbersome process that does not appear to be an equal or equitable process for autistic persons. It was encouraging to hear from all organisations around their in-depth knowledge when it comes to required accommodations needed for autistic persons as one of the main stumbling blocks for employers can be around understanding such accommodations.

This dissertation had three main objectives which also tested three hypotheses. The objectives for this research were to probe commitment levels of organisations when hiring autistic talent, to understand what accommodations can be made from an employers' perspective when hiring autistic talent so they may be easily integrated into the organisation and to explore societal barriers when hiring autistic talent. To meet these objectives, three hypotheses were tested.  As a result, the hypotheses for objective one was found not to align to the research since although all employers are successfully hiring autistic talent at a global level, predominately in the US, the same hiring for autistic persons is not happening locally in Ireland for most organisations so commitment levels are deemed lower than they should be.  The hypotheses for objective two and three were found to align with the literature review with employers really understanding accommodations needed and in terms of the last objective around societal barriers, they were explored with the findings outlining there are societal barriers that can certainly hinder employment levels for autistic persons.  However, despite these, those employers who are hiring autistic talent in Ireland remain encouraged to do so but called out a review of such barriers needs urgent attention.

## 6.2 Recommendations

In terms of future research around hiring autistic persons, this dissertation focused on the views of MNEs, two autistic employees and one specialist recruitment agency which garnered critical information across all three groups to understand what it means to genuinely hire autistic talent.  Future research could focus on the gaps in this research which are to obtain the views of SMEs and a larger sample size of autistic persons for an even more rounded holistic view.  For example, the findings within this research outlined that whilst the organisations who participated are equipped with core knowledge in relation to hiring autistic talent, it is predominately in the US and not in Ireland.  And even those organisations who are hiring autistic talent in Ireland have more work to do thereby enabling future research to probe perhaps why this is the case and understand how it can be greatly improved.

In terms of accommodations, the research explored and probed several critical accommodations to be provided.  Further research could seek to understand views from organisations, such as SMEs, who did not take part in this research, to understand if such accommodations are viable for them and if not, it could seek to understand what factors are preventing other organisations from implementing such reasonable accommodations.

And the third factor, societal barriers.  This research identified two areas around societal barriers in terms of hiring autistic talent. However, further research could build on the gap within this research and understand if there are any more societal barriers at play that are useful to probe for an overall even more informed understanding of such barriers.

Finally, it is useful to point to some practical and actionable recommendations that employers seeking to employ autistic talent in Ireland can action based on the research findings.  Such recommendations encompass employers, employees and specialist agency viewpoints who participated in this research:

- Hire autistic talent because it is the right thing to do for the organisation and there are open roles that suit autistic persons skillsets and not because it might look good on paper around serving diversity initiatives.   Completely avoid a tokenistic approach
- Start small and grow big by utilising the support of specialist recruitment agencies who have the expertise to help and guide organisations when preparing candidates for interviews, coaching candidates and the organisation and keeping an honest, open relationship with the employer and the employee to ensure long term success
- Employee accommodations are the most critical part of the whole process and employers must be prepared to implement all necessary accommodations.  Such accommodations are individual and a 'one size fits all' approach should not be taken but rather each employee should be asked what their accommodations are.  It should be noted such accommodations are generally not onerous on employers and can include noise cancelling headphones, quiet spaces and understanding an employees' social preferences

- The interview process should not resemble the traditional interview expectations. It should be tailored to suit the employee who is being interviewed by ensuring those who are responsible for interviewing are trained to understand no eye contact or perhaps speaking in a monotone voice/saying too much when asked questions does not make the candidate any less well able to perform the role than neurotypical candidates. Check recruiters' own biases. Again, utilise the support of the agency to understand/get a better insight into the candidate being interviewed

- Training is the ultimate key to success. Train the general population to help them understand what autism is/what is it not. Break down stereotypes. Hold myth busting sessions. Train line managers at a granular level so they can help build out long-terms careers with their autistic talent and so they understand different nuances around working with autistic persons. Hold continuous regular briefing sessions to ensure new joiners are included and educated

- Finally, do not be afraid to embrace hiring autistic persons, have an open mind and do it because the organisation truly believes it will make a difference to tap into skillsets that are greatly underemployed perhaps because of stereotypical thinking. Data analytical and IT roles were some of the skillsets called out as part of this research where employers have embraced hiring autistic talent

## 6.3 Implications of Findings

The recommendations outlined within this research for employers in terms of hiring autistic talent can be implemented throughout most organisations in Ireland. However, stumbling blocks arise owing to perceptions of perhaps what it takes to hire such talent in terms of the time involved, employers not educated in this space, no training provided for employees or managers so therefore employers may believe it is a much bigger mountain to climb than it is. And whilst hiring autistic talent will take more time initially than hiring neurotypical talent, if employers are prepared to put the effort into the early stages of hiring, such as the interview process and accommodations, the rest will fall into place and of course will require monitoring, just like any new hire does. The research outlined that those employers who are willing to hire autistic persons start with one person at a time and it grows from there. Employers should not lose momentum around their hiring efforts and the research highlighted that some employers have hired four neurodiverse persons over an 18 month period. However, the research also outlined that there is a notable gap hiring autistic talent in Ireland and whilst it is certainly getting better, there is quite a bit more to be done.

It is recommended employers hiring autistic persons could partner with a specialist recruitment agency for the best experience from both the employee and employers' perspective. There is a cost associated with this, however, it is a lower cost than mainstream recruitment agencies employers use for hiring neurotypical employees. Generally, recruitment agencies costs are between 15%-18% of an individuals salary to place a candidate with an employer whereas a specialist recruitment agency can be half of such costs and employers are provided with a completely bespoke approach to ensure the smooth integration of the employee into the organisation. It was outlined that an employer can also avail of a

grant for the employee which will mostly likely offset the agency cost, however, this research highlighted the grant process is cumbersome and challenging to complete which is a stumbling block to overcome but it is possible to successfully apply for the such grants.

Those employers who participated in the research praised the efforts of the recruitment agency they use and outlined they couldn't have hired autistic talent otherwise. Those employers who were not familiar with utilising the services of a recruitment agency advised they were keen to learn and understand more which could ultimately serve to enhance progression overall in terms of hiring autistic talent.

## 6.4 Personal Learning Statement

Embarking on this research study certainly tested my limits in terms of patience, endurance, and self-motivation whilst also working full-time in an extremely busy role.  However, it was all helped by my extremely keen interest in hiring autistic talent and my desire to help other employers move this agenda forward.  I know wholeheartedly that choosing a research topic that interests me was the key to keep pushing forward even when there were days and weeks, I felt I couldn't.

The most challenging aspect of the study was the literature review as it was difficult to source research that was applicable to my study given the area of autism is certainly under researched. This is further compounded by the fact many researchers have varying views around what autism is and how it should be defined.  This then impacts on the actual knowledge on the ground in terms of HRM professionals and employers and is also further complicated by the area of disability which autism falls under.  So, during the research, it was one thing researching autism but also the area of disability and how both should be linked, or otherwise, from an employers' perspective when hiring autistic persons. There was also limited research from a HRM perspective other than to outline HRM professionals themselves are under educated in this space.  So, my hope is, given these challenges, this research helps employers and HRM professionals to enable them to take the first steps when hiring autistic talent.

Finally, my heart is uplifted from my experience interviewing the employees who took part in my research.  To listen, learn and understand their challenges when gaining employment was sobering but also fueled my desire further to make this research as accessible and meaningful as possible for employers so that autistic talent can gain employment just like neurotypical talent. I would have loved to interview more employees', but I am delighted I got the opportunity to interview the two that I did, and my greatest wish is that this research will genuinely help employers and eventually one day level the long overdue playing field in this space.

# Reference List

- Agnieszka, S; Edyta, IP, 2021. Difficulties in employment perceived by individuals with ASD in Poland. *Advances in Autism,* 7(1), pp. 49-59.

- Albright, J; Kulok, S; Scarpa, A, 2020. A qualitative analysis of employer perspectives on the hiring and employment of adults with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation ,* 53(2), pp. 167-182.

- Austin, RD; Pisano, GP, 2017. Neurodiversity as a competitive advantage: why you should embrace it in your workforce. *Harvard Business Review,* 95(3), pp. 96,8.

- Barnhart Andrew J, Dierickx, K, 2021. Cultures and cures: neurodiversity and brain organoids. *BMC Medical Ethics,* 22(1), pp. 1-6.

- Beardwell, J; Thompson, A, 2014. *Human Resource Management; A Contemporary Approach.* 7th ed. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.

- Boxall, P; Purcell J, 2000. Strategic human resource management: where have we come from and where should we be going?. *International Journal of Management Reviews,* 2(2), pp. 183-203.

- Bury, SM; Flower, RL; Zulla, R; Nicholas DB, Hedley, D, 2021. Workplace Social Challenges Experienced by Employees on the Autism Spectrum: An International Explatory Study Examining Employee and Supervisor Perspectives. *Journal of autism and developmental disorders,* 51(5), pp. 1614-1627.

- CIPD, 2018. *Neurodiversity at Work.* [Online]
  Available at: https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/neurodiversity-at-work_2018_tcm18-37852.pdf
  [Accessed 15 January 2022].

- Fuentes, J; Hervas, A; Howlin, P, 2021. ESCAP practice guidance for autism: a summary of evidence based recommendations for diagnosis and treatment. *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry ,* 30(6), pp. 961-964.

- Haley, M., 2021. Screened Out Onscreen: Disability Discrimination, Hiring Bias, And Artificial Intelligence. *Denver Law Review,* 98(4), pp. 775-805.

- HBR; Thomas DA; Ely RJ; Hewlett SA; Williams JC, 2019. *HBR's 10 Must Reads on Diversity (wtih Bonus Article ' Making Differences Matter: A New Paradigm for Managing Diversity' By David A. Thomas and Robin J. Ely),* Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business Review Press.

- HBR, 2015. *HBR's 10 Must Reads on Emotional Intelligence (with Featured Article 'What Makes a Leader?' by Daniel Goleman) (HBR's 10 Must Reads),* Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business Review Press.

- Hennessy, M; Dennehy, R; Doherty, J; O'Donoghue, K, 2022. Outsourcing Transciption: Extending Ethical Considerations in Qualitative Research. *Qualitative health research ,* Ahead of print(Ahead of print), p. Ahead of print.

- Hidegh, AL; Csillag, S, 2013. Toward 'mental accessibility' : changing the mental obstacles that future Human Resource Management practitioners have about the employment of people with disabilities. *Human Resource Development International* , 16(1), pp. 22-39.

- Hillier; A, Poto; N; Schena II, D; Dorey; J, Buckingham; A, Santangelo; M, Frye; A, 2022. Overview of a Life Skills Coaching Programme for Adults on the Autism Spectrum: Coaches' Perspectives. *Psychological Reports,* 125(2), pp. 937-963.

- Honeybourne, V., 2019. *The Nuerodiverse Workplace: An Employer's Guide to Managing and Working with Neurodivergent Employees, Clients and Customers,* London: Jessica Kingsley.

- Hughes, J. A., 2021. Does the heterogeneity of autism undermine the neurodiversity paradigm?. *Bioethics,* 35(1), pp. 47-60.

- Jaysane-Darr, A., 2020. Enabling and disabling emotional diversity: Negotiating autism spectrum disorder in therapeutic encounters. *Children & Society,* 34(4), pp. 261-275.

- Johnson, KR; Demetria, EC; Bonhamgregory M, 2020. Workplace Success Strategies for Employees With Autism Spectrum Disorder: A New Frontier for Human Resource Development. *Human Resource Development Review,* 19(2), pp. 122-151.

- Lynas, L., 2014. Project ABLE (Autism:Building Links to Employment): A specialist employment service for young people and adults with an autism spectrum condition.. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* , 41(1), pp. 13-21.

- Malterud,K; Siersma, V; Guassora, AD, 2021. Information power: Sample content and size in qualitative studies. *Qualitative research in psychology: Expanding perspectives in methodology and design,* 8(2), pp. 67-81.

- MariaSzulc, J; Davies, J; Tomczak, MT; McGregor, FL, 2021. AMO perspectives on the well-being of neurodivergent human capital. *Employee Relations: The Intnernational Journal,* 43(4), pp. 858-872.

- McLoughlin, D., 2021. Neurodiversity and dyslexia: Paradigm shift or euphemism?. *Assessment&Development Matters,* 13(2), pp. 21-25.

- Mukhles, M; Al-Ababneh, 2020. Linking Ontology, Epistemology And Research Methodology. *Science & Philosophy,* 8(1), pp. 75-91.

- O'Connor, K., 2021. *How To Build Psychological Safety For Better Team Results.* [Online] Available at: www.legal-island.ie/articles/ire/features/coaching/2021/july/how-to-build-psychological-safety-for-better-team-results/ [Accessed 10 August 2021].

- Ortiz, L. A., 2020. Reframing Neurodiversity as Competitive Advantage: Opprotunities, Challenges, and Resources for Business and Professional Communication Educators. *Business&Professional Communication Quarterly,* 83(3), pp. 261-284.

- Praslova, L., 2021. *Autism Doesn't Hold People Back at Work. Discrimination Does.* [Online] Available at: https:/hbr-org.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/hbr.org/amp/2021/12/autism-doesn't-hold-people-back-at-work-discrimination-does [Accessed 8 January 2022].

- Procknow,G; Rocco, TS, 2016. The Unheard, Unseen, and Often Forgotten: An Examination of Disability in the Human Resource Development Literature. *Human Resource Development Review,* 15(4), pp. 379-403.

- Quinetta R, Narda R Quigley, Vickers K, Bruck I, 2021. *Reconceptualising Leadership From a Neurodiverse Perspective.* [Online]
Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1059601120987293
[Accessed 1 November 2021].

- Reichwald, S., 2021. The impact COVID-19 has had on diverse talent. *Strategic HR Review,* 20(6), pp. 211-214.

- Remington, A; Pellicano, E, 2019. 'Sometimes you just need someone to take a chance on you': An internship programme for autistic graduates at Deutsche Bank , UK. *Journal of Management & Organisation,* 25(4), pp. 516-534.

- Richards, J; Sang, K; Marks, A; Gill, S, 2019. "I've found it extremely draining ". Emotinoal labour and the lived experience of line managing neurodiversity. *Personnel Review,* 48(7), pp. 1903-1923.

- Salkind, N., 2012. *Sage Publications.* [Online]
Available at: https://methods.sagepub.com/Reference/encyc-of-research-design/n320.xml
[Accessed 28 May 2022].

- Scandura, T., 2017. *Leading Diversity in the 21st Century,* Charlotte: Information Age Publishing .

- Shahram, H., 2015. *What is Confirmation Bias?.* [Online]
Available at: www.phychology.com/us/blog/science-choice/201504/what-is-confirmation-bias
[Accessed 30 April 2022].

- Smith, T., 2021. *Qualitative and quantitative research,* Massachusetts: Salam Press Encyclopedia.

- Theophilus, A., 2018. Qualitative research: deductive and inductive approaches to data analysis. *Qualitative Research Journal,* 18(4), pp. 383-400.

- Tomczak, M., 2021. Employees with Autism Spectrum Disorder in the Digitzed Work Environment: Perspectives for the Future.. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies,* 31(4), pp. 195-205.

- Torrington; D, Hall; L; Atkinson; C; Taylor; S, 2017. *Human Resource Management.* 10th ed. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.

- Waisman-Nitzan, M; Gal, E; Schreuer. N, 2019. Employers' perspectives regarding reasonable accommodations for employees with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Management & Organisation,* 25(4), pp. 481-498.

- Whelpley, CE; Perrault, E, 2021. Autism at work: How internal and external factors influence employee outcomes and firm performance. *Journal of General Management,* 46(3), pp. 210-219.

- Whelpley, CE; Perrault, E, 2021. Autism at work: How internal and external factors influence employee outcomes and firm performance.. *Journal of General Managment ,* 46(3), pp. 210-219.

- Wilkinson; A, Redman; T; Dundon; T, 2017. *Contemporary Human Resource Management.* 5th ed. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.

- Writers, P., 2022. *What are the limitations in research?.* [Online]
Available at: https://pro-academic-writers.com/blog/limitations-in-research
[Accessed 30 May 2022].

- Yildiz, A., 2020. A Discussion on Accurate and Effective Data Collection for Qualitative Research. *Journal of Current Researchers on Educational Studies,* 10(2), pp. 17-24.

# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Employer Questionnaire

*The employer gap when hiring neurodivergent talent, specifically autistic talent, compared to neurotypical talent. Understanding the challenges and solutions from both an employers' and employees' perspective*

Source: Albright, J; Kulok, S; Scarpa, A, 2020. A qualitative analysis of employer perspectives on the hiring and employment of adults with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* ,53(2), pp. 167-182. (Adapted).

1. Would you currently have any reservations or concerns about hiring an autistic person? If so, please describe.

2. Can you think of benefits there might be to hiring an autistic person? These can be unique strengths the employee might have, or secondary benefits associated with being an inclusive business.

3. What kind of information regarding autism and how it can affect employees would be helpful to you if you were considering hiring an autistic person?

4. What kind of training to help handle the transition of the autistic person into the workplace would be most helpful?

5. In what capacity would you feel most comfortable working with a Vocational Rehabilitation representative or employment support provider? Some options would include a representative simply introducing you to a potential employee, a provider who helped a new employee transition into the workplace, and/or a provider who remained in contact with your workplace long-term to provide information and support.

6. What support do you feel you would need to transition an autistic person into your workplace in the short-term?

7. What support do you feel you would need to transition an autistic person into your workplace in the long-term, so that the individual could potentially build a long-term career?

8. In your opinion, what are the most important practical skills an individual should have if they want to get a job/begin a career in your field, and how can those be gained?

9. In your opinion, what kinds of social skills are most important and in what context(s) should individuals be prepared to use those skills?

10. To the best of your knowledge, has your organisation hired autistic people?  If not, are you aware of any plans to do so?