

**A qualitative analysis of employers' perspectives on  
the increase of employing autistic individuals at  
IT companies in Ireland**

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# Submission of Thesis and Dissertation

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# Table of Contents

Abstract	4
Introduction	4
Literature Review	7
Autism in today's work environment	8
Neurodiversity and its discrimination	9
The power of cognitive diversity	12
Barriers to employment opportunities	13
Practices to support employers to hire more autistic people	15
Research gap	17
Research question	18
Methodology	20
Participants	20
Procedure	21
Data analysis	22
Ethical considerations	24
Analysis and findings	24
Positive approach but not enough knowledge	24
Good understanding of needs and skills essential	26
External experts' help essential	28
Importance of the internal transition process	30
Discussion	32
Limitations	37
Future research	38
Conclusions and Recommendations	39
References:	44
Appendix	55
<b>Interview questions:</b>	55

## Abstract

Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are a growing group of people who face constant barriers in finding successful employment opportunities in IT companies. Understanding the challenges that impact employment and integration into a workplace, is crucial to improve this situation. The perspective of the employer must be examined to understand what factors influence their decision on employing autistic people. The purpose of this study is to take a thematic approach and examine Irish employers via semi-structured interviews. The findings emerged into four themes and a few trends developed while analysing the outcomes. The results showed positive attitudes towards employing people with ASD, however the level of knowledge where to obtain more information and support was very low. Employers expressed that autistic employees' requirements need to be communicated in a clear way, so that the work expectations and the workplace can be adjusted accordingly. The employers identified that third party support services are very important in the process of background check, recruitment and transition of the autistic person into the workplace. The findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of employers' needs and how they can better prepare for hiring and employing more people with ASD. The implications of the research can lead to more job opportunities and increased number of placements for autistic people. Higher employment rate within people with ASD will also improve other outcomes, including quality of life of autistic people.

## Introduction

“Neurodiversity may be every bit as crucial for the human race as biodiversity is for life in general. Who can say what form of wiring will be best at any given moment?” (Blume, 1998). One of the first mentions of the term ‘neurodiversity’ appeared in Blume’s article from 1998. Even though this way of thinking took a long time to get accepted by society, it is now seen as a natural form of human neurocognitive variation. Neurodiverse groups of people represent more than 10% of the population (CIPD, 2018), and other sources say it might be 15 - 20% of the population (Developmental Dimensions International (DDI), 2021). This group of people

is becoming a significant part of the job applicants, clients and employees. Therefore, companies and employers must start including them in their recruitment strategies and employment processes.

This paper is focused on one of the neurodiverse groups - individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). In 2020 in Ireland there were 5,753 people registered as autistic and 75% of them are under 18 years old (O'Sullivan *et al.*, 2020). This suggests that a large group of people with ASD are entering now or will enter the job market in the next 10 years and employers should prepare their workplaces for these young people. However, the statistics are alarming as only 20% of autistic people are in full employment (O'Sullivan *et al.*, 2020). These numbers are similar worldwide (Cusack, 2021; Office for National Statistics, 2021; Miley, 2019). It is important to mention that the unemployment rate of people with ASD is significantly higher than in any other disability group.

These concerning facts call for deeper research on why the employment of autistic people is so low. The question to be asked is why employers do not include this group of population in their recruitment strategies and what can be done to change this. There has been some research done on the benefits of implementing neurodiversity into a company's culture and on the challenges people with ASD face when working in a neurotypical work environment (Hedley *et al.*, 2021; Spoor, Bury and Hedley, 2021; Diener *et al.*, 2020; Remington and Pellicano, 2019). However, most of them were based on the autistic employees' perspective. It is important to consider other stakeholders and investigate the employers' view and their challenges of successful integration of neurodiverse individuals into a workplace. A better understanding of how employers, Human Resource (HR) departments and other hiring personnel can support employees with ASD is crucial for developing comprehensive solutions to the issues autistic minorities experience.

There are a few studies which have explored this subject area (Moore, McDonald and Bartlett, 2018; Westover, Hughes and Cardon, 2018; Chen *et al.*, 2015; Hendricks, 2010). They concluded that employment opportunities for autistic people are limited because of a centralised recruitment process, not enough suitable roles and too high productivity demands. They have also pointed to lack of awareness and training and need of specially designed programs to help the autistic people to gain and maintain employment (Westover *et al.*, 2018). There are also a couple of main studies, which conducted research on employers to analyse their view on employing ASD workers (Shahid and Zahid, 2021; Albright, Kulok and Scarpa, 2020; Nicholas *et al.*, 2019; Riesen and Morgan, 2018). The research stated that knowledge

and awareness have a significant impact on employers' positive attitude towards recruiting individuals with ASD. Moreover, the employment process needs to be customised and the employment specialists need special training. More research on practical guidance on how to include autistic people during all stages of employment could improve the situation of ASD employees on the labour market (Bowman, 2020).

The literature review chapter presents a deeper overview of what has been researched and written within this theme over the recent years in the literature. It also identifies the research gaps this research intends to fill. The next section justifies the research question and the sub-questions and gives reasons why the questions were chosen. In the next chapter, the methodology used to conduct the research is explained. The thematic analysis has been used to analyse data sets of the seven semi structured interviews. The following chapter analyses the data collected from interviewing the participants. The data is coded into four themes: positive approach but not enough knowledge, good match of the skills and needs, external experts help is essential also in internal onboarding process. The last chapter includes a conclusion and recommendations. It also covers the CIPD requirements.

This paper's aim is to get a deeper understanding of employers' perspective on hiring and managing people with ASD. The pioneers in this field are IT companies, therefore the research will be narrowed to technology companies based in Ireland. The aim of the study is to get an overview of the benefits and reservations they might have when hiring people with ASD into their teams. Moreover, the study's goal is to examine what needs and management skills are crucial to successfully integrate neurodiverse employees into the organisations. The study was carried out from a qualitative perspective and is based on the in-depth interview method. It is believed that face to face interviews are best to achieve the aims and collect experiences, needs and challenges employers might face in the workplaces.

The time of the study is very relevant considering that the number of individuals diagnosed with ASD is increasing. Most of them are entering adulthood and will start looking for employment. Therefore, it is crucial for employers to obtain more knowledge on the differences in managing and maintaining people with ASD (Bowman, 2020). Many industries, particularly the IT industry, are starting to experience shortage of workers (Johnson, Ennis-Cole and Bonhamgregory, 2020) and could benefit from the above average talents of the autistic neurodiversity group (Holland, 2016). A common trend of remote work and digitalisation of work relationships can bring a lot of advantages to the ASD population and release the pressure of the social skills needs.

The findings provide meaningful contributions to the topic of creating a more inclusive environment in IT company workplace and increase the hire of autistic people. The value of the study is a better understanding of the challenges employers experience with implementing neurodiversity into their workplaces. The outcomes of the study show what employers needs are and what tools and strategies they need to develop to successfully hire and manage neurodiverse teams. These outcomes and practical advice can be useful for other employers who would like to open themselves more to diversity and inclusion practices in their organisations. The findings could shed light on some guidelines for governments and other bodies who create and implement diversity practices and policies. The study also brings value in terms of better understanding of the employees with ASD and improving their wellbeing at work. Employment is an important aspect of adult life, and a meaningful job is desirable for most people, including individuals with ASD. It impacts other parts of life, from higher social status and better mental health to financial independence, which would be very beneficial for this disability group (Chen *et al.*, 2015).

## Literature Review

Since the first publications about neurodiversity in workplaces in the late '90s, few research papers, describing how to support employers to employ more autistic people, have been published. Lopez *et al.*'s (2021) research shows that the barriers and challenges ASD people face at work have not changed through the years. They are mostly related to low awareness of their special needs among managers and colleagues (Stedman, 2021). The findings from the studies point to the crucial role of education and training for future managers and for existing staff members. It has been proved that most impact have HR departments and they should be the leaders in implementing neurodiversity at workplaces. Existing stigma and discrimination lead to high unemployment within this population. Autistic people bring a lot of benefits and much needed diversity into a workplace. A lot of barriers in employment of autistic people come from the lack of policies including diversity and misconception of costs of employing autistic people. The main thing to be changed to enable to hire more autistic people is the way the recruitment process is formed. Moreover, it is recommended that the employers start collaborating with colleges to organise placements and hire external employment support companies. There are a few main outcomes that the studies suggest should be implemented to encourage employers to employ more autistic people. Job matching, awareness training and

information campaigns are one of the most important aspects, as well as trying to give a chance to the autistic people and include them in the workplaces, as well as in the society.

The first part of the literature review called 'Autism in today's work environment' describes the positive and negative aspects of including autistic people at work. It also looks at the role of HR managers and the fact that it is easier to implement the changes in bigger companies. The next part 'Neurodiversity and its discrimination' describes positive autism and treating it in a social way. Despite some legal acts to protect autistic people the discrimination and stigma around employing people with disabilities still exists. The unemployment rate among autistic people is very high, as well as the costs of excluding this group of people from the work society. The next chapter is called 'The power of cognitive diversity' and it collaborates on the benefits autistic people bring to a workplace and how this group of people can't be ignored by the employers. The following chapter 'Barriers to employment opportunities' explores challenges the autistic people face when applying for a job and transitioning into a workplace. The main barriers are related to social skills challenges, lack of autism awareness and poor workplace adjustments. The second last section of the literature review is entitled 'Practices to support employers to hire more autistic people' and it concentrates on the strategies different studies researched to help to encourage employers to employ more autistic people. The last section is called 'Research gap' and it describes the areas where more research should be conducted.

## Autism in today's work environment

According to Whelpley and Perrault's (2020) recent study, we can see an increase of awareness of ASD issues across management literature in recent years. The authors point out that a lot of research and popular press led to a confusing view that integration of autistic individuals can be very difficult and hard both for employers and employees (Whelpley and Perrault, 2020). While contributing to encouraging more research in this subject of how to give managers skills to integrate autistic individuals in the workplace, the research concentrates too much on the increase of company's performance and strategic advantage. This study contradicts this research, which one of the main findings is how important is training for managers to improve their skills in managing and integrating autistic people.

Negative results can be found in a study by Remington and Pellicano (2018), where interviewed interns said the experience of a workplace brought a lot of anxiety, difficulties in communication and office rules confusion. These outcomes are an important source of



knowledge for the employers and employment support companies on how to work with future employers who aim to hire autistic people.

Another approach by Johnson *et al.* (2020) explores different strategies to develop a collaborative approach of a company, so it has more impact on the successful employment of autistic people. According to their research it is the human resource managers who should care about the skill development and work environment to support people with ASD in a workplace (Jonson *et al.*, 2020). Similar practical implications are suggested in a study by Szulc, McGregor and Cakir (2021) who state that very few HR professionals included neurodiversity in their practices. Only 10% of HR departments try to create an accessible and friendly neurodiversity environment (CIPD, 2019). This is very significant evidence showing that the issue of implementing neurodiversity into HR practices is in a very early stage. It is also quite shocking that HR departments don't take on the leading role in implementing the changes in mentalities and approaches of the companies and their teams.

There is still a significant lack of empirical data on support for potential employers of people with ASD (Whelpley and Perrault, 2020). Usually only some large companies can present cases on how neurodiversity can create a more inclusive work environment and lead to more successful performance. Austin and Pisano's (2017) article shows how neurodiversity can work to a company's competitive advantage. They give an overview on how different corporations changed their HR processes and introduced programs to include neurodiverse talent in their recruitment process (Austin and Pisano, 2017). Research has found that the process can be more difficult in small and medium companies, due to less possibilities to accommodate the needs of disabled employees (e.g., smaller offices), fear of higher costs of accommodation or challenges with changing the performance management and supervisors and co-workers' attitudes towards employees with disabilities (Sundar, 2017).

## Neurodiversity and its discrimination

The knowledge about neurodiversity that has been gained over the last few years shows that human brains are different, and people can have different reactions when experiencing the world around them. The neurodiverse group of people is growing and is becoming a significant part of the population (Booth, 2016). This led to changing the perceptions towards disability and understanding it more from a social point of view, and not medical, as something caused by the way our societies are built. A comprehensive study has been done on positive autism and the way it leads to focus on strengths when employing autistic people (Wong *et al.*, 2018).

Their study follows Drucker's (199) and Clifton and Harter's (2003) argument that sees autistic challenges as personal differences and not deficits (Wong *et al.*, 2018). The social way of looking at disability helps to discover the barriers people with disabilities face and find solutions to remove the barriers (Haegele and Hodge, 2016). Despite the different ways of thinking about disabilities, there is still discrimination, especially in a work context. According to Eurobarometer (2019), disability was reason number three of discrimination in workplace in the EU and in Ireland. A positive insight is that 93% of Irish people said they would feel comfortable working with a disabled person, which is a very high number compared to the lowest outcome, which was 60% (Eurobarometer, 2019).

To prevent discrimination in the workplace, several legal acts have been implemented into Irish law, the Equal Status Acts (2000-2015) and the Employment Equality Acts 1998-2015 (EEAs). Despite this, the work situation of neurodiverse people did not improve. According to Baska (2019), equality rights are not being enforced and a lot of cases must be filed before compliance with the Equality Act is respected. Another aspect of discrimination is unconscious discrimination and bias that can start at the recruitment stage and leave the employees unaware of it (Faragher, 2017). This aspect is interesting in the context of this research, as it impacts the employers when they employ autistic people and don't know about their condition. In this case no special amendments or management rules applied to these employees and it affects the performance and productivity of this group of people, which could be better if required changes could be made.

Almost four in five autistic individuals have difficulties finding employment (AsIAM and IrishJobs.ie, 2021). This neurodiverse condition causes social communication problems and makes interactions with other people difficult. People with ASD can be sensitive to bright lights, noises and general changes in their environment (CIPD, 2018). According to many articles, there is still a stigma of employing individuals with ASD and this might be one of the reasons why the employment rate of this group is around 10% and is the lowest among all the neurodiversity groups (Bird and Flint, 2019; European Economic and Social Committee, 2017). The stigma can come from little awareness of the disability and misinformation gained from popular films and books rather than research and academic sources (Sparrow, 2018). A similar outcome by Lindsay *et al.* (2019), which future research could look into, found that the lack of experience in working with people with disabilities, stigma and discrimination are caused by disability discomfort.

Hensel (2017, p. 75), an expert on employment discrimination, states that “In the next eight years alone, experts predict a 230% increase in the number of young people with ASD transitioning to adulthood”. Hensel also explains that the employment services and opportunities must follow the educational services. Young people nowadays get a lot of assistance and support during their education years and then they reach the next step, which is employment and a huge gap in terms of the support.

According to Knapp, Romeo and Beecham (2009) the costs of not employing autistic people are reaching over £9 billion per year in the United Kingdom and according to Buescher *et al.* (2014) \$23.5 billion per year in the United States. For an autistic individual, however, the consequences of not being employed are often worse. Employment gives a sense of purpose, belonging and independence, which gives hope and dignity and is very important for the autistic population and their integration with the society (Herr, 2001). A study on social inclusion and supported employment of disability people at work has been conducted in Sweden by Gustafsson, Peralta and Danermark (2018). The two themes that stand out from their results were the importance of a sense of social belonging and being valued as a worker. Gustafsson *et al.* (2018) found that social inclusion can be increased by job-matching and by encouraging natural support with reasonable working conditions and relationships at the workplace.

Colleges should provide diversity courses to make the future managers and team leaders aware of the challenges of autistic people with employment and remove the stigma related to their employment (Hidegh and Csillag, 2013). Anderson, Butt and Sarsony (2021) present research about the meaning of pre-employment opportunities, the role families should have in employment and the need for coordination of schools, agencies and employers to reduce the challenges of job search for autistic people. External support via employment support services and vocational training, were also among the strategies to facilitate successful employment of people with ASD in a study by Dreaver *et al.* (2020). Hedley *et al.* (2017) also states that a meaningful collaboration between families, schools, community resources and workplace capacity buildings is crucial for successful employment outcomes of autistic people. These are significant findings in the context of this study. The external employment support turned out to be one of the main elements the employers find crucial to start recruiting and employing autistic people. Ongoing support of companies providing such a service encourages employers to offer long term placements and helps autistic employees to keep the job.

## The power of cognitive diversity

“Who can say what form of wiring will prove best at any given moment? Cybernetics and computer culture, for example, may favor a somewhat autistic cast of mind” (Blume, 1998). Different perspectives and thinking ‘outside the box’, which inspires creativity and lateral thinking, can be the biggest benefit people with ASD can bring to a workplace (Brinzea, 2019). According to Patton (2019), employees with ASD are hardworking, detail – oriented and are very honest and loyal and they do not mind repetitive work and can often specialise in very narrow niche topics. Moreover, the inclusion of neurodiverse employees can increase productivity and quality at work, as well as motivate and integrate teams. Although some critical views on autism claim that it is rather a difference than a disability or that the autistic people with more needs (described as ‘low functioning’) should not be included in the neurodiversity movement. However, the autism researcher den Houting (2019) says this criticism comes from misconceptions and misinformation and they limit the opportunities of autistic people.

In a study by Morris, Begel and Wiedermann (2015), participants with ASD said that despite many challenges, they also feel they have a lot of strengths. Some of the advantages they mentioned were the ability to notice patterns or focus for a long period of time and Morris *et al.*'s (2015) study suggests a lot of people with ASD find technology interesting. Technology companies battle to attract new talent and the big IT companies have already implemented programs supporting hiring autistic people. Matching ASD people to jobs, where they can use their skills and interests, is an important social trend. This also suggests that the benefits can be mutual. However, it is important not to link ASD people only with IT skills as it can lead to a limiting general understanding (Cook, 2020).

Companies need to start considering individuals with ASD in the workplace, as they soon will not be able to omit this group of people in the recruitment process and employment. As the consumers and the consumer markets become more universal and diverse, so should the diversity of employment. This would improve the diversity of products to suit the new group of customers. Westover *et al.* (2018, p.11) state in their study “There is a dire need for individuals on the autism spectrum to be employed, not only for their sake, but for the sake of successful and competitive business around the world”. They have also concluded that the literature supports that individuals with ASD bring a heightened set of skills and talents to the

workplace and hence can be a valuable asset to the company's competitive edge (Westover *et al.*, 2018). Another study, conducted in Australia, stresses huge benefits of employing a person with ASD than without (Scott *et al.*, 2017) and they state that some of the benefits include higher productivity, better attention to detail and an ethical approach. It also diversifies the workplace and has a potential impact on increasing the competitive edge of the company.

## Barriers to employment opportunities

The challenges of neurodiversity at the workplace have been a subject of a lot of studies in recent years (Bross *et al.*, 2021; Albright *et al.*, 2020; Baker *et al.*, 2018; Morris *et al.*, 2015; Hendricks, 2010). Most of the findings concentrate on three main barriers: social challenges of interactions with other people, the lack of autism awareness among other employees and poor adjustments of the physical environment. Among the consequences of social challenges were negative feelings and perceptions and challenging relationships with colleagues (Bury *et al.*, 2021). Some of the recent studies point to the pre-employment challenges and the difficulty of the young adults' transition process from schools to workplaces (Bross *et al.*, 2021). The other barriers include disconnect between interests and job tasks and little job support (Bross *et al.*, 2021). The recruitment process barrier is related to the job matching problem, according to Moore *et al.* (2018). There is a lack of research exploring how organisations should offer continuous employment opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities. Today the opportunities are limited because the recruitment process is centralised, not enough suitable positions are offered and the productivity demands are too high (Moore, *et al.*, 2018).

The challenges with adjusting the workplace to meet the needs of ASD people are detailed in the DARE report on adjustments (Heasman *et al.*, 2020). The report identifies two knowledge gaps which include ASD employees do not know if they can ask for amendments, or how to, and employers do not know how to implement the changes (Heasman *et al.*, 2020). This suggests a general lack of knowledge, communication and procedures. Similar outcome came up in a study on barriers done by Baker *et al.* (2018). Among their observations was the lack of cooperation between employers and colleges and universities campuses on hiring students with disabilities and including this relationship in the recruitment policies. Another barrier was lack of experience and knowledge on how to treat autistic people in the office in day-to-day situations among team leaders (Baker *et al.*, 2018).

Those barriers can come from the fact that disabilities, including intellectual disabilities, are often not an integrated part of diversity policies, practices and corporate social responsibility

strategies. This results in low recognition of different needs of this group of employees. However, there is a high demand to include disabilities in the company's culture, inclusive practices and workplace policies (Gould, *et al.*, 2020). Research by Phillips *et al.* (2019) disagrees with this statement, and it introduces companies that successfully use practices to overcome barriers to hire and retain disabled people. Their findings show that companies with successful practices around people with disabilities, and they also highlight that the management commitment to accommodate employees with disabilities is important (Philips *et al.*, 2019). Their research conclusion says the information about effective workplace practices will back up future policies and programs to train employers, as they want to increase employment with people with disabilities (Philips *et al.*, 2019).

Griffiths *et al.* (2019) concludes that company policies and practices and their quality, were the indications on which companies would be successful at employing individuals with ASD. On the other hand, other researchers' results showed that a very low percentage of participants mentioned policy changes as a factor, which improves accommodation (Sundar, 2017).

One of the challenges described in older research is the unknown of any extra costs when hiring an autistic person. There is also little knowledge of the costs of accommodation of such employees, and this might work to the person's disadvantage. Schartz, Schartz and Blanck's (2002) study on employment of people with disabilities in IT companies, stated that lack of experience is leading to concerns about the costs of hiring and retaining these employees. According to Kocman, Fischer and Weber (2018), extra costs related to employment of autistic people were at the top of the list of barriers for people with disabilities. They indicated that to impact higher employment of people with disabilities, is it important to take the employer's reservations seriously. This might be a problem especially for small and medium companies, who are afraid of the additional costs to accommodate the needs of autistic employees (Sundar, 2017). However, findings of two more recent studies show that the costs of hiring an autistic person are none or very little. According to Scott *et al.* (2017), there are no additional costs when hiring an adult with ASD related to workplace modifications, additional supervision or training. The costs have been confirmed not to go over the standard costs of a new employee. A study by Szulc *et al.* (2021) demonstrates that the solutions to change the work environment to accommodate a sensory sensitive person, can also be done without significant costs.

Employment barriers for people with ASD in Irish society were examined in a study by Li (2019). The main outcomes of their study were that most of the barriers are caused by wrong job match and not meeting autistic employees' needs (Li, 2019). The barriers that the research

described were related to sensory sensitivity and the efforts individuals with ASD have to put towards social interactions. Another outcome was described as a misconception of autism created by Irish mainstream media (Li, 2019). The paper suggests that the lack of knowledge is also found among HR managers, which affects the office infrastructure and the main source of support for neurodiverse employees. The participants of the study said that the policies issued by their employers were far from the reality of the office and the mental and physical capabilities of the autistic people (Li, 2019). According to Patton (2019), the barriers can also come from traditional HR practices and definitions (e.g., good employee). ASD employees, who often can seem rude, arrogant or have a loose temper can be negatively judged and have difficulties being liked and accepted in their teams. This suggests that the traditional performance reviews structures and reward systems can be seen as barriers and need rethinking. Individuals with ASD are becoming a growing part of the population and they still face discrimination and barriers in the workplace on many levels (Banks *et al.*, 2018). Those individuals are usually highly intelligent and able to provide excellent work. Unfortunately, even for people with very mild dysfunctions the barriers existing in the work environment prevent them from getting and retaining a full-time job and lead to an estimated unemployment rate of 80 percent (National Autistic Society, 2021; Patton, 2019).

## Practices to support employers to hire more autistic people

Adam Harris, Chief Executive of AsIAM, Ireland's National Autism Charity, said “We need to work together to educate companies on the huge contribution autistic people can make to the workforce and on the valuable contribution they can make to the economy” (Stedman, 2021). Therefore, several guides have been published by autism charities to support employers in the inclusion of ASD individuals in the workplace including the National Disability Authority (2022) ‘Assisting people with autism. Guidance for Line Managers and HR Professionals’ and the National Autistic Society (2022) ‘Employing autistic people – a guide for employers’.

However, those initiatives do not improve the situation of adults with ASD at work and seem to be detached from reality (Li, 2019). According to Patton’s (2019) study, real integration should be a concern of all members of a company and is possible through a deep understanding of unique differences and creating a general feeling of belonging. Similar results were obtained in a study by Seitz and Smith (2016). Their findings were divided into five themes around compassion and understanding of employees’ needs, flexibility of management rules, leaders’

willingness to work with autistic people and direct communication with clear instructions and finally emotional and instrumental support (Seitz and Smith, 2016). Comparable findings were presented by Li (2019), where a support plan tailored to each employee and regular communication between all groups of employees and supervisors were the two main support practices identified.

When discussing communication in a diverse workplace, it is important to address needs of both sides and ways to accommodate them. Accommodation in a workplace was the main outcome that was found in a study on supporting vocational opportunities for adults with developmental disabilities by Rashid, Thompson-Hodgetts and Nicholas (2018). Work accommodations are very helpful with creating equal employment opportunities. A study on workplace accommodation and invisible disabilities has been carried out by Prince (2017). Invisible disabilities are disabilities which might not be immediately obvious to other people. Prince's (2017) study sheds light on the issue of disclosing the disability to the employer and its consequences. It concludes that effective management is more important than exceptions. On the contrary, this study comes to a different conclusion and the findings say both managing and exceptions are equally important to successfully accommodate the needs of invisible disability workers. A recent study by Romualdez, Walker and Remington (2021) on experiences of disclosure also studies factors associated with the outcomes. The three main factors were: understanding of autism, willingness to make changes and organisational culture. These outcomes are significant as they align with this study, which also points out to the awareness and understanding of autism, the ability to make changes in the companies' policies and open culture of the company, which can accept neurodiversity.

According to the most relevant and recent studies on the employer's perspectives on how to encourage employment of autistic people, there are a few themes that stand out including lack of awareness and knowledge about people with ASD and the importance of job matching and employment services. A couple of studies conducted on the need of awareness training and information campaigns that should be provided by employment services and external consultants (Diener *et al.*, 2020; Kocman *et al.*, 2017). These studies align with the outcomes of this study, where the lack of knowledge came out as one of the main objectives and barriers to employ autistic people.

The hiring process to accommodate the needs of autistic people needs a lot of improvement. Employers are not certain about the applicants' abilities to take on a job and the employment service system is very complex according to Henry *et al.* (2014). The applicants' skills need to



match the company's expectations and goals of a workplace (Diener *et al.*, 2020). For the employment of autistic people to be successful, employment specialists need special training to help to customise the process (Riesen and Morgan, 2018; Smith *et al.*, 2004). Job matching of the autistic people's interests and skills and the skills needed at the workplace is essential (Dreaver *et al.*, 2020; Nicholas *et al.*, 2019). Also, findings by Smith *et al.* (2004) show that a good job match results in employer's satisfaction, good performance reviews and a will on hiring more people with disabilities. Riesen and Morgan (2018) take a closer look at the employer perceptions of the customised employment process, its barriers and facilitators. Their outcomes highlight the importance of experienced employment specialists and their help with customising jobs for intellectually disabled individuals. Meaningful research on adapting interview questions to improve performance of autistic participants found that it has a great impact on the results of the interviews (Maras *et al.*, 2021). In their research Maras *et al.* (2021) found out that using the special interview questions gave better interview results also around non – autistic applicants. This would suggest the new recruitment standards can be unify for all neurodiverse and neurotypical people.

Some companies have been taking part in special employment programs to support neurodiversity. Hedley *et al.* (2021) conducted a study from the employees' perspective on such a program in Australia. The feedback was supportive, and the strengths of the programs could be seen in positive change of HR practices and introduction of personalised support for the ASD employees (Hedley *et al.*, 2021). A different study on the employment programs concluded that employers need more support with individually designed adjustments for their autistic employees (Lopez *et al.*, 2021). In this study the employers agreed that the program gave them more awareness of autism and support to hire autistic employees (Lopez *et al.*, 2021). This is also the main conclusion of the work of Nicholas *et al.* (2019), that experience with working directly with people with ASD has a very positive impact on their awareness and engagement and it increases hiring activity.

Most of the recent research aligns with the previous ones and addresses that employers' understanding and knowledge of ASD is crucial to facilitate their employment. Job matching, external expert support and holistic approach which takes into consideration the needs of employers, not only autistic individuals, are the major contributions to the new practices to support employment of people with autism (Dreaver, *et al.*, 2020).

## Research gap

In the light of the above more research is needed on what employers need, to adapt neurodiversity in their workplaces and how they can be encouraged to hire more autistic people. A lot of potential has future research on how to gain competitive advantages from successfully integrated people with ASD (Markel and Elia, 2016). Nicholas *et al.* (2019) and Riesen and Morgan (2018) also address that limited research has been done on employer experiences and views on hiring, supporting and managing autistic people. More data is needed to gain better knowledge on employer's views and guide them how to better include and support people with ASD in a workplace. According to Griffiths *et al.* (2019) a lot of potential for future research lies in best practices supporting employing people with ASD, and on how employers can practically use those concepts and ideas in their organisations. According to Bowman (2020, p.1), there is also a lack of data on “specific organizational leadership behaviours, leadership training needs and organisational culture elements that mediate positive employment outcomes for individuals with ASD [...]”.

Bowman's (2020) research as well as a significant amount of the research mentioned, were conducted in the USA (Anderson *et al.*, 2021; Whelpley and Perrault, 2020; Hensel, 2017). There is a significant gap in research on the challenges Irish employers experience with neurodiversity (Tracey, 2020; Li, 2019). These studies were done as a college thesis and the samples were very small. Also, the study by Lindsay *et al.* (2019) points out an important gap in the literature on getting a better understanding of the concept of disability from the employer's perspective who hires these people.

The research carried out in this study aims to gain a broader perspective on the reason why Irish IT companies do not hire more autistic people and what would they need to start integrating this population into their talent pool and then into their workplaces. For the purpose of this study, the focus is on tech companies, as their work environment and type of work has proven to work well for autistic people (Keogh, 2017). There is a lack of research, which would concentrate specifically on this sector. The shortage of people with disabilities working for IT brands has been already noted by Schartz *et al.* (2002). The question appeared in relation to the high demand for qualified IT workers in IT and not IT industries.

## Research question

The main research aim of this study is to explore the perspectives of Irish tech companies' employers on the employment of autistic people. The study's objective is to find out what

information, training or skills could they use to make their recruitment process and workplace a safe place to accommodate this group of employees.

The aim of this study is to identify strategies that would open companies for continuous employment of autistic adults. This study aims to explore the perspectives of technology sector employers to examine what are their reservations and limitations when employing people with ASD. This study aims to explore the changes the employers would need to implement in their workplaces to make them more welcoming for autistic people.

Therefore, the paper concentrates on the following research question:

*What support companies need, according to employers, to become a more welcoming work environment for autistic people?*

The research aims to answer some inter-related questions:

*What practices and tools businesses need to successfully hire and transition an autistic employee into a workplace?*

*What knowledge and training managers and employees need in order to successfully manage and work with people with autism?*

*What kind of skills would employees need to begin a career in the IT field?*

These questions start a discussion on how the employers feel about neurodiversity inclusion in their workplaces and what are their biggest reservations and hopes.

The objective is to find out what requirements would be critical when designing new practices and policies supporting neurodiverse culture. The practices should relate to hiring and to managing people with ASD through all the stages of the employment cycle. The management should help with social challenges of employing neurodiverse employees and be able to give sufficient guidance to their teams. To be able to accommodate those changes, employers and team leaders need to have specific skill sets, among which emotional intelligence is the strongest one (Bowman, 2020). Therefore, the aim of the study was to challenge hiring personnel to come up with their own solutions on inclusion and making neurodivergent thinking a business transformation process. Workplaces need neurodiversity friendly policies and practices, and the implementation should be mainstream. The changes needed most are around recruitment, increasing awareness of neurodiversity and the communication challenges between the neurodiverse and neurotypical groups. Last but not least, are the physical workplace adjustments which are very important for long term employment of autistic people.

The study has been narrowed to Irish IT companies, as the IT sector is a pioneer on the market in hiring autistic people. This is due to a specific type of work and environment which matches the skills, interests and personalities of people with ASD. Neurodiversity can be a big opportunity for technology employers in Ireland to increase their innovations and win the war of talent in the technology sector (Keogh, 2017).

The findings of the questions should bring important additions to the research literature on autism in Ireland. The research aimed to bring insights on hiring personnel's view of employing autistic people in Ireland and it sheds light to what issues they struggle with. This understanding should provide a new perspective on how to support employers and help them be more open to employ individuals with ASD. It is hoped this knowledge and findings of this research will help to reduce the high unemployment rate within this population. Giving a chance and employing autistic people will give them a feeling of belonging in the society and will also improve their wellbeing and morale (Chen, *et al.* 2015).

## Methodology

The main articles studied and examined within this subject conducted qualitative research with semi-structured interviews to collect their data (Bross *et al.*, 2021; Szulc, *et al.*, 2021; Albright *et al.*, 2020; Lindsay *et al.*, 2019; Gustafsson *et al.* 2018; Moore *et al.*, 2018). The methods used by those studies resulted in honest and valuable content and it was based on participants' real life experience. Therefore, this research uses a qualitative approach, focused on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with people who are involved in the hiring process in IT companies in Ireland. In addition, most of the studies mentioned above used thematic analysis to interpret the data and identify main themes and findings. For this study, a similar approach is used by following Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework.

## Participants

A total of seven participants attended the interviews. The participants ranged from 38 – 56 years old, they were four male and three female. Six of the people identified as White and one as Black. Five of those people were hiring managers, two were Heads of Human Resources and one was the CEO of the company. The majority of the participants represented small and medium businesses, Irish tech businesses, with less than 150 employees, and two participants

represented a large company (over 250 employees). One interview was conducted in person in the participant's workplace, one was through email and the rest of the interviews were via video calls on MS Teams software and lasted, on average, 20 minutes (shortest 16min, longest 25min).

Inclusion criteria for participating consisted of employer, manager or team leader with experience in recruitment and employment process. The participants would have been involved in some stage of the hiring process, but some of them would not be exclusively responsible for decisions. Some participants would make the hiring decisions for the business on their own and some would be involved in reviewing the applications and the interview process. As long as the responder confirmed they were part of the recruitment process they were included in the study. Two respondents shared information that they had previously hired, trained and worked with an autistic employee. However, there was no requirement for the companies to have any experience or knowledge of employing ASD people. One participant shared they have some knowledge about autism from personal experience as his child is autistic.

The researcher has an established relationship with one participant. Further recruitment strategy was direct contact with the companies based in the same Innovative Campus, as the researcher's employer. The information about the research project and interview call was distributed by the internal email to 15 businesses, however none of the companies replied to participate. Further participants were recruited through personal contacts of the researcher and some of the participants.

## Procedure

To get the most insights and information from the participants the research involved an interview. The interviews were arranged to be face-to-face or over a video call and the choice was left with the participant. Prior to interviews all participants were provided with detailed information about the study and a consent form, which they were asked to sign and email back. Once consent was received the researcher and the participant agreed on the form a date and time of the interview. The interviews were carried over a period of three weeks. One person preferred to give their answers in writing and sent them over email.

The study takes an exploratory approach and tries to find new insights and understandings for the subject in questions. An inductive approach was chosen for constructing the research questions. Each of the participants answered questions related to their reservations, opinions

and needs and skills they think are crucial to best manage and maintain neurodiverse employees. A semi – structured interview as the main research instrument, and it was used to assess the employer’s perspective and it was constructed based on a previous study by Albright *et al.* (2020). The questions were designed to find out the reservations of the hiring managers and what skills are crucial to better integrate autistic people into a tech company. The questions lead to conversation towards some practical solutions and ideas on what tools would the employers need to help them to maintain the autistic people in the workplace and successfully integrate them with their teams. The interviews were semi-structured to allow for some additional probing of subjects which were particularly captivating to the participant. A flexible approach to the conversation helped to build a rapport with the participants.

The research instrument consisted of nine questions (see Appendix A). The interview started with two questions about the benefits and concerns of employing people with ASD. The next two questions asked about any information and training which would be helpful when hiring and transitioning autistic employees into a workplace. Then cooperation with employment support providers was discussed. The following two questions were about short-term and long-term support with transition of an employee with ASD. The last two questions covered issues of practical and social skills the employees need to work for the interviewed person and their company. This interview schedule was used to keep the consistency however, participants were encouraged to discuss a theme they could relate to, or that they found particularly interesting. Each of the interviews was audio recorded using a phone application and additional observation notes were taken.

## Data analysis

Analysing data identifies and reports patterns with a data set. Thematic analysis allows for a flexible and comprehensive analysis across the data. It aims to find important and engaging themes and patterns within the collected data (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). Albright *et al.* (2020) examined their data on thirteen interviews with hiring personnel using a data driven thematic approach. Shahid and Zahid (2021) conducted interviews with eleven HR managers and used thematic analysis as well, following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) guidelines to analyse the data. The same approach of thematic analysis was chosen for the purpose of this study. The thematic analysis was used to obtain the most realistic and based on experiences outcomes. The outcomes cannot be used as a general view, but they give an in-depth, informative insight and knowledge of the researched subject.

The study followed the six steps framework for conducting a thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006). The data was analysed by relistening to the recordings. An inductive approach was used to interpret the data, which means the form of this analysis is data driven. The immersion in the data has been done through relistening to it with a purpose of finding patterns and meanings. During this phase the researcher took notes and initial ideas of the coding, however coding was defined continuously till the end of the analysis process (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This thematic approach means that participants' replies were coded based on what they said and not on key ideas. This reflects a pattern occurring in the recorded data (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). The coding was performed manually using a Microsoft Excel sheet. The data was approached to code particularly compelling features of the interviews. The researcher was coding the data with specific research questions in mind. The coding template was revised and improved with a final version of the template used for the dataset interpretation (O'Connor, C. and Joffe, H., 2020). The data of the study refer to audio recordings together with notes on observations made by the researcher while conducting the interviews.

This step was followed by looking for themes and trying to sort and group the long list of codes into a few themes, which would present the most valuable findings (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). A few different ideas for themes were identified and they were arranged into a mind-map. Some sub-themes were identified, and some themes were grouped in an extra data pool. In the fourth phase all the themes were reviewed to see if there was enough data to support them. Some themes were grouped together because they covered similar data set. The sub-themes were eliminated and merged into different themes. At this point the themes were also analysed in relation to the whole data set and some additional data, which has not been coded before, has been added to the existing themes to present a whole picture of the data set.

The following phase helped to redefine some of the themes to really bring out the essence of the subject of each theme. It is important to check if there is no repetition in the themes and if they relate to the whole picture of the study and the research questions. At this point names were given to the four identified themes of the research. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), the final step is to produce a report that tells the story of the data and gives a full interpretation of the findings.

Some participants were more outspoken than the others during the interview, some content themes do not include all participants' insights. However, many of the content themes include most of the participants.

## Ethical considerations

The research was conducted with the permission of all participants. There are no ethical considerations arising as a result of the research. The data collected during the research was treated confidentially. The anonymity of the people who were interviewed is protected and no names of the participants or of their companies were used in the paper. Their anonymity will be protected in any future published work as well. An interview consent form was signed by all the participants, and they were informed they could stop the interview at any time they might feel uncomfortable. The results of the research come from a detailed analysis of the collected materials. The replies to the interview questions were not taken out of context and any other observations were discussed in the appropriate context as well.

## Analysis and findings

The main goal of the study was to understand the perspective of an IT company on employing more autistic people. The research questions were formed to find out what support companies need to be able to successfully hire, accommodate and manage more autistic people. Four themes clearly appeared from the qualitative analysis of the research data set collected while interviewing IT company's hiring personnel:

1. Positive approach but not enough knowledge
2. Good understanding of needs and skills essential
3. External experts' help essential
4. Importance of the internal transition process

### Positive approach but not enough knowledge

The first theme represents a very positive attitude toward employing autistic people and how the hiring personnel feel they would benefit the company. It also brings out the lack of knowledge of the condition. Most of the employers were not aware of the opportunities of how to hire autistic staff and where to look for additional information and support.



All the participants were speaking positively about the possibility of hiring and working with autistic people. Most of the participants said they can see benefits of employing autistic people in their companies and pointed to diversity and inclusivity in the workplace as the main positive aspects. Some participants have experience with working with disabled people and in their opinion, they were very smart, detailed, focused, and brought a lot of skill sets into the company. These participants referred to employing autistic people as something that needs to be normal.

Participant 2: *'I worked with somebody who was on a spectrum and she definitely brought a lot of assets to the company. She was very smart and very focused. Later she moved to IT team and they only had positive stuff to say about her'*

Participant 5: *'I worked with two people who were autistic, and it worked really well. [...] the more staff we can add in, the more experienced and normal it will be. It needs to be just normalised because that's what it is, it's normal.'*

Previous study by Stedman (2021) talks as well about the huge contribution and benefits of employing autistic people.

Two participants indicated that it is important to give chance and a sense of normality to the autistic people by giving them employment. It also brings tolerance into the office space.

Participant 1: *'First of all you are giving them an opportunity, it's really difficult for them to find opportunities. So, somebody has to give them that first step [...] and then also it brings a little bit of normality into their life [...] it is helpful on the tolerance level.'*

Two participants mentioned that employing an intellectually disabled individual could be a 'good story' to tell their employees and other companies and use it to promote hiring more people with ASD. The story could demonstrate that it works well and has a positive impact on the organisation. In relation to this, one participant said that the public needs to be aware of companies who will employ disabled people only to achieve corporate social responsibility (CSR) compliance requirements. The danger is that they will not have necessary knowledge of this group of people and will not be prepared to give them special assistance and time they need to implement into the office environment.

Participant 1: *'many organisations will be doing it for CSR credits and tick box exercise, because people just want to say they are being diverse, but these are people's lives, and when you bring someone with autism to the environment and it would be the worst thing for the*

*individual [...] people might be willing to take credit but not the social responsibility to truly do it.'*

Lack of knowledge was communicated by some of the participants, particularly by those who never worked with autistic people. They expressed interest but said they have no idea how to approach this issue, where to look for information, and how to get support when hiring or managing an autistic individual.

Participant 3: *'Again, I don't know. It's not a subject I would be familiar with.'*

Participant 6: *'I never thought about it, about hiring an autistic person. [...] because to tell you the truth we don't know what challenges we could face, so autism it's a bit of a black box for me, I don't have experience, I would need to know what challenges I could face, but also some access to information, on how I can support them, what that condition really is. At this moment I wouldn't even consider a person with autism because I don't know how to support them and what is the difference between a person with autism and a person without it.'*

One participant, who was working with autistic people and knows the realities, shared that they think the labour market is definitely not ready for the autistic people who are trying to find work. This suggests a broad information campaign should be planned and organised by the Irish government or by non-government organisations to educate employers about the benefits and possibilities of employing autistic people. Those findings align with the recent research by Mothersill *et al.* (2021), who also speak about the misinformation and not enough knowledge around companies and other organisations. Lack of knowledge and stigma around disabled people could be the main reason why the unemployment rate among this group in Ireland is so high.

## Good understanding of needs and skills essential

The second theme discusses information the participants would need to hire and transition someone with ASD into a workplace and how important it is to match their skills with the position. It also mentions the recent changes in the office environment of many companies, which could positively impact the autistic population.

All the participants expressed how important it would be to be aware of the level of disability and needs of the potential employee with autism before the hiring process. According to many of the participants, this is essential to support the employee and to fulfil their requirements and make the transition into a workplace successful.

Participant 1: *'it's really important to understand what that person's disability is and what you need to do to support that or to prevent the issue arising. [...] it's really unfair to bring anybody in unless you put that time in to understand the medical perspective and that you are very aware of exactly what business needs to do to help them. You need this to be successful for everybody.'*

Participant 3: *'it would be good to know what their needs might be just so we can understand it and prepare for it. So, whatever they are we can accommodate them and work around them, like we try to do it for all our employees'*

Participant 4: *'to know how it affects them is what we need, when I hire someone I want to make sure they are comfortable here and that we can work away from them, if there is anything in the workplace that would be difficult for them we should know about it so we can work around it.'*

Participant 7: *'Some basic awareness training on ASD...environmental sensitivities, break frequencies and other needs. Awareness of these needs at an early stage can help any potential issues arising down the line.'*

The employers seek information about individual characteristics of the potential autistic employees and of any workplace accommodations that would make the employee feel good and comfortable as well. Moreover, some participants expressed opinions that finding out their skill sets and matching them with a job description is an essential element for employment to be successful. One participant stressed that while hiring an individual with ASD they would need to know where they fit in the company. Another interviewee described that for a long-term placement it might be beneficial to move an employee within the company's departments to test their skills and check where they would feel most comfortable. Another participant, a Head of HR said:

Participant 1: *'Everyone with autism working in an office needs to bring a skill with them, and it doesn't matter how basic it is. [...] Jane arrived with a skill she could then relate to people and so she joined the group of programmers. [...] You need to understand what that person's skill set is and they need comfort in themselves that they know what they are doing.'*

A compelling aspect in this theme is the perspective of social skills. Most of the participants said that there are a lot of people working in their IT companies who have very low social skills. One participant mentioned that there is no need for social skills anymore. Another employer shared: *'I prefer to keep the small talk with my colleagues to a minimum.'* To

illustrate, another participant, the Head of HR said: *‘The social skills are missing with most people with autism, and so you just accept that. [...] When somebody joins your business, you need to explain what your business culture is more so than the skills. [...] I don’t think you can put social skills as a reason why somebody isn’t going to get a placement.’*

An important factor in this change was the recent Covid 19 pandemic, which changed the workplace relations in many companies. After the pandemic most of the relations, with colleagues and with clients, are more digital than personal. This could be potentially a big advantage for people with ASD, who struggle with the social aspect of being in the office environment. According to one participant, a hybrid model of work will open new possibilities for this group of people and can potentially result in hiring more people on the autism spectrum which relates to what Szulc *et al.* (2021) found in their study.

This theme indicates that a full background check should be done before inviting a potential autistic candidate for an interview. Detailed information on medical condition, skillset and specific needs and requirements would help the employer to assess if they are able to amend their workplace to meet those needs, as well as find the best fit for this person in the company. Also, a previous study by Prince (2017) talks about the importance of workplace accommodation and Seitz and Smith (2016) talk about the crucial role of communication and how clear instructions make a difference in performance and productivity of a diverse work environment.

## External experts’ help essential

The third theme formed around employment support organisations. Most of the participants, when talking about information and support they would need to hire and transition an autistic employee, referred to a third-party organisation, which would be a point of contact for them.

Participant 3: *‘if there would be a place to go , whether it as simple as trying to understand what parental leave is, because employee asked about it, we go to a government page to understand what is it, if there would be a place to go, that had all the information relevant to the needs, that would be want you want, you go to the page and if not you have a place to put enquiry into somebody.’*

All the employers emphasised that long-term help from employment support provided would be crucial for them when hiring an employee with ASD. They stressed that detailed knowledge on the medical condition of the potential employee and what they can expect in terms of

challenges would be very important for them. Several participants described they would expect the external organisation to also give them support with job matching, workplace design, legal advice, and performance issues. This service would be a kind of touch point for them where they could always reach out to and confirm their actions. To illustrate, some employers said:

*'It would feel nice to have support for 6 months or longer where we could look for advice when we would need it or maybe through them review the individual's progress and how they are performing, maybe I don't really know.'*

*'You definitely need to have that support, just for a place where you go and say 'I don't understand that fully, how do we deal with that', I think it's really, really important the support is there. I think the returns will be huge; it has to work for the individual'*

One participant gave a great example of this service when their company employed an autistic individual, a person from the employment support company came to inspect the office and explain where the employed autistic person can sit and where they could not due to direct light as it might be disturbing for them.

Moreover, some participants would expect the external expert company to provide training and support for their managers and the rest of employees, to give them more skills to manage and to work in a team with autistic people. To illustrate this, some hiring personnel said:

Participant 2: *'how the management style needs to change, how to communicate with that individual, giving feedback might be different, so we would need to educate ourselves on the HR functions first and then to managers and then potentially to other people within the team who are working with individuals who might have certain ways of working or how they like to communicate.'*

Participant 5: *'We would definitely need to educate ourselves how to support them as best as possible, so essential would be working with third-party experts to be able to give us guidance to make their employment with us as enjoyable experience as possible.'*

This implicates a great need for third party organisations, employment support providers and other support bodies in the process of increasing employment within the population of autistic people. It is also interesting to see that, according to the participant quoted above, the company should start from educating the HR team and then move to training managers and other employees. These findings align with the previous research of Diener *et al.*, 2020; Riesen and Morgan, 2018; Kocman *et al.*, 2017 and Smith *at al.*, 2004. Those research stresses the importance and huge support employers can get from employment services and external

consultants. The findings from Johnson *et al.* (2020) research also concluded human resource managers should lead the skill development of managers to support people with ASD in a workplace.

## Importance of the internal transition process

A fourth theme in the research findings about employers' perspectives on how to increase employment of autistic individuals concentrates around the internal process of integrating autistic employees into a company. The research shows that most of the participants would expect to get help with the internal introduction processes from an external support company. They said they would hope to get instructions, guidelines and constant advice when employing an individual with ASD.

A controversial aspect in this case is the amount of information that should be passed to the manager and the team. According to some participants there should be a system for informing the employees of the fact that there will be a special needs person joining their team. The details of the person's condition should be shared depending on how close they would work with each colleague. To illustrate, one of the participants said:

*'General explanation has to come so people are ready to embrace. [...] Some people need to be aware of more details of the disability, what they need to look out for and how they need to act in emergencies. In the inner circle you have people who are fully aware and fully comfortable'.*

Another aspect is the onboarding system. A few interviewers mentioned that as part of the induction process a buddy system could work well. This would mean one person from the company who is responsible for training the employee with ASD and for being a contact person for them in any work-related issues. One participant said they would advise to have a buddy system not only during the onboarding process, but through the whole time of the employment. They said:

*'you need to have someone shadowing the person you are going to take in, for the first while just to make sure that they settle in well.'*

Throughout the interviews over half of the participants mentioned that there is a necessity of changing the internal procedures and policies to include more diversity and inclusion and to update the management style of the managers of neurodiverse teams:

Participant 2: *'We don't always have policies in place. We have one policy, one fit all, for everybody else, which might not be able to serve people of the spectrum. So, we need support in creating policies, for managers and the HR department on how to communicate, what to communicate, how to bring up policies.'*

Participant 5: *'Upscaling on our part in terms of making people comfortable in the environment and understanding the challenges they might face so that we understand how do we make things easier for them [...] we would need to flex our style to meet their requirements.'*

The importance of implementing diverse policies was also a main outcome of Phillips *et al.* (2019) study.

Another two participants pointed out that in many technical companies, the leaders do not have enough training in how to manage people with different backgrounds.

Participant 2: *'More training on working with people with autism. I think that's where an external provider would be a good help. A lot of companies don't have training on how to deal with people with autism or what kind of support they need to have for them. [...] Definitely the government should provide part of the training.'*

Participant 7: *'We would need management trained specifically to appreciate the different approach and perspective of individuals with ASD. [...] Many times, with technical companies, technical leaders tend to become management. This can often impact a team's health, when that technical leader has had no formal 'people' training. We would need to have a management group with a people approach and a group who holds strong value in inclusion and diversity. This is not typical of what you see in the tech industry.'*

In some technical companies, the 'people skills' are not present on the management level and as indicated by the participant above, this can become an issue when working and managing employees with ASD. According to this participant communication, between manager and employee and between employee and employee, was mentioned as a crucial skill to achieve team's goals and successful team cooperation. These findings contradict one of the main research projects for this study by Albright *et al.*'s (2020), who talks about the importance of social skills. However, they align with previous research by Johnson *et al.*, 2020 and Hendricks (2010), who say lack of meeting social expectations is not a concern for today's companies.

This theme indicates that some serious internal changes are needed in a company which intends to hire intellectually disabled employees. To ensure a successful and long-term employment

background check, onboarding system and inclusive policies and procedures are critical. Support with all these services could be provided by an external employment service company.

## Discussion

The main goal of this study was to research employers' view on hiring more autistic people in Irish IT companies. The aim was to explore what support, tools and training they would need to be more open for hiring people from this population. Finally, what skills would help autistic employees to integrate well in a tech workplace was also explored. The outcomes revealed some trends within the IT industry that limit the employment opportunities for autistic people. Although these trends can be found in previous studies (Diener *et al.*, 2020; Riesen and Morgan, 2018) this research explores this theme in the context of Irish technology companies. Those IT workplaces have a significant impact on the future of employment of people with ASD (Schartz *et al.*, 2002).

First, employers expressed their positive attitude towards hiring more autistic employees. They stressed this would have a significant impact on the diversity in their workplaces, also meaning diversity of thinking, ideas, and perspectives, which these individuals bring in. Same positive outlooks were identified in Albright *et al.*'s (2020) study. However, this study also revealed some reservations and concerns on how employing autistic people could negatively impact the workplace. None of these concerns were mentioned by the interviewers in this study. However, they did express lack of knowledge of the spectrum and how it affects people and what challenges this can bring to the workplace. Lack of awareness is related to lack of training on how to employ, manage and work with autistic people. A previous study by Diener *et al.* (2020) came to a similar conclusion, "Coworkers and supervisors of employees with ASD need more training on how to work with this population, and education about the benefits and challenges involved when hiring someone with ASD" (p. 13).

The lack of knowledge was also one of the findings of recent research done by Mothersill *et al.* (2021) and according to their study, knowledge has a direct impact on the attitudes and behaviours towards people with disabilities, including autism. The results of this study align with this as most of the participants were misinformed about mental health by the media. Therefore, this suggests more campaigns concentrated on specific mental health diagnoses to increase knowledge and make people more familiar with this subject. Lindsay *et al.*'s (2019) research also concentrated on the lack of knowledge and awareness of disabilities. According



to Lindsay *et al.* (2019, p.9), “‘reaching beyond your comfort zone’ involves disability awareness training and gaining knowledge, shared lived experiences, and the business case for hiring people with disabilities.”

The results of this study suggest that more accurate information on ASD should be distributed to general public by an official government campaign or by some authorised non-government organisations. A separate target group of those campaigns should be employers and in particular IT companies’ employers. A good idea to deliver more practical aspects of employing autistic people could be, as mentioned by one of the research participants, a case study of a successful employment story. The story could give insights from both sides, the autistic person and the employer, and could be a good example of what benefits and challenges there can be expected and how to resolve them. Similar suggestions can be found in the conclusion of Mothersill *et al.*’s (2021) research, where the authors advise future policies and campaigns should describe mental health diagnosis of individual people and concentrate on spreading the knowledge about them to increase its understanding among the Irish population.

An interesting outcome of the research was that a few participants mentioned employing autistic people will give them a huge chance and opportunity, which everyone deserves. This approach has been seen in earlier work of Herr (2001) who elaborates on the sense of purpose and belonging, as well as hope and dignity that employment can give to autistic people.

It is worth mentioning that a few of the participants did refer to benefits of a person with ASD as a ‘good story’, which could be sold to encourage other businesses to be more open and welcoming to autistic employees. Similar observations have been made in a study by Baker *et al.* (2018) who explain that such narratives may positively change the discriminatory perception of people with disabilities and by showing their outstanding impact increase the employment of individuals with disabilities.

A second trend developed from asking employers about what they would need to employ an individual with ASD and successfully integrate them into a workplace. All the interviewees said they would like to get as many details about the person’s condition, their needs, and challenges as possible. They believe the detailed knowledge of the person’s requirements and skills would be helpful in integrating them into the workplace and the team. Similar needs were expressed by employers who took part in Albright *et al.*’s (2020) and in Griffiths *et al.*’s (2019) studies. When discussing disclosing an employee’s diagnosis, consequences of such a decision need to be mentioned. There are both negative and positive consequences of sharing these

details with a manager and employees as examined by Romualdez *et al.* (2021) and Johnson and Joshi (2015). Another researcher also describes the advantages and disadvantages of the risky decision of disclosure of the information about disability, especially if this is invisible disability (Prince, 2017). In both studies positive consequences mean the managers can adjust their management style and expectations to accommodate the autistic employee's needs. The negative consequences impact the autistic employee, as the disability disclosure can lead to stigma and discrimination against them. This research proves the employers would like to know as many details about an autistic employee as possible and this would have a positive impact on the preparation of the workplace and getting to know the employees' needs.

Together with obtaining individual characteristic information about the potential employee some participants mentioned they would like to understand what type of office accommodations would be most suitable for an employee with ASD, so they could feel comfortable. Some previous research (Patton, 2019; Sundar, 2017) looked deeper into this subject and concluded that it can be a main factor for a successful placement of autistic employees and can have a huge impact on their productivity. Research by Lopez *et al.* (2021) found that only 25% of autistic adults confirmed their workplaces were adjusted according to their needs, also all the research groups in this study reported that this was the main problem and barrier for them.

Another element that the employers pointed out would help them maximize employment outcomes would be job matching. Matching specific skills of people with ASD to their job appeared in many studies as a main result of the research (Nicholas *et al.*, 2019; Moore, McDonald and Bartlett, 2018; Kocman *et al.*, 2017; Smith *et al.*, 2004). According to Nicholas *et al.* (2019) matching skills with the job description is essential for successful long-term employment. Among the benefits are also mutual satisfaction, high productivity, and good performance (Smith *et al.*, 2004). It is important they know where they fit into the company. A suggestion from one of the interviewees was to introduce an employee with ASD to all departments in the company and through gaining a sense of all of them, decide where they would be the best fit.

Most of the research discusses hard skills, as opposed to soft skills. Albright *et al.*'s (2020) study talks about the importance of social skills. Many of the participants in this study said they felt social skills are not as important as they used to be and is likely due to remote work being more frequently accepted in the tech companies as a standard model of working and digitalisation of relations at the workplace. Some valuable employers' suggestions to help with

the low social skills issue included a basic training on the company's culture, values and social behaviours. The training would give simple instructions on how to be a good member of a team. Similar suggestions appeared in Johnson *et al.*'s (2020) study, "Research also shows that mentors have helped to improve social interactions between individuals with and without disabilities" (p. 137). They also concluded that "The qualifications and potential of the employee with ASD have proven to be less of a concern when compared with the ability to meet social expectations and requirements in the work environment" (Johnson *et al.*, 2020, p. 137). Hendricks (2010), a well known researcher in the topic of employment of people with ASD, has also provided similar outcomes.

One more trend covers the importance of employment support providers. Nearly all the employers mentioned that having a third-party expert would be essential for them in deciding on hiring an autistic employee. An external expert would be expected to help with providing medical information, assessing the workplace in terms of any amendments, matching the skills with the jobs, and the general onboarding process. They would preferably be a constant touch point for the company, where they could reach out and get advice anytime. The study by Dreaver *et al.* (2020) was conducted with four company directors and sixteen line managers and used thematic analysis to code their findings. One of their findings was a strategy of successful employment of persons with ASD through employment support services (Dreaver *et al.*, 2020). Those services would provide job matching support, initial support and training for line managers, regular check in for managers and employees with ASD. They would assist with difficult and unexpected situations. This kind of support would give a lot of confidence and assurance to employers that if they hire an individual with autism, they will constantly have a point of contact to reach out to (Dreaver *et al.*, 2020). A study by Kocman *et al.* (2017) on a sample of 30 HR managers came to the same conclusion on the importance of active support of external employment services and experts in reducing employers' hesitations towards hiring people with intellectual disabilities. Henry *et al.*'s (2014) study of 74 participants among private and public employers in the USA stated that employment service providers should cooperate more with the employers and get to know their hiring needs more to match them with the skills of individuals with disabilities and include them in their workplaces.

Another trend in replies to the interview questions, which would contribute to a successful employment of more autistic people in IT companies, was a well thought through and executed onboarding process. According to this research, such an induction process would include some

awareness and management training for managers and awareness training for employees. There are a couple of previous studies which elaborated on the need of awareness training and information campaigns, which should be provided by employment services and external consultants to the managers and to regular employees (Diener *et al.*, 2020; Kocman *et al.*, 2017).

Interestingly one of the participants mentioned that the training should start from the HR department. This argument has previously appeared in Johnson *et al.*'s (2020) study where they identified how HR professionals can support successful implementation of ASD employees using regular activities like training, coaching, mentoring. Johnson *et al.*'s study also suggests there should be a link between the industry and community agencies and educational institutions.

Finally, an important element of an induction process are internal policies, which should reflect staff diversity. A few participants of this research mentioned that they do not believe their internal policies are inclusive and do not consider people with diversities in their processes. The significance of the policies was examined by Griffiths *et al.* (2019) who revealed that companies which have updated policies on hiring, training, and retaining individuals with ASD, employ a higher number of this group of people. This implicates that hiring more autistic people could increase due to implementing comprehensive policies on how to hire and manage this group of employees. In their study on effectiveness of employers' practices Phillips *et al.* (2019) report that the practices are important, as they support new policies to educate hiring personnel on how to employ more people with disabilities.

The practices and policies are crucial for overcoming work barriers. Moreover, the significance of these practices was researched by Gould *et al.* (2020) who emphasise that disability inclusion needs to be included in the policies. The demand for work diversity is constantly increasing and meaningful inclusion of disabled people is what more organisations pay attention to. Gould *et al.* (2020) described four practices companies use to strengthen disability inclusion and one of them is corporate social responsibility (CSR) and the strength of their study is the sample size of 34 companies recognised nationally in the USA for acting accordingly to corporate social responsibility. However, the limitation is a concern, also expressed by participant 1 and participant 5 of this research, that those companies can overemphasise their efforts and follow the actions only to meet social and cultural expectations (Gould *et al.*, 2020). A contradicting finding was presented by Sundar (2017) whose research focused on the analysis of workplace accommodations in 47 studies and showed that the importance of policy changes was

mentioned only by a small percentage of the studies and found that a more important type of accommodation was specialised equipment.

This study brings direct benefits to the employers and can help them gain a better understanding of the population of autistic people and moreover, the benefits of hiring them. By reading this study and gaining a better understanding of challenges related to hiring people with ASD other employers can find some factors that can be implemented to new policies in their organisation. Future employers who are seeking to employ more autistic people could benefit from this research by gaining a deeper understanding of some of the issues that previous employers have encountered. This could be turned into implementing better policies and better addressing these issues in the future. Some employers might seek practical advice on how to introduce more diversity to their workplace and this research can be helpful providing needed information. Future employers can be mindful of these issues and therefore implement policies addressing inclusion issues in their organisations.

It is hoped that the research will benefit the autistic community as well. It is important the community has a voice, and that they can share their experience, hence in future research, autistic people should be the targeted sample group. Interviewing them will give an overview on how they feel about working in IT companies and explore what they would need in terms of a more suitable recruitment process and what their needs are in terms of workplace accommodation. It would be interesting to find out their opinion on what they would need from the employers to be successful in a tech company in Ireland. Similar studies have been done in Sweden (Gustafsson, 2018), Australia (Remington and Pellicano, 2018) and USA (Diener *et al.*, 2020). Another important implication of this study would be that job opportunities for autistic people bring a lot of normality and purpose in their life as Chen *et al.* (2015) states, employment gives this group of people a better quality of life.

## Limitations

Although this study found some important reasons why the employment of autistic people is still very low in IT companies across Ireland, there are several limitations to consider. First, the sample of the employers was very small. All participants came from the same geographical area as they were based in the Dublin area. Moreover, not all the interviewees were employers, some were hiring personnel involved in the hiring process. Future research could use a bigger sample and interview more company owners or HR specialists who make direct decisions on the recruitment process.

It must also be noted that most of the participants had no knowledge on autism or working with people with autism. Ideally, for the purpose of this research a short introduction should have been sent to the participants, to give them a general overview of this condition and the challenges of ASD. This knowledge could have brought more practical ideas of what they would need to employ autistic people and what tools and training could be helpful in the transition stage and in the later management stage. Additionally, it is possible that participants who agreed to take part in the study are more open to diversity in the workplace and therefore the perspective can be biased. Despite these limitations, this study is potentially the first to investigate the employers' perspective of hiring more autistic people in technology companies in Ireland and it has identified several areas for future research.

## Future research

This study reveals important information around hiring and employment of people with ASD from the perspective of the employers of technology companies in Ireland. They shared their observations on benefits and concerns of hiring autistic people and identified what would help them to prepare their workplaces and staff to hire and integrate an individual with ASD. The needs included training for leaders and employees and implementing practices to promote inclusivity within the workplace. Additional research is needed on how to provide the most effective training to encourage them to hire more autistic people and teach how to manage and cooperate with them. Autistic people are worthy of the same chances of successful employment as any other group of people. Future research should further investigate employment outcomes for this group of disability people. Current research is not accurate as it usually only investigates people who have been employed at some stage (Chen *et al.*, 2015).

The findings provide valuable information on how to improve the employment support system to make it more approachable to autistic people and how to become a more open and welcoming job provider for autistic community. Future research should investigate how to build effective policies and practices to create a more inclusive workplace.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Neurodiversity issues experienced by today's organisations, as well as challenges they create for employers, have been researched by a few studies (Gould *et al.*, 2020; Phillips *et al.*, 2019; Riesen and Morgan, 2018). This study reveals needs and requirements of employers in IT companies in Ireland, which when met would reduce the workplace barriers and help to create a welcoming environment for long-term successful employment of people with ASD. Organisations should support the management in hiring positions to employ these individuals to increase diversity and benefit the companies.

The benefits and positive approach towards employing autistic people came as one of the main findings. However, the same employers also admitted to little knowledge about the condition of ASD and how it can be challenging in a workplace. Therefore, a solution to this issue could be implementation of courses and programs about disabilities to college education. Diversity courses for future leaders and managers would broaden awareness of the workplace challenges people with ASD could experience and moreover, teach them how to manage this group of people. Considering a lot of employees attend developmental courses in their careers, such a course could be added to the list.

Another way to overcome the problem of lack of knowledge about autism could be more work-based experience achieved by a more effective cooperation between education organisations, schools and colleges and companies. College placement and internships could expose autistic people to a real office environment from an early age and make them aware of their needs and requirements in order to be most productive and successful. Opportunity to work with autistic people and gain experience appears to encourage employers to improve their inclusive employment practices and hire more people with ASD (Nicholas *et al.*, 2019). The costs of these courses and trial placements are rather small. The implications can be huge for employers as well as employees. Employers get evidence of competency of autistic individuals in an office environment. The challenge here could be the education institutions, as they usually are less progressive and take a long time to update their education programs.

One of the conclusions of this study is that employers need practical advice on how to employ people with autism. A few of the participants in this study suggested that case studies and sharing good stories of successful employment of an autistic person could be good for eliminating employers' concerns and encouraging them to welcome more people with ASD.

Implication of this research results could have significant advantages for the companies and show them the practical benefits of a neurodiverse workplace and how to solve accruing problems. These stories could be shared with employers through employment support providers and other government and non-government organisations supporting employment of autistic population. The costs of gathering the success stories and testimonials from hiring managers and supervisors would be rather low, however very time consuming and slow to process.

When speaking of external employment service providers, all employers interviewed in this study expressed a big hope that the third-party organisations could be a touch point for them and a first contact in any concerns and emergencies. The hiring personnel would feel much confident to include autistic people in their talent pools and employ them if they knew those services would be available during the recruitment and onboarding process. Therefore, most of the participants mentioned that they would like to have a standby relation with them and access to support when needed. The implementation of support delivered by employment assistance companies could increase the amount of autistic people hired by IT companies in Ireland.

One of the research findings was the positive result of matching specific skills of autistic workers with their position in the company. Job matching is a crucial tool to successful implementation of autistic employees into the workplace. This relates mostly to practical skills. When discussing social skills, employers presented a less demanding attitude towards them. One aspect was to simply admit that this group of people does not have the social skills, on another hand, there were a few voices that say they are not that necessary anymore. Workplaces have changed after the Covid 19 pandemic and a lot of employees never came back to work in the office, or they work based on different remote models of work. Working remotely limits the social interactions between the employees and also between employees and customers (Szulc, *et al.*, 2021). This can bring potential benefits and advantages to people with ASD, as one of the biggest barriers for them was the social part of the job and establishing good office relationships.

One of the conclusions of this study is the importance of diversity policies at work. However, there are divided opinions on implementing diversity policies and other practices which support neurodiversity. Some research shows that they are not important to the changes of perception of disability and there is still a huge research gap on inclusive practices, organisation culture and workplace practices (Gould *et al.*, 2020). Very often they are far from the reality of the office and contain just general guidance, separated from the practical advice. Other research



says it is important to have those policies in the companies and that they influence the change to the awareness of disability in a workplace and help to establish more inclusive practices (Phillips *et al.*, 2019). The findings of this study indicated the HR departments should drive the change. It was recommended they get training on how to work with people with intellectual disabilities and how to manage them. The greatest implications of this conclusion would be for policy makers. They should conduct more research on disability inclusion and practices on how to successfully overcome the barriers and produce comprehensive policies for Irish employers. The implications are also significant to organisations trying to introduce more diversity into their teams. The costs of implementing new policies depends on the recommended practices, however, in previous research it was stated that the extra costs of workplace accommodation to fit autistic people are non or low (Scott *et al.*, 2017).

The overall recommendations for IT companies in Ireland to employ more people with autism would be to start implementing diverse policies to make all employees aware that the company is ready to include disabled people on their team. The costs of the policies implementations would be rather low. The policy introduction should be combined with a general training for all employees and supervisors to shed light on the condition of this spectrum disorder, challenges which may appear in work situations and how to react to those. This should be followed by a specially designed onboarding process, which should be based on a buddy system. The person should be appointed from the team and willing to be a first point of contact to the autistic employee in any work issues to help them keep their job. The buddy could change every 6 months; however, it is important that the person would be trained and willing to take on this role. The HR department should lead the role of the main implementer and supporter of those changes. The training could be done by the employment support provider as part of a recruitment program.

It would be recommended for any IT company in Ireland to investigate in cooperation with colleges and organisations which work with autistic people and arrange internships or short-term work placements. Gaining experience would be a valuable benefit for both sides. The internships are usually free of charge or the costs of wages are at the minimum rate per hour. A challenge could be to find and train internally employees who would act as buddies and support the interns and employees in the integration process. Moreover, cooperation with third party companies who assist with job-matching, recruitment, transition, onboarding, and short-term and long-term support would also be very beneficial, especially if a company only starts to employ autistic employees. The cost of such ongoing support could be a challenge for some

companies, as they can continue during the whole employment time. However, they can be covered by government financial support (Citizens Information, 2022; Specialisterne, 2020). Another recommendation would be to pay attention to clear communication regarding physical needs of the autistic employees and the expectations of the productivity and performance requirements of the company. The study has discovered that an optimal way to a successful placement is to provide a workplace setting that matches the skills of the autistic employees.

There is a general misconception about the yearly costs of employing an autistic person. In fact, Scott et. al. (2017) found the opposite and concluded that hiring autistic people does not generate extra costs in comparison with hiring neurotypical employees. No significant differences were found in costs of manager or workplace training costs. Moreover, there are more and more government grants available for Irish employers (Citizens Information, 2022; Specialisterne, 2020).

This approach represents a mutually beneficial response to how to employ more autistic people with the result supporting best practices for including people with ASD into jobs that match their skills and the employers' expectations. The biggest benefit for the companies should be meeting the social responsibility requirements and the fact that by giving autistic individuals meaningful jobs, they give them hope and chance and help them to become independent members of society. Inclusion depends on the level of feeling of belonging and being unique and different as some high values (Patton, 2018).

**Personal learning statement:** To complete this project more effectively I would have started it earlier to have more time to approach more technical companies. Most of the tech companies I have contacted didn't reply. I found it very challenging that big IT companies, with more than 250 employees, which should have implemented inclusion policies, were very reluctant to take part in the research. The process of reaching the right person was long and in the end I was left with no reply. All the participants I managed to interview were contacted through personal relations and recommendations. In the future to get more comprehensive replies to the questionnaire I would have sent a short presentation about the ASD to the participants prior to the interview. I believe it would give them a better idea of the benefits and challenges they could face when employing autistic people, as some of the participants had no knowledge about the ASD condition at all. Moreover, I would have changed a few questions in the questionnaire, as they seem to be too similar and maybe a bit confusing for the participants.

This project was a huge learning process and I found it very interesting. Moreover, it made me aware of the significant and very urgent problem the employers must face to integrate the population of autistic people into the workplace. With the increasing shortage of workers in the IT sector and the talents and benefits neurodiversity can bring into the workplace, there must be more support available for employers to help them with recruitment, employment and transition process of the people with ASD. By completing the dissertation, I am considering moving my career in HR towards neurodiversity employment support direction. I believe it is very important to include this part of our populations in today's labour market.

The existing issue of invisible disability at workplaces made me conscious of how important it is to introduce policies and practices including neurodiversity. Introduction of the policies needs to be combined with basic training for all employees to spread awareness and knowledge about neurodiversity, the different conditions and how to work and communicate with autistic people and how to manage them.

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# Appendix

## Interview questions:

1. Can you think of any benefits there might be to hiring an individual with ASD? (These can be unique strengths the employee might have, or secondary benefits associated with being an inclusive business.)
2. Would you currently have any reservations or concerns about hiring an individual with ASD? If so, please describe.
3. What kind of information regarding ASD and how it can affect employees would be helpful to you if you were considering hiring an employee who has ASD?
4. What kind of training handling the transition of an employee with ASD into the workplace would be most helpful?
5. In what capacity would you feel most comfortable working with an 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 individual with ASD into your workplace in the short-term?
7. What support do you feel you would need to transition an autistic individual 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 kind of social skills are most important and in what context(s) should individuals be prepared to use those skills in mixed neurodiverse workplace?