

Meaningful Employment of Autistic People

Research report and project proposal - summary

This is a summary of research done from November 2018 to January 2019 for stage one of a project on meaningful employment of autistic people: ideas generation and research and development of a practical delivery plan. This has included research and comparison of employer demands / needs and the realistic 'supply' of local autistic people in Salford.

In summary, the work in this first stage has involved: contacting autism organisations, local growth industries, employer organisations and data analysts; online surveys; a workshop with autistic people; data analysis; reviewing relevant reports and guides; liaison with officers in statutory agencies; and a search for existing models across the world.

This work has produced a practical learning resource to establish a business case and to inform the rest of the project.

1. Economy and employment

The economy of Salford will continue to grow rapidly, especially its key growth industries. However, Greater Manchester's labour market will increasingly be an 'hourglass economy', with growth in both high-skill jobs and low-skill jobs, but much lower growth at intermediate skill levels.

In response, the strategic priorities for both Salford and Greater Manchester are: young people equipped for life and work; and adults in good jobs with opportunities to progress and develop.

Employment will change by 2030. Although it is uncertain what will happen to most jobs, many of the jobs likely to experience a fall in employment are low-skilled or medium-skilled in nature.

In all future industry scenarios, the key skills likely to be required by employers will be: interpersonal skills; higher-order cognitive skills; system thinking skills; and broad-based knowledge as well as specialised features needed for specific occupations. Key personality attributes will be: agility and resilience; creativity and critical thinking; empathy and emotional intelligence; and commitment to continuous learning.

2. Autistic people and employment

The data on the prevalence of autism and the number of autistic people is variable and unreliable. The estimated number of autistic adults in Salford ranges between 1,671 and 2,543 people (median = 2,107), rising to

between 1,965 and 3,051 people by 2037 (median = 2,508). The estimated number of adults with Asperger's syndrome in Salford is 316, rising to 343 in 2027 and 372 in 2037.

In general, the particular strengths of autistic people include: intense focus; attention to detail; thinking differently with different insights; reliability; commitment; and diligence. For employers, neurodiversity offers both a new pool of talent, and greater diversity of thought within a workforce and teams.

Just 16% of autistic adults are in full-time employment, and another 16% are in part-time employment, even though at least 70% want to work. This suggests that there may be as many as 1,250 autistic people in Salford who are unemployed and want to work, including at least 200 people with Asperger's syndrome.

3. Key barriers to employment

Key barriers to employment for autistic people are: recruitment and selection processes; lack of confidence; employer ignorance of autism; employer attitudes and prejudices on autism; failure to make reasonable adjustments; inappropriate support to move into and retain employment; and difficulties with social skills and issues.

Key barriers to employers taking on autistic people are: lack of awareness and understanding of the skills and talents of autistic people; worry about getting things wrong for autistic people; not knowing where to seek advice about employing an autistic person; belief that it costs more to employ an autistic person; use of traditional recruitment and interview processes.

A common theme is communication between stakeholders (from schools to higher education, and from training providers to employers), who often find themselves at cross-purposes, delivering what they can individually, but collectively missing the mark. We therefore need to find a whole-system approach that matches the availability of skills with the demands of employers and the expectations of local people.

4. Solutions

The Greater Manchester Autism Strategy seeks to ensure that: "All autistic people and their family members are given the right information to prepare for adulthood and that those autistic adults who are able to work can access the support they need to find and maintain work, including from employers who understand them."

Key principles for any action are: personalised actions; choice and control; addressing inequalities; and a life-long perspective.

Key elements of support for employment of autistic people are: employer awareness and understanding of autistic people and their strengths; practical-base recruitment; reasonable workplace adjustments; and support starting and during employment. Employers would benefit from both information and guidance, and learning on working with autistic people. Self-employment should also be considered as an option.

In practical terms, the main areas to address are: recruitment and selection; induction and onboarding; inclusive workplace environment; and managing a neurodiverse team.

Other complementary provision includes: Access to Work; Disability Confident; supported employment; apprenticeships; work experience, placements and internships; and digital support.

Around the world, the main approach adopted is autism-focussed employers. Other approaches are employers with specific employment programmes for autistic people, and employment preparation. Only one example of a 'recruitment agency', matching employers and autistic people, has been identified.

5. Proposal

There appear to be skills gaps amongst local employers with a realistic 'supply' of autistic people with the talents to fill them, and experience elsewhere that programmes for mainstream employment of autistic people are viable.

Our aim is to address the autism employment gap through a commercially sustainable solution, with a view to double the number of adults with Asperger's syndrome or high-functioning autism in work by 2021.

The concept is develop an approach and a practical pathway that matches the demand from employers and the potential supply of skills and talents from autistic people, with a particular focus on people with Asperger's syndrome or high-functioning autism (without a learning disability).

Based on intelligence gathered, possible business models include:

- an organisation that specialises in employing autistic people and trades based on their particular skills and talents
- a specialist organisation that employs autistic people and is then contracted by relevant businesses
- supporting specific employment programmes for autistic people within larger employers
- a specialist brokerage and recruitment service, matching autistic people with employers
- a system to support autistic people to operate on a self-employed or freelance basis (for example, 'digital nomads')

We plan to do this in Salford in three stages (with routine data collection and learning):

1. Proof of concept (6 months) - development and testing of both an employers' programme and an employment pathway for people with Asperger's syndrome or high-functioning autism.
2. Development (6 months) – an option appraisal of possible business models and creation of an appropriate sustainable social enterprise.
3. Mainstreaming (12 months) – starting commercial operation matching local employers and autistic people through employment.

6. Benefits and evidence

It is anticipated that there will be a new potential of high-potential talent for local employers, and high-quality meaningful employment for up to 50 local people in Salford, improving both their income and well-being. This is with a view to eventual expansion beyond Salford.

There will also be direct benefits to the wider economy and savings to the public sector.

During the project, we will enhance the standards of evidence for the approach as it evolves. We want to develop, in partnership with Salford CVS, Salford Clinical Commissioning Group and Salford City Council, a robust and meaningful evaluation framework that captures outputs, outcomes and ultimate impact.

7. Consultation

Unlimited Potential is aiming to produce a solution to match the demands of local employers and the particular strengths and talents of autistic people.

We have gathered views from autistic people, employers and autism organisations across Salford, analysed available data, reviewed relevant reports and guides and looked at models across the world.

This summary proposal and a full detailed report are available at <https://www.unlimitedpotential.org.uk/enterprise/innovation-projects/meaningful-employment-autistic-people>

We invite your views on the proposal that is emerging from this research. Please respond by 5pm on Friday 22nd February, 2019, at <https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/9VBSCSS>

If you have any queries about this consultation, please contact Marcia Powell on 0161 743 4500 or marcia.powell@unlimitedpotential.org.uk