

The Select Committee on Autism
Department of the Senate
P.O. Box 6100
Canberra A.C.T. 2600

17 July 2020

Dear Members of the Select Committee on Autism

My Experiences of Unemployment and Underemployment

The Senate Select Committee on Autism's media release dated 5 December 2019 states that one of the wide range of issues relating to autism that the committee will look into is employment. My submission is regarding my studies and my subsequent experiences of unemployment and underemployment. With regards to the Committee's Terms of Reference, I think that my submission falls into point "k", i.e. "The social inclusion and participation of autistic people within the economy and community". If not, I think my submission would fall into point "n.", i.e. "any related matters".

Some Background Regarding Myself

I was officially diagnosed with having Autism in 2011, at 37 years old. I hold two degrees (1) a Bachelor of Commerce Degree, majoring in accounting and banking, and (2) a Bachelor of Ministry Degree. I have not been able to find work in either of those fields. I have been working in a supermarket, part time, on the checkouts, for nearly thirteen years. This is an example of underemployment i.e. working in a job that is well below my knowledge and skill sets. I have also experienced periods of unemployment.

I am passionate about:

1. Wanting to influence companies, organisations, government departments to be aware of autism and accepting of autistic people and to employ autistic people.
2. Wanting autistic people to gain meaningful and rewarding employment, in accordance with their knowledge and skill sets.
3. Wanting the correct supports for autistic employees and their employers.
4. Wanting equal opportunities and equal pay for autistic people.
5. Wanting the figures for unemployment and underemployment of autistic people to significantly decrease.

My Studies and Subsequent Experiences of Unemployment and Underemployment

I studied my Bachelor of Commerce Degree, fulltime, in [REDACTED] (1997 – 2001). Before studying my degree, I was a bookkeeper for various companies and organisations in South Africa. My desire was to become a Chartered Accountant once I graduated. I attended numerous employer events and also submitted my C.V. to numerous job adverts for graduate positions. I did gain some interviews, unfortunately, I only got offered one job, which I lost seven months later, which was devastating for me. I did apply for other graduate accountant roles and general accounting roles. Again, I gained some interviews, but never got offered any other positions.

As time went by, I started applying for bookkeeper roles (which is not using my degree). I remember thinking, for some time, "I have put all of my time and effort studying my degree and I have not gained work that uses my degree". I also thought, "If people are not gaining work using their Commerce Degrees, why does the Federal Government let so many people study that degree, year after year?". I felt very disappointed and frustrated. Looking back, I still think that it is horrible doing all of that study and have not gained my desired work using that degree.

After a period of unemployment, I did gain a bookkeeper role at an aged care company. Again, after months in that role, I lost that employment. I went into another period of unemployment and I did gain another accounts position. After a few months in that role, I got sick and tired of working in offices, with numbers and invoices, so I resigned and decided to study a Bachelor of Counselling degree, part time. I started that degree at a [REDACTED] Bible College in 2006. In 2011, while still studying, I landed up in a psychiatric ward for three and a half months. That was then I was diagnosed with having Autism. After consulting with a clinical psychologist, I switched into a Bachelor of Ministry Degree, which I completed in 2014.

During the time of my second degree (2006 – 2014), from 2007, I worked at a supermarket on the checkouts. Unfortunately, I am still working in that same supermarket, still on the checkouts, not having found work in fields of both degrees. Whilst I am grateful to have a job, I have found working in the supermarket, on the checkouts, to be unstimulating, unrewarding, and boring. Again, I studied hard for both degrees, but have been very disappointed that I have not found work in those fields. I had put a lot of time and effort into my studies. I am an example of an autistic person being unemployed, for periods of time, which was very depressing for me. I am also an example of an autistic person being underemployed, which is soul destroying.

Statistics on the Labour Force Participation Rates of Autistic People

The Australian Bureau of Statistics report “4430.0 – Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings, 2018 – Autism in Australia” states:

- The labour force participation rate is 38.0% for autistic people of working age, compared with 53.4% for people with a disability, and 84.1% of people without a disability.
- The unemployment rate for is 34.1% for autistic people, compared to 10.3% for disabled people, compared to 4.6% for people without a disability.

An article by Amaze, titled “Autism and Employment: Australia has Work to Do”, which is based on research that was conducted by the Centre for Health and Social Research and Australian Catholic University, states:

- While more than half of autistic Australians would like a paid job, only one in three were currently in a paid role.
- More than half of unemployed autistic Australians (53.9%) had never held a paid job, despite often possessing the skills, qualifications and a strong desire to join the workforce.

The above article also states that “the message from Australia’s autistic community is abundantly clear – they want to work, and for employers to give them the same opportunities to enjoy participating in the workforce”. Also, “the sad reality is autistic people feel unsupported in finding paid work and are challenged by the lack of understanding of Autism from potential employers”.

Barriers to Employment

There are several barriers to employment for autistic people. These are including, but not limited to:

- The interview process. The interview process relies a lot on social skills, which autistic people may not have.
- Companies, organisations, government departments not understanding autism, autistic people and their unique characteristics and not being autistically aware.
- The above not providing the correct supports for the autistic person.
- The above not being accepting of autistic people.
- The above not receiving adequate and the right supports to employ autistic people.

The Business Case

A strong business case, for employing autistic people, can be built around facts about autistic people:

- Autistic people are willing to work, in accordance with their knowledge and skill sets, as mentioned above.
- They are honest, fair, and trustworthy.
- They are loyal, therefore, low absenteeism and low staff turnover.
- They have unique perspectives and thinking therefore can solve problems and innovation can increase.
- Their work ethic is great.
- They have good attention to detail.
- They have a great capacity to focus on tasks and work.
- More often than not, only small and inexpensive supports and/or adjustments are required.

The above are facts that I have read about in several places and know about.

Recommendations

- Companies, organisations, government departments to become aware of autism and accepting of autistic people. This can be done through education via connecting with autism specific organisations such as Autism West, Amaze, and Aspect Australia.
- Companies, organisations, government departments attending Employer Training Forums to improve their recruitment and onboarding processes and to improve their ongoing employment support of autistic people. Examples of these forums are Autism West's "Neurodiversity in the Workplace Employer Training Forums" and Autism CRC's "Autism at Work Summits".
- Peak organisations such as The Chamber of Commerce and Industry and professional organisations to be involved in all of this.
- State and Federal Governments to fund these types of Employer Training Forums.
- State and Federal Governments to lead the way in becoming aware of, accepting of, and employing autistic people.
- Job Search Providers and Disability Employment Services organisations to help autistic people find meaningful and rewarding employment, in accordance with the autistic person's knowledge and skill sets, and not just to help them find any kind of work, as I have had experience of that happening to me.
- Companies, organisations, government departments providing autistic people equal opportunities and equal pay.
- Companies, organisations, government departments providing autistic people with the correct supports during the recruitment, onboarding process and ongoing employment.
- The State and Federal Governments to increase funding to "The Jobs in Jeopardy" program. I think that if I had that support, I could have kept my job at the Chartered Accountant company and at the aged care company.
- The most important things are to consult with the autistic community (including myself as I am passionate about this) in all of this and to draw from research that has been conducted (on the topic of employment) via entities such as The Autism CRC and The Curtin University Autism Research Group.

Summary

I have two degrees, yet I have worked in jobs (and I am still working) that does not use the fields of study in my degrees. I have had periods of unemployment, which has been very depressing. I have been, and still am, underemployed. This has been soul destroying for me.

The statistics show that the labour force participation rate is lower than that of people with disabilities and people who do not have disabilities. The unemployment rate is higher than that of people with disabilities and people who do not have disabilities. Autistic people have a strong desire to work and often possess the skills and qualifications.

There several are barriers to employment for autistic people, however, there is a strong business case for employing autistic people. I have provided some recommendations so that autistic people can find and keep rewarding and fulfilling employment, in accordance with their knowledge and skill sets.

As an autistic person with experiences in unemployment and underemployment, I would like to see the statistics for autistic people to improve significantly.

References

Amaze. 2019. Autism and Employment: Australia has Work to do. Victoria: Amaze.
<https://www.amaze.org.au/2019/03/employment-research/> Accessed 15 July 2020.

Australian Bureau of Statistics 2019. *4430.0 – Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings, 2018 – Autism in Australia*. Canberra: ABS.
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