

How to engage employers in autism employment research

Involving organisations and their employees in research presents numerous challenges for both organisations and University researchers (Hayes & Manktelow, 2023). Academic and non-academic organisations have differing interests (Horta et al., 2022). This can be further hindered by time constraints, lack of incentives, and power imbalances within non-academic organisational structures which can limit employee willingness to engage (Johnson et al., 2008). However, if researchers build trust, clearly communicate research objectives, and offer tangible benefits, this may incentivise participation (Coole et al., 2018). This paper shares preliminary lessons learned from recruiting employers who hire autistic people to participate in two workplace wellbeing strategies and their evaluation. The aim is to improve the engagement of organisations with researchers and inform the design of future research and training programs.

Autistic adults experience high rates of under- and un-employment (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019). These individuals can also experience poor wellbeing (Croen et al., 2015), a further barrier to sustaining long-term employment (Chen et al., 2015). Those in leadership are particularly important to autistic employees' career success (Hayward et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2023). Yet, there is limited research linking how organisations can support employee wellbeing and therefore enhance autistic employees' work outcomes. This study examines the challenges engaging with organisations to participate and implement two workplace interventions. The purpose of the interventions is to improve the wellbeing of autistic employees. These interventions are an autism-specific mental health and wellbeing training (MHT) package and a job crafting intervention (JCI) tool.

The MHT package is designed for completion by autistic employees, their supervisors, and co-workers. It is self-paced and completed on an online platform. Its 11 modules are intended to help autistic and non-autistic individuals understand, identify, and address mental health and wellbeing concerns in the workplace. Each module includes lived experience accounts from autistic people; support strategies; further reading and resources; quizzes, and a certificate of completion. The total employee time commitment to complete the MHT is approximately 10 hours.

The JCI tool is adapted from the Workplace Performance Questionnaire (WPQ; Royo-Leon et al., 2019). It is a 31-item measure of five areas of workplace performance: a) Workplace Rules and Procedures, e.g., presentation and appearance, punctuality, responsibility; b) Task Comprehension and Planning; c) Task Performance; d) Managing Changes, and e) Social Interaction, e.g., contact and interaction with colleagues and supervisors. The WPQ has undergone psychometric testing (Bury et al., 2019; Gal et al., 2020). Pilot data indicates it is useful for performance conversations between autistic employees and their managers.

The JCI tool facilitates conversations between employees and their supervisors enabling job customisation, so jobs can better meet the needs of both parties. Although the tool is designed to be autism specific, all employees can benefit. The employee and supervisor each complete the same questionnaire independently and later meet to compare their responses. The tool serves as a foundation for constructive dialogue and offers specific ideas to enhance different aspects of employment customisation. The JCI takes up to 45 minutes for each party to complete. The meeting to compare responses takes up to one hour. For this project, the strategy is used three times; once per month for three consecutive months.

To measure the impact of the MHT package and JCI tool on employee wellbeing, completion of a 60-minute survey is asked of participants before they gain access to each strategy, as well as after each strategy's completion. A follow up survey is asked of participants 12 months after completion of the final strategy. Additional optional interviews,

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pre- and post-, each strategy is also available. The overall time commitment for the MHT, JCI, surveys and interviews by employee type is summarised in Appendix A.

The project received funding for three years from industry (i.e., non-academic organisational) partners and [government research funding - blinded for peer review]. All industry partners have a business interest in autism employment. When this project was conceptualised in 2020, prior to receiving government funding, industry partners agreed that: a) participants would be recruited from their organisation (or their affiliated organisation/s), and b) they would be active in assisting with participant recruitment. The study funding formally commenced approximately two years later in 2022.

Twelve months after the receipt of funding, owing to university ethics approval processes and community consultation on project design and materials, it was time to recruit participants. However, at this time most of the industry partners were limited in their capacity to assist with participant recruitment. As a result, the research team relied on warm contacts from industry partners, professional links, and cold calling organisations that openly employ autistic people.

The two interventions are offered to all eligible organisations free of monetary cost, however employees need to be supported by their employer to complete the training during their normal working hours. We had the capacity to offer a AUD \$30 gift voucher for completion of each survey to participants who could not complete the surveys during their typical working hours.

Eligibility for inclusion in the study, and access to the MHT package and JCI tool was to either be an autistic person, supervise an autistic employee, or have a co-worker who is autistic. Where participants are both autistic and a supervisor or co-worker of an autistic person, they have the option of choosing which capacity they would like to participate.

A total of 41 Australian organisations were contacted to participate in the study, these included the funding industry partners. Note organisations affiliated with funding industry partners were counted as part of that organisation and not separately. Most organisations (95%, $n=39$) contacted either declined to participate, or after three or more unanswered attempts at reaching them, we considered them declined. Organisations were contacted by phone and email with over half ($n=22$) agreeing to meet at least once with a member of the research team either in-person or via Zoom.

Method

Procedure

Given the unusually high decline rate by potential organisations, we attempted to better understand why some organisations agreed or declined to participate in the project. Representatives from the organisations that were contacted were offered a qualitative interview over Zoom. The interviews lasted up to 30 minutes and were transcribed verbatim.

Analysis

The results were analysed using Inductive Thematic Analysis (ITA). Two researchers coded the data independently. Where there were discrepancies, the response was discussed and the placement of the response to a theme agreed.

Results

Participants

Out of 19 organisations contacted, six (33%) representatives from these organisations agreed to participate in an interview. See Table 1 for the representatives' characteristics of the organisation within which they worked.

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Table 1. *Organisational Characteristics*

Organisation number	Size (N) of organisation	Type	Structure / funding	Industry	Participated in study (Y / N)
1	Large (~3000)	Independent statutory authority	Government funded	Public sector	Y
2	Large (~1400)	Charity / not-for-profit	Government funded	Community services	N
3	Medium (23)	Charity / not-for-profit	Government funded	Research	N
4	Large (~1200)	For-profit	Private company	Consumer goods	N
5	Large (unknown)	Charity / not-for-profit	Government funded	Community services	N
6	Large (~5000)	For-profit	Private company	Information technology	Y

Themes

Below are the preliminary results from the ITA. The reasons for participation or non-participation are stated in order of frequency.

Theme 1: Cost and Value

Several challenges were expressed regarding the project's length and therefore resource burden, both in terms of participant time and financial cost for the organisation. This was often weighted with the perceived value of the MHT and JCI tool.

"... the benefits are rarely questioned, but the cost and time are the biggest issue. The cost in dollars isn't the worry, but time becomes dollars when people can't do their work." [non-participating organisation]

"[It's the] time required to participate in the research. Again, we're a really small team who do a massive amount of work." [non-participating organisation]

"While I don't doubt its [the JCI tool] usefulness, teaching someone how to do that seems excessive." [non-participating organisation]

"...it's like we're just doing it [supporting autistic employees] within our own social impact practise[s] because it's hard to get that buy-in again for others [organisations] to do it." [participating organisation]

"We discussed it with the ... [autistic] network first, before I made the recommendation, because I didn't want to recommend something that the[y] ... didn't feel would be useful." [participating organisation]

Theme 2: Timing

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One challenge identified was organisational staffing or process changes within potential participating organisations. These changes prevented them from considering participation.

“I think, at the time that [you wanted] to recruit [us it] was just a really, you know, it was just a difficult time for [us] to say we're going to get involved because they just had major upheaval in the HR department.” [non-participating organisation]

“I think if you ran the project, like if [you] we[re] actually recruiting two or three years ago, we might have had more luck ... if you're hitting a business at a time where they're in a state of kind of flux and crisis, then adding another thing for them to think about, even if it's potentially beneficial [isn't going to work].” [non-participating organisation]

“You know, [having] the ability to get time to work on it when you're not fully utilised from doing billable work.” [participating organisation]

Theme 3: Impact on autistic employees

The impact on autistic employees was also a consideration. There was a mix of concern about overburdening autistic employees with research participation versus the perceived benefit.

“We have a small number of employees that are constantly, they're getting hit again and again, and again. I suppose if you had 100 or 200 employees, you could strategically target events [at] people once a year... so the studies usually want to talk to the neurodiverse employees too, and then a support person or someone who works with them. So that's usually asking the same people both times. In both cases.” [non-participating organisation]

“So in terms of the training ... the only factor that I had there was do my autistic team members think it's beneficial and worthwhile?.. So it wasn't a decision that I made. Again, I do everything through collaboration, knowing that I'm not the expert here. It's actually my autistic team members who are so, that that was the only consideration in terms of the training.” [non-participating organisation]

Theme 4: Internal communication

Communication within the organisation, both between individuals and departments, for the message to get to the person who has the authority to decide whether the organisation becomes involved was another reported barrier.

“I didn't have a conversation. So, it's kind of whatever they told you, because I believe they did send an email. I think I might have been cc'd into the email, and it's whatever they said in that email. So I wasn't involved in any of those conversations. They didn't come and ask me about it ... The extent of my knowledge about why they changed their mind [from participating to not participating] is whatever's in that email.” [non-participating organisation]

“I can push, but then I just don't [have] the capacity to do that, we need to get someone as a sponsor to run that through and understand it... someone close to the top” [participating organisation]

Discussion

This paper aims to help Universities improve the engagement of organisations that employ autistic people to participate in strategies designed to help improve autistic people's wellbeing as well as research. Understanding these factors can also inform how to design feasible training programs for organisational use.

Consistent with previous literature, organisations that see value which outweighs organisational costs are more likely to participate (Drake et al., 2009). When designing research and training, starting with market research or a feasibility study to understand what

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target organisations value and the length that would be acceptable to them for training activities may assist. Once training is designed, member checking the design with the organisation/s that participated in the feasibility study to identify risks associated with its implementation would also be beneficial.

A thorough consideration of risks to project implementation should be considered a priori as well as co-developing potential solutions to these risks with the potential organisation/s involved. Doing so allows the project to pivot quickly should it need to do so. For example, although the training we offered was at no cost, the business costs at a time of economic uncertainty to release employees to participate in the project was given little attention. Where business models are fee-for-service, this needs even further consideration. Targeting large (>250 employees) organisations or organisations that previously participated did not result in greater participation in this study, unlike the findings from Coole et al. (2018).

Other researchers might also consider offering options like flexible timing (Drake et al., 2008) through after-hours participation. However, while reducing the burden on the organisation, this may reduce participation rates even if financially incentivised. It may be that financial incentivisation would need to also cover the time needed to undertake the strategies. We found no organisations considered financial remuneration for each completed survey as an incentive.

Although this study found that internal restructuring can create barriers to research participation. Being able to directly identify and engage with the person/s who make strategic decisions within the organisation appears to be beneficial, as also noted by Lysaght et al. (2016). Engagement with key decision-makers is essential to showcase how the research aligns with their mission, goals, and values. Warm contacts are evidenced to enhance likelihood of participation (Coole et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2008). If researchers can demonstrate tangible value to the organisation and its autistic employees, such as benefit to employee wellbeing, enhanced diversity inclusion, this too may increase the likelihood of engagement.

Future Directions for the Current Project

To minimise the demands placed on organisations and their employees, we are offering two modules from the original 11 module MHT. This is combined with reduced survey time to 60 minutes per participant for the duration of the entire study, no optional interview or JCI tool are offered. This takes the total time commitment down from an average of 12 hours for the duration of the study to three. Further, the research activities are now being conducted alongside organisational workflow and working with organisational procedures for training to avoid creating additional barriers. This has been met with increased enthusiasm to participate. However, it is not known yet how successful this approach will be given the reduced study is being rolled out in March 2024.

Conclusion

This research aimed to improve university efforts in engaging organisations employing autistic people for research and wellbeing initiatives. The study identified factors influencing participation, like perceived value exceeding organisational costs. Researchers are advised to conduct feasibility studies, involve decision-makers, and showcase project value. The project is being streamlined to reduce participant burden and improve participation rates. While future success remains unknown, this research provides valuable insights for future collaborations.

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Appendix A

Summary of Time Commitment from Employees (Autistic and Non-autistic)

- 1 x wellbeing training (strategy A): 10 hours
- 1 x job crafting tool (strategy B): ~1 hour per participant per month for 3 months
- 4 x online surveys: ~1 hour each, detailed below
 - o 1 x pre-strategy A and B
 - o 1 x post-strategy A
 - o 1 x post-strategy B
 - o 1 x follow-up survey 12 months after strategies A and B

- 3 x interviews: ~1 hour each, detailed below (optional)
 - o 1 x pre-strategy A and B
 - o 1 x post-strategy A
 - o 1 x post-strategy B

Total approximate time per participant = 20-25 hours for the duration of the study.

Summary of Time Commitment from Supervisors

- 1 x wellbeing training (strategy A): 10 hours
- 1 x job crafting tool (strategy B): ~1 hour per participant per month for 3 months
- 4 x online surveys: ~.17 hours (10mins) each, detailed below
 - o 1 x pre-strategy A and B
 - o 1 x post-strategy A
 - o 1 x post-strategy B
 - o 1 x follow-up survey 12 months after strategies A and B

- 3 x interviews: <1 hour each, detailed below (optional)
 - o 1 x pre-strategy A and B
 - o 1 x post-strategy A
 - o 1 x post-strategy B

Total approximate time per supervisor = 14 to 16.5 hrs for the duration of the study