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The employment experiences of young autistic adults

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It is known that autistic people have more difficulty securing and maintaining employment, compared to those without autism. Research that has investigated this suggests that autistic characteristics, the workplace environment, personal attributes and discrimination towards autistic people are responsible. While there are recommendations for supports to overcome these barriers, little research has focused on personal experience on entering employment. The current study therefore looked to explore the experiences of autistic young adults who are entering the workplace. Comparisons were also made between those who had a university degree, compared to those entering work as school leavers.

Following ethical approval, 6 autistic adults (3 women and 3 men) took part in one-to-one interviews. Interviews were hosted by an autistic researcher and three themes emerged. These were; Disclosure, Influences of Education, and The Application Process.

The theme Disclosure, revealed that the participants were wary disclosing their diagnosis to their employer or when to disclose it. Influences of Education showed that participants in this study had contrasting views on the extent that education influenced their career paths.

Educational qualifications appeared to have differing importance for each participant. Lastly, The Application Process theme highlighted the difficulty that people experience when applying for jobs and that the process can put people off applying. Particular difficulties with online applications were discussed.

The findings of the study show the personal experiences of young autistic adults entering the world of work and that more needs to be done in creating autism friendly applications and interview processes. Likewise, once in a job, how employers respond to a disclosure of autism diagnosis and workplace reasonable adjustment are important to address. In order to provide a more positive experience of employment a combination of work experience and qualifications were identified as essential.

Background: Autistic adults are underrepresented in the workplace, and previous research has identified barriers which lead to poor employment outcomes for autistic people including: diagnostic characteristics of autism, personal, environmental, and discrimination related issues. Research has suggested potential solutions and interventions to these barriers and negative outcomes but there has been little research into the personal experiences of autistic people when entering the world of work.

Objectives: This study aimed to explore the experiences of autistic young adults when entering the world of work and identifying if there were differences between those who have had higher education compared to school leavers.

Methods: An interpretive qualitative design comprising of one to one semi structured interviews. 6 participants (3 males, 3 females) volunteered to take part.

Results: Using thematic analysis three themes emerged: Disclosure, Influences of Education, and The Application Process. The first theme, Disclosure, participants were found to be selective on whether, and when, they would disclose their diagnosis. These choices appeared to be based on both past experiences as well as each participant's perception of the potential consequences. Influences of Education found that education had a multifaceted role on the experiences of entering employment. The final theme, The Application Process it was found that, regardless of educational level, participants reported experiencing difficulties. Online applications were identified as a particular issue as participants perceived them as a lengthy process, with differences in application websites resulting in each application meaning starting a new process.

Conclusions: The findings of this study have implications for employers in terms of the need to develop autism friendly application and interview processes, how they respond to disclosures of an autism diagnosis, and providing tailored workplace supports. The importance of a combination of qualifications and work experience was identified as essential in leading to positive employment outcomes.