

# Employing autism



Work  
special

## Dame Stephanie Shirley CH talks about finding the right job to suit your skills

Many of the thousands of working age autistic people in Britain want to get into work. But the rate of employment is much less than that of the disabled population who are not autistic – 80% of non-disabled people are in work, compared with 47% of disabled people, and only 32% of autistic people, according to the National Autistic Society's 2016 report, *The autism employment gap*. This is for a group whose main impairment is in social interaction. The waste of talent has been accentuated by the coronavirus crisis.

Many autistic people who are in paid work do not have jobs that match their intellect. Despite graduate-level skills, they often fail to get or keep jobs – even ones (typically in retail, care or administration) that do not represent their formal qualifications. I define work as disciplined physical or intellectual

activity towards some goal. It is not just paid work. Voluntary roles demonstrate all the things potential employers look for, or it can be satisfying creative activities.

Work is not just something you do when you'd rather be doing something else. Picasso called work "the ultimate seduction" (as I grow older, this makes more sense) and Thomas Carlyle thought it "the grand cure of all the maladies".

More than 60% of autistic adults are financially dependent on their families. The London School of Economics\* estimates the loss of income averages more than £20,000 a year for the individual, and 14% of income for parents' reduced earnings.

A **minor adjustment** can  
make a **major difference**

Nationally, this equates to a staggering £10bn annually.

## Opportunities for work

In 2018, the National Autistic Society presented me with one of its coveted Autism Professional Awards. This honour was for autism work, including a three-year study that led to *Autism works*, a book full of case histories.

It showed wonderful examples of opportunities, ranging from social enterprises where pre-verbal adults with autism earn the living wage, to an academic Centre for Applied Autism Research in partnership with a financial services firm.

Other establishments concentrate on helping autistic people with the difficult transition into work. My first charity set up the first autism-specific Kingwood College in Reading, Berkshire, in 2012. It's small, but effective in teaching life skills.

Although many autistic people are successful at work, others have difficulty and some may remain unemployed. Workplace structure may suit some and hamper others. But it is not the lack of skills, enthusiasm or motivation to deploy their lives usefully that are the barriers to work, but rather the problem with communication, interpretation of language and the ability to access services. Many remain extremely vulnerable, finding it hard to get into employment and to make friends.

Many of us enjoy the social aspects of work, but it is precisely those social aspects that present the greatest challenge for autistic people who may choose to remain alone or at their workstation rather than socialising with colleagues over lunch. And the higher up the employment scale, the more social one is generally expected to be. It's worth reminding doubters that autism's different cognitive style can confer advantages in certain contexts. A recent study from the University of Stirling\*\* showed a welcome link between autistic traits and unusual and original ideas.

To concentrate on what autistic people can do, their strengths rather than their deficits,

and the specific talents – often unrecognised – that come with their differences, an applicant could ask for questions to be disclosed before any recruitment interview takes place. Better still would be to secure a trial, where practical abilities can be demonstrated.

## In the workplace

In the workplace itself, once colleagues understand autism, they are often very helpful.

Autistic people can sometimes find being in large groups very stressful, so it's best to look for a small, stable group or one-to-one working. Make sure you get a designated workspace, not a hot desk. Ask for an appropriate sensory adjustment to maintain low stress levels.

Autism can make any or all of the five senses very weak or very strong. Most of us don't notice the buzzing of light tubes. Some people on the autism spectrum hear it so loud as to exclude anything else, so special lighting or tinted lenses might be needed to filter out the frequencies causing the problem. And perhaps also headphones to block out noises that don't worry me, but are excruciating for some autistic people. It's worth negotiating these things before employment begins. A minor

Philip Sinden



Dame Stephanie Shirley CH – known as Steve – is a successful IT entrepreneur turned philanthropist. In 1962, she founded an all-woman software company that pioneered remote working, upending the expectations of the time. Since retiring, her focus has been on philanthropy, especially autism and IT. Her TED Talk has had more than two million views, and her memoir, *Let it go*, is being made into a film.

Dame Stephanie is a longstanding member of our charity. Her late son, Giles, was autistic, and this led her to found Autism at Kingwood, Prior's Court School and Autistica. [www.steveshirley.com](http://www.steveshirley.com)

adjustment can make a major difference. The aim of adjustment is to minimise anxiety and to stop worrying – worrying about being late, worrying what to do at lunchtime, worrying about what people are asking of you. Such issues can be resolved when a selected workplace has consistency. It is also worth looking for a mentor. Note that there are some IT companies that employ exclusively autistic people as IT consultants, data coders and data quality checkers. Their employees relate better to the consistency of computers than to unpredictable human beings. So, IT enables them to work better and faster, as it can do for us all.

### Playing to your strengths

Applicants should also look for tasks that play to their strengths. For some autistic people, this is in systemising, precision and thoroughness. Many autistic people have an extraordinary capacity to hold information 'online' when solving a problem. They have a wonderful ability to hyperfocus.

Enquiry jobs, indeed all those staring-at-a-screen type jobs, can be good. As most organisations are into technology nowadays, that gives lots of professional opportunities. As we all know, the homeworking revolution brought about by coronavirus means that many of us will be working and meeting on screen perhaps permanently. Society needs to see with new eyes and modify its ways of

## Top jobs

The top five professions autistic people would like to work in are:

**The arts/acting (11%)**

**IT (10%)**

**Admin/office work (9%)**

**Scientific research (7%)**

**Library/museum work (7%)**

Source: *The autism employment gap report* (2016)

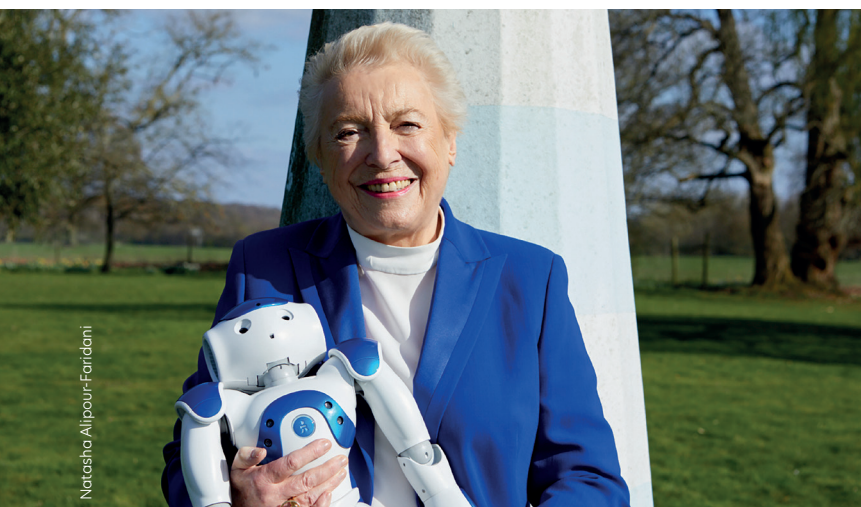
working, rather than expecting everyone to adapt to standard work environments.

Autistic people function well at work if the focus is on their ability and skills, rather than any associated disability or awkwardness. Not everything that's different is inferior. New ideas can be amazing, and it'd be boring if we all thought in the same way all the time. Autistic people see reality from a different perspective and can have a positive impact in both public and private organisations.

The autism employment gap costs the nation highly. But it is easy to compensate for. As I said, "a minor adjustment can make a major difference". So, give it a go. Apply for that job, go where you are celebrated. You'll find that work is well worthwhile.

\*Iemmi, V., Knapp, M., Ragan, I., (2017). *The autism dividend: reaping the rewards of better investment*. LSE: London

\*\* <https://www.stir.ac.uk/news/2015/08/research-discovers-link-between-autism-and-creativity/>



Natasha Alipour-Faridani



Do you want to be part of changing the employment landscape for autistic people? Our first Work Summit will be held on 4 March 2021. Find out more at [www.autism.org.uk/work-summit](http://www.autism.org.uk/work-summit)



Work  
special

# Creating opportunities

We have launched a new Autism at Work programme to promote job opportunities to autistic people

Only 16% of autistic adults are in full-time employment, though 77% want to work. Autistic people are often disadvantaged when it comes to getting and keeping a job because of difficulties with social communication and interaction, and other people's lack of understanding.

As well as helping employers to become more autism-friendly, we want to create more opportunities for autistic people to find work. Our charity's new Autism at Work programme, in partnership with the Bloomfield Trust, supports

employers to promote job opportunities to autistic jobseekers. Support for candidates includes pre-employment preparation, support when starting the role, and ongoing meetings with a specialist job coach.

Current opportunities include roles from Auto Trader UK, JP Morgan and Oracle, and range from full-time technical roles to summer internship programmes. You can see the full range of roles at [www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/employment/job-opportunities](http://www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/employment/job-opportunities)



## Jerrel's story



### What were you doing before the Autism at Work programme?

I was out of work for about seven months. I was applying for jobs, but did not receive any responses.

### How did you get involved with the programme?

I found out about it at the end of my civil service internship with the Home Office. I met Mandeep, who works at HMRC, at the closing ceremony. She told me about the programme and how I could potentially join the Secure Our Technical Future (SOTF) team at HMRC through it. Seven months later, I am now working with Mandeep and many other staff as a data business analyst.

### What skills do you work on with your job coach?

I'm working on my social skills. I'm doing my best to keep in touch with my colleagues during these difficult times, and am trying to meet new colleagues by joining more meetings and virtual groupings. I feel I can achieve this if I just come out of my comfort zone a little bit more.

### What skills have you developed?

My confidence has improved a lot. I am working with people who respect me and are willing to do what they can to ensure I feel comfortable around them, despite my social challenges. Because I feel more confident, my communication skills have improved.