

**Non-Autistic Employees' Perspectives on the Implementation of an Autism Employment Program**

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### Abstract

Although employees' attitudes toward an autism employment program may impact its ultimate success, there is limited research examining the implementation of these programs from the perspective of non-autistic employees (i.e., co-workers and managers). This study explored the implementation of an Australian-based supported autism employment program, drawing on qualitative data collected from 32 employees working with autistic trainees in the program. Thematic analysis revealed three main themes. The *program benefits* theme suggested that the employment program and autistic trainees were generally viewed positively, with the program benefitting both the trainees and the organisation, and leading to greater understanding of autism. However, negative attitudes and perceptions of special treatment contributed to *program challenges*, which paralleled challenges that have been observed with other disability and diversity programs. The design of this specific program led to *concerns about workforce integration*, such as reduced opportunity for social and work integration into the broader workplace. This research extends the research on diversity management in the context of autism employment and provides practical insights into barriers and facilitators associated with implementing autism employment programs.

### Keywords:

Disability; Autism Employment; Autistic adults; Diversity; Intergroup Relations

### **Non-Autistic Employees' Perspectives on the Implementation of an Autism Employment Program**

Despite reporting a strong desire to work (Chen et al., 2015), many autistic adults experience significant challenges in finding long-term and meaningful employment (Nicholas et al., 2019; van Heijst & Geurts, 2015). Research has explored the reasons underlying these adverse employment outcomes (Hedley et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2015), often focusing on the autistic person's ability to navigate the job search process (Müller et al., 2003; Richards, 2012) or access reasonable accommodations (e.g., Shattuck et al., 2012). A growing number of autism-focused employment programs (Austin & Pisano, 2017) aim to address these barriers through modified human resource management (HRM) processes and a supported work environment. There is growing evidence that these programs have significant benefits for autistic individuals (Flower et al., 2019; Hedley et al., 2018). However, there is a paucity of research examining the broader organisational context (Vogus & Taylor, 2018), including the extent to which non-autistic employees engage with and support their autistic colleagues (i.e., "workforce integration"). This is an important gap because autism employment outcomes occur within an ecosystem in which co-workers and managers play a critical role (Nicholas et al., 2018). To address this gap, we explored the experiences of co-workers and managers during the implementation of an Australian-based supported autism employment program.

Autism employment programs are often based on a business case that autistic employees, when appropriately supported, can bring the organisation diverse skills, perspectives, and intelligence that can drive productivity and innovation (Annabi et al., 2019; Austin & Pisano, 2017). More specifically, autism employment programs seek to leverage the high intellectual ability (Happé & Frith, 2006) and specific skills and interests that characterise some autistic people (Austin & Pisano, 2017; Donovan, 2008; but see Bury et al., 2019, 2020). Engagement and supportive attitudes amongst co-worker and employee attitudes are critical to the success of a diversity program (Cunningham & Sartore, 2010; Harrison et al., 2006), and employees who are highly committed to a program are more likely to devote extra time to it

and champion it externally (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002). Co-workers and managers are also an important part of the broader autism employment ecosystem (Nicholas et al., 2018). Supportive co-workers and managers can augment formal support services for autistic staff (Gerhardt et al., 2014) and facilitate greater inclusion and social integration of their disabled colleagues (Colella & Bruyère, 2011; Schur et al., 2009). In the rest of this section we discuss features of autism employment programs and their potential impact on co-worker experiences and support for the programs.

Austin and Sonne (2014) have suggested that autism employment involves fitting the organisation environment to autistic employees (see also van der Zee & Otten, 2019). Thus, many autism employment programs include accommodations that shape organisation structures and HRM processes to better suit the unique needs and capabilities of autistic individuals (Annabi et al., 2019; Austin & Pisano, 2017). Although these accommodations can help autistic individuals to perform well (e.g., Flower et al., 2019), research demonstrates that co-workers may perceive even minor accommodations for disabled employees to be unfair (Colella et al., 2004).

Given the potential negative consequences of revealing one's disability and receiving fair accommodations, it is not surprising that disabled employees often avoid disclosing their disability (Johnson & Joshi, 2016; Santuzzi et al., 2014). However, disclosure is a tacit requirement for individuals employed in these programs (Annabi et al., 2019; Hedley et al., 2018). Research suggests that the potential negative effects of accommodations and disclosure can be minimised by highlighting the quality of work, sensitising other employees to disability and employment issues, and celebrating success of all employees (Kulkarni, 2016). Autism-specific diversity training, which is included in most autism employment programs (Annabi et al., 2019; Hedley et al., 2018), could also enhance employee attitudes toward the program and autistic staff, particularly for individuals who are already motivated to understand disability (Kulkarni et al., 2018).

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More positive attitudes toward an autism employment program may also relate to greater inclusion. Colella and Bruyère (2011) defined inclusion in employment as the “extent to which people with disabilities are accepted, helped, and treated as others by their co-workers” (pp. 492-493). They described stereotypes, poor information sharing, organisational culture, and poor supervisory relationships as potential inclusion barriers. Employees are also more inclusive toward disabled colleagues when work pressure is low and disabled colleagues are perceived to be competent (Nelissen et al., 2016; see also Colella et al., 1998). Autism employment programs are often limited to specific work that is thought to be a good fit for business objectives and autistic individuals (Annabi et al., 2019; Krzeminska et al., 2019), which could promote perceptions of competence. However, using clearly defined projects and identifiable support staff (Annabi et al., 2019; Hedley et al., 2018) may also contribute to an ‘us/them’ mentality where autistic staff are relatively excluded from the rest of the organisation.

Although there is growing research evidence that organisations with autism employment programs have laudable goals and that autistic people employed via these programs experience benefits (e.g., Flower et al., 2019; Hedley et al., 2018), it is unclear whether these goals cascade down and are reflected in how the program is implemented and experienced by employees throughout the organisation. This gap likely reflects that prior research has mostly neglected the critical perspective of co-workers and managers who are an important part of the autism employment ecosystem (Nicholas et al., 2018) and are likely to have important insights into the day-to-day benefits and challenges that arise in the program. For example, organisations may espouse inclusive values, but the enacted values may lag if managers and staff are cynical and lack skills (Soldan & Nankervis, 2014). Gaps between espoused versus enacted values could partly explain why, despite good intentions, diversity management initiatives have had limited success in increasing workplace inclusion of disabled individuals (Cavanagh

et al., 2016; Lengnick-Hall et al., 2008). More optimistically, program implementation could be improved if employees feel engaged and empowered to advocate for it.

### **Overview of Current Study**

We explored the implementation of an Australian-based supported autism employment program in the information and communications technology (ICT) sector. Our principal research question was: *How was the autism employment program and its implementation perceived by co-workers and managers?* At a more nuanced level, we were interested in the critical role that employees play in the program's implementation, and how these factors affect the overall inclusion of autistic staff in the broader workplace. We focused on co-workers and managers for their insights into the program's implementation (Soldan & Nankervis, 2014), and we purposefully included participants with regular direct interaction with the program, as well as participants whose experience with the program was more limited, to explore its influence across the organisation more broadly. We chose a qualitative method (focus groups and interviews) due to the limited prior research and our desire to obtain a richer and more in-depth view of this program from participants' perspective. Focus groups also allow participants to interact and build on each other's ideas and knowledge of the program (Louwerse et al., 2019; Riesen & Morgan, 2018). Thus, focus groups have the potential to uncover strengths, barriers, and limitations to the program implementation.

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

Participants were current employees ( $n = 32$ ; 13 female) at two organisation sites where autistic trainees had been working in a supported employment program for approximately two years.

Participants' ages were distributed across age categories (3 aged under 25, 8 aged 25-34, 7 aged 35-44, 10 aged 45-54, 4 aged 55 or over). Thirty-one participants were employed full-time, and 25 had been employed more than five years. Participants worked in technical, management, and support roles (7

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analysts, 6 developers, 8 engineers, 2 testers, 2 technical managers, 3 team leaders, 2 senior managers, 1 site support worker, 1 administrative support worker). Some participants worked with autistic staff daily while other participants had more limited work contact with them.

### **Research Context – Autism Employment Program**

The autism employment program (hereafter ‘the program’) is a supported employment program that aims to provide autistic people with a career path into the ICT sector. Autistic staff are employed by a very large (>100,000 employees) ICT services firm to work in 3-year contract roles at client organisation sites. The client organisation in this study is a very large (>30,000 employees) Australian government department that administers health and social welfare programs. Autistic staff were employed at a graduate entry level to work in software testing roles, and they received salaries equivalent to non-program peers working in similar roles. When the program commenced at each site, the client organisation held open staff briefings regarding the program and its general aims, as well as voluntary autism training. Training was organised by the ICT firm and delivered by local autism advocacy groups.

The ICT firm modified HRM practices to support autistic candidates. Successful candidates (henceforth ‘trainees’) worked at the client organisation site in teams of 10 to 14 individuals. The program team comprised primarily other autistic trainees who had participated in the same extended selection process, as well as technical support staff and a manager who had received specialised autism training. A full-time, on-site autism spectrum consultant (ASC) assisted both trainees and client organisation staff. Trainees initially began working with their program team but could later transition into different client organisation teams if suitable.

### **Procedure**

The study was approved by La Trobe University Human Ethics Committee. Participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained. The study was conducted November 2016 (Site 1) and



July 2017 (Site 2), at which time the program had been running for approximately two years at each site. The study was promoted via emails from upper management and the ASC to all staff who currently or had previously worked in the same building as the trainees. This approach was designed to recruit participants with broad degrees of interaction with the program and thereby a range of perspectives. Seven focus groups were facilitated at the worksite by the third author, and two focus groups were co-facilitated by a trained research assistant. Due to scheduling constraints, most focus groups included both managers and technical employees, but no one participated in a focus group with their immediate supervisor. Two additional participants completed individual interviews, one facilitated by the research assistant via telephone and one via email.

We used a semi-structured approach and developed a focus group guide (see Appendix 1) (Krueger, 1998a). Participants were informed about the study aims, that they could withdraw at any time, and that their responses would be de-identified. The facilitator encouraged all group members to participate, to discuss both positive and negative experiences, and to offer contrasting or additional examples. During the focus groups and interview, the facilitator provided a brief summary and interpretation of each question to allow member checking and correction (Thomas, 2006). Focus groups and interviews were recorded. Recordings were professionally transcribed verbatim, and the research assistant reviewed transcripts for errors.

### **Data Analysis**

We used reflexive thematic analysis to identify underlying patterns in the data (Braun & Clark, 2006; Braun, Clarke, Hayfield, & Terry, 2019), using these phases: familiarisation, generate codes, construct candidate themes, revise and define themes. The first author read the transcripts multiple times to gain familiarisation. The first and third author developed a codebook of *a priori* codes based on the focus group guide and knowledge of the program. The first author coded all transcripts using NVivo 12; raw codes were applied at the semantic level, to reflect what participants were willing to explicitly

state within their focus group. We used a constant comparative process (Cavana et al., 2001) and concept maps (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to ensure that emergent codes were sufficiently centred on separate conceptual bases. Data saturation was reached by the seventh transcript.

We constructed candidate themes (Braun et al., 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2006) by reviewing the extracts at each code in NVivo and developing construct maps to visualize patterns and relationships amongst the codes. Candidate themes and sub-themes were compared to the facilitator summaries in the transcripts, and we adopted a flexible minimum criterion of approximately 50% coverage at both the group and individual level to construct themes and sub-themes. Individual themes and sub-themes were defined with a short paragraph describing their scope and boundaries (Braun et al., 2019).

### **Community Involvement Statement**

Members of the autism community were not involved in the study.

## **Results**

### **Focus Groups**

The composition and duration of the seven focus groups and two interviews is summarized in Table 1. Within the focus groups, participants' contributions ranged from 5.6% to 56% (*Mdn*=22.6%). The high maximum occurred in group 1, which only included two participants. Individual word counts, including the two interviews, ranged from 276 to 3767 words (*Mdn*=1241, *M*=1369.5, *SD*=979 words), confirming that all participants contributed to the discussions. Managers tended to speak more (*M*=1752, *SD*=983 words) than participants in support (*M*=1118, *SD*=555 words) and technical roles (*M*=1341, *SD*=961 words). However, a univariate analysis of variance on word count, with role as the independent variable, revealed that these differences were not statistically significant,  $F(2, 29) < 1$ .

[Table 1]

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Participants were first asked to discuss their overall impressions of the program. Impressions were generally positive, and 16 of the participants responded to this question with unreserved enthusiasm:

I see the guys around and chat with them in the tearoom and I think it's a fantastic thing personally. [Technical-16]

A further 14 participants stated that they were positive toward the program but also spontaneously mentioned issues or areas for improvement:

I do think it's been great, fabulous for them, because I've seen so many improvements in all of them and some more than others. But there are some improvements, I think, can be good for both the program and [organisation] where things could be done a bit differently. [Technical-2]

Finally, two participants' response was mainly limited to describing the program aims.

In the remaining sections we discuss three themes and illustrative quotes that reflect the complexity of this program and participants' perceptions: *program benefits*; *program challenges*; and *concerns about workforce integration*. The themes and sub-themes, including the number of groups and participants coded at each, are summarised in Figure 1 (see Supplementary Material for additional quotes). Except where noted, themes comprised comments from participants in both technical and management roles (and often support roles, although there were only two support staff); and coded comments appeared throughout the transcripts and were not limited to specific focus group questions. Due to the small size of the program teams, we identify quotes by the person's functional role (i.e., technical, management, support) to minimize potential identifiability. Consistent with our semantic level of analysis, we present quotes verbatim wherever possible. Square brackets indicate where we have edited a word to clarify the context or de-identify, and ellipses indicate where we have shortened a quote.

[Figure 1]

### **Theme 1: Program Benefits**

Except for one individual interview, all groups included some discussion of the benefits and value of the program, for the trainees, the organisation, and participants themselves.

**Trainee benefits.** There was general agreement that the program provided valuable opportunities for autistic individuals who might otherwise struggle in this organisation:

Yes, to get to present opportunities for those people who would normally not consider going for [...] this sort of work, because, especially with the [organisation] sometimes entry requirements are fairly daunting for most people, let alone anyone who has [...] some sort of disadvantage. [Manager-1]

**Organisation benefits.** Participants also generally agreed that the program benefitted the organisation, often reflecting on the good fit between the roles and autistic traits:

When they said that the particular personality traits or behavioral traits of autistic people into - would make very good testers, I could immediately resonate with that through having knowledge of my friend's son. Just the attention to detail and the meticulous, methodical method of going about things. Even the repetitive aspect of it. Immediately I thought, 'Oh yeah, they're so right.' [Technical-7]

Participants also mentioned that the trainees with autism generally produced high quality work, as illustrated by this quote: "The outcomes that they deliver and what they achieve is of a high standard" [Manager-5].

Some participants noted that their attitudes toward the organisation had improved. For example, one participant thought that the organisation had received external recognition and awards, and other participants talked about a sense of pride in the organisation:

I've mentioned it socially, I've talked to friends about it. It's something that's cool about [organisation] [Technical-16].

**Greater knowledge about autism.** Participants noted that their own knowledge and understanding of autism had improved, which helped them to improve their interactions and communication with the trainees:

We've been fortunate where the individual has been quite open and honest about his personality, his behaviours, what he understands, what he doesn't understand as far as facial expressions et cetera. I think the team have accepted him quite openly and the work that he's produced, the team actually feel a bit more motivated, they actually feel a bit challenged,

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because he is quite smart. It allows them to actually - you could be threatened by that I guess, but the team have embraced it and actually use that as an opportunity to work together, to achieve work goals. [Manager-5]

Participants also learned that autistic individuals are themselves quite diverse and often similar to other employees:

But I must admit I was expecting that for this group of people, to be less interactive with us than what they were. It surprised me. I was expecting a group of people who didn't react well with people or interact well with people. A number of them in particular were not that, and so it surprised me. [Manager-6]

### Theme 2: Program Challenges

Despite the program's benefits, participants also identified issues that might limit its success.

**Negative attitudes.** This sub-theme reflected negative attitudes toward the program and the autistic trainees. These attitudes were often attributed to co-workers rather than participants' personal attitudes:

I have just in the break room heard some things from other testers, that are interesting. That may not have been quite so positive feedback. But yeah, [...] some people I know may be mocking them a little bit. I think somebody might have been stuttering, so they were mocking that person's stuttering, in the breakroom, just things like that. [Technical-18].

Participants also commented on the persistence of autism stereotypes, which may have been reinforced by the initial training and information sessions:

I think it's a bit of anecdotal experience, a bit of perception, but by the same token, I can't say that. Nobody we've ever given work to [has handled it badly] ... It's probably a lot to do with perception and the amount of pressure that you can apply onto a team. [Manager-1]

Whether all that information was necessarily good or not, I can't say, because I think sometimes it gave some preconceptions that people took on and maybe reacted to the [trainees] when they did start. [Technical-1]

**Special treatment.** This sub-theme reflected concerns that the program accommodations that the autistic trainees received were sometimes perceived as 'special treatment' For example, technical employees commented that they had sometimes felt 'forced' to act differently toward the trainees or had to adjust their own work with short notice:

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When they transitioned to ours, we were in the middle of [a sharp increase in work] for a rather major project. Then suddenly on the Friday, we got called in to a meeting saying, 'Yeah, no, now you've got an extra – there's another 14 or whatever people coming. Redesign everything around them to include them.' It's like 'what?' [Technical-20]

Participants also noted that work colleagues who had less interaction with the program often did not understand the reason for the accommodations:

They were some people who hadn't actually worked with the [trainees] and so they don't necessarily see the reasons why they're being kept together. There is a little bit of resentment there. [Technical-2]

Although participants suggested that they understood the reason for the special treatment initially, they also suggested that ongoing special treatment seemed unnecessary and unfair:

It's not fair on [organisation] staff. But it's also not fair on the [trainees], because they're not being given that opportunity to be a bit more independent. [Technical-1].

**Reliance on co-workers with autism experience.** This sub-theme reflected that participants often became interested in the program and supported it because they had some vested or prior interest in autism and autism employment. For example, some participants felt that while they were capable to work with the trainees due to their prior experience with autistic people, most employees needed more training and support:

But I think it's a personal experience. I had experience with people with Asperger's before. It's an individual thing. So I think I would be okay. But I think maybe as an organisation it would be good that everyone that's involved to have those information sessions. [Manager-3]

Other participants only took notice of the program when it affected them directly, such as when they started to work closely with the team:

Yeah, I kind of didn't go to any of those information sessions. I think when the program first started I was not in [same project], so I didn't actually – I saw the invites but didn't bother to go. Didn't really know what [program] was, up until they started sitting near me, and then started to have a chat then. [Technical-18]

We have identified this sub-theme as a program challenge because it suggests that the program's positive impact depended on having employees who already wanted the program to succeed.

Employees without this motivation may have been less likely to engage with the program, thus limiting its potential impact.

### **Theme 3: Concerns about Workforce Integration**

While the above theme included challenges that could impact any diversity and disability employment program, the final theme was focused on program-specific challenges. Across the participants, there were concerns about whether the program and trainees had been integrated into the work and social interactions.

**Work integration.** Some participants were positive about the level of work integration and noted that some trainees had essentially ‘graduated’ from the program and were now working in other projects and teams:

Now some of the [trainees] have skills that have been identified and they've been moved out of the core [program] team as well. [Technical-12]

However, other employees expressed concern that some trainees would struggle after the program ended:

Some of them fine, they're great, from when we interacted, roughly about half I'd say. From what I've seen, won't have an issue, they'll be fine. The other half seem to be very within the [program] group and only within the [program] group. [Technical-20]

Participants felt that although the trainees benefitted from being ‘sheltered’ at the start, the trainees had been kept separate for too long, and participants questioned whether this was appropriate:

I believe we kept the [program] team together too much. We should have dispersed them amongst all test teams, not keep everyone within one team working on one application. I think one of the big challenges is that change is not always easy for people on the spectrum but in reality our workplace is about change on a daily basis, so we need to look at incorporating them into numerous teams not one team. [Technical-3]

I think we tend to still have a little bit of a – there's the program and then there's [organisation] staff. I think that's something that we could do better. But it's a learning experience. [Manager-2]

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As evident in the above quotes, participants were dissatisfied with the levels of work integration and suggested that the program could be improved by offering earlier and more frequent opportunities for integration:

I felt it would have been better to let them branch out and let them interact with people, get them to know people more. Like how he said just then, it's just there's no – you can't really tell with some of them and I feel like if you treat them like any normal person would, they're not going to – nothing's going to happen, nothing bad will come out of it. [Technical-11]

**Social integration.** As with work integration, participants had mixed views on the level of social integration within the program. On the negative side, participants felt that the program was depersonalised:

I wouldn't even know any of their names [...] I don't know who their – do they have a boss? Do they have an ambassador? [Technical-6]

That's right, their limit is [the program], they're the [trainees], they're known as the [trainees]. Rather than Fred, George, Harry, Robert. Those that have the better interpersonal skills probably should have been [assigned] into teams individually, so they can get their independence in the working environment. [Manager-6]

As with the varied levels of work integration, participants commented on the potential value of greater personalisation and social interaction opportunities:

I do know that there's quite a few of them who are really into socialising and going along to social events and others who maybe aren't. [...] I don't know if their aim is to be more comfortable in social situations through the workplace but maybe they can try and get them involved in activities along those lines. [Support-2]

We also note that some participants were happy with the level of their social interaction:

We get along quite well, I don't know if he's faking it or whatever but he tells me jokes and we laugh and I tell him jokes and like I said I work better with him than a lot of other guys just because he is so straight to the point about the work and we don't have any issues. [Technical-17]

**Mediated interaction.** Although many participants did interact directly with the trainees, for some participants, contact with the trainees was often mediated or indirect through managers or support staff such as the ASC:



My interactions with them have been through their leads – their team leads, their managers.  
[Manager-2]

From a daily work output perspective, my job became easier. Because the team, especially the support team, the test manager and the test [lead] they actually took on responsibility for managing pieces of work. Yeah, they were very good in being able to manage for the team not being involved in, I guess other office politics, and just being able to focus on their daily work [...] Also, I think to have the support worker available there, just to give them space when they needed space, has been amazing. [Manager-5]

### Discussion

We explored non-autistic employees' perceptions of the implementation of an Australian-based supported autism employment program. Participants were generally favourable toward the program, reflected in their overall impressions of the program and the *program benefits* theme. Participants' comments also reflected several *program challenges*, which paralleled challenges observed in other diversity and disability employment programs, and *concerns about workforce integration*, which reflected challenges more specific to this program's design. Overall, the analysis suggests that while this may be an exemplary program and organisation in many ways, there may be some underlying ambivalence toward the program and key areas for improvement.

Within the program benefits theme, it was clear that participants recognised the value of the program for the autistic trainees. Benefits to the organisation included high quality work, external recognition for the program, and increased job satisfaction. Participants also saw improvements in their own knowledge of autism and greater appreciation of the challenges faced by autistic colleagues, both within and outside the program. A manager working closely with one trainee noted that honest communication about his strengths and potential challenges helped the team work well together, which resonates with other research on managing autistic staff (Hagner & Cooney, 2005). It is interesting to note that this benefit resulted naturally from their specific task interdependence rather than any formal elements of the program. Some participants expressed surprise at the trainees' diversity, and their similarities to themselves or other co-workers. Autism awareness training was available and

participation was encouraged, but it may have had a limited impact, partly due to its voluntary nature (Kulkarni et al., 2018). Moreover, some participants noted that the training was only offered at the start of the program, thus new employees to the organisation or the team were not able to complete the training or develop the same level of awareness about the program. A further important point is that, when an autistic trainee was placed within a team outside of the employment program, no training was available for the new team members who had not attended the initial voluntary training sessions. Thus, there is a clear need for autism training to be available on an on-going basis. Training could be online and supplemented by face-to-face sessions led by autistic people.

The *program challenges* theme reflected issues that parallel challenges observed in other diversity and disability employment programs. The program included accommodations and intensive support for the autistic trainees, but prior research indicates that accommodations can be perceived by others as unfair special treatment (Colella et al., 2004). Participants in the current study described needing to change their behaviour or work processes to accommodate the trainees, although they generally described the accommodations as minor and reasonable. However, participants observed that other colleagues, who were often less familiar with the program and the trainees, seemed to resent the program's format and accommodations. This could reflect issues with the program integration and limited interaction (discussed further below), but it also points to the need for ongoing and effective communication and training about the program, including the business and social values underlying its unique format (Annabi et al., 2019; Kulkarni, 2016; Olsen & Martins, 2012). Participants' comments also reflected that personal experience with autistic people, either in the program or their personal lives, influenced their attitudes toward the program. We identified this as a program challenge because it suggests that widespread attitudinal or cultural change may be unlikely to occur without some personal incentive or vested interest in the program's success (see also Kulkarni et al., 2018; Nelissen et al., 2016).

The *concerns about workforce integration* theme reflected participants' perceptions of relatively low levels of both work-related and social interaction between the trainees and other organisation staff. This lack of interaction was partly due to the program's design (i.e., trainees began working in project teams with high levels of support) and was viewed positively at the start of the program but more negatively over time. We also note that participants' interaction with the trainees was often indirect, often via the trainees' managers or the ASC. Although participants were enthusiastic about these specific supports, over-reliance on these supports could reflect and reinforce stereotypes about the social skills of autistic people, thereby slowing the development of inclusive relationships. Ongoing formal or symbolic separation of diverse groups inhibits full inclusion. However, we also note that participants generally disliked the lack of integration and felt the program could be improved by providing more formal opportunities for work integration (e.g., mentoring, job rotation) and more informal, social opportunities. Moreover, some participants bypassed formal organisational constraints to increase interaction, such as advocating for more equal treatment (e.g., availability of overtime) and inviting trainees to social activities (e.g., a walking group). When combined with the program benefits and program challenges theme, the concerns about workforce integration theme indicates some tensions and ambivalence toward the program and its implementation. Future research should examine how to empower non-autistic employees to become advocates for the program and innovate its implementation to further improve inclusiveness.

We note that the trainees began the program as an outgroup on multiple dimensions (both contract staff and identified as on the autism spectrum), and the *concerns about workforce integration* theme suggests that, to some extent, they were still perceived as an outgroup. Although we did not specifically ask participants whether they perceived the trainees to be a separate group, 12 participants did discuss the trainees as contract staff; however, these comments were highly variable and did not suggest a cohesive positive or negative view of the trainees as contractors (and some participants

indicated that they did not know the trainees were contractors). Some participants' language, such as using outgroup terms (e.g., they, them), suggests that they perceived the trainees to be an outgroup (Maass, 1999); and some of participants' comments implied endorsement of stereotypes about autism, similar to 'inadvertent othering' observed in prior diversity training research (e.g., Kulkarni et al., 2018). However, we also note that some of the outgroup language could reflect the topic of the focus groups (i.e., participants were asked to think about the program and its participants), which may have primed an ingroup/outgroup mindset. Moreover, many participants used inclusive language and indicated that they had formed good bonds with some trainees.

The current research is based on a case study of a specific supported autism employment program in Australia. The research method allowed for in-depth analysis of participant perceptions, but we do note some limitations. Although the facilitator used techniques to ensure equal participation and discussion of multiple perspectives (Krueger, 1998b) and we limited themes to those mentioned by a majority of participants, the emergent themes could be limited by specific focus group composition and group dynamics. Perceptions of the program may also have been impacted by the organisation's large size and longstanding position in the public sector, as well as the timing of data collection and the trainees' status as contract employees. Future research is needed to examine other autism employment programs in a wider range of industries and settings.

By examining the perspectives of non-autistic employees (i.e., the social context, Vogus & Taylor, 2018), this study provides valuable insights into the implementation of this autism employment program, including an apparent paradox between the program's intent and its outcomes. The program is designed to be inclusive and accommodating to the needs of autistic people, reducing barriers and challenges that have limited their workplace participation in the past. However, the concerns about workforce integration theme suggests that the highly supportive environment that is a key part of the program's design may, at least in some cases, lead to ongoing separation of the autistic trainees and lack

of integration within the broader workforce. We do not suggest that the program designers intended to minimise inclusion of autistic trainees, but a program structure in which they often worked on clearly defined and separate projects, with dedicated support teams and managers almost certainly impacted the level of inclusion. This model is widely used in autism employment programs (Annabi et al., 2019; Hedley et al., 2018), thus it may be important to evaluate this potential limitation against the program's wider goals. For example, Nicholas and Klag (2020) have questioned whether employment without inclusion contributes to autistic people achieving a good life.

Finally, we note that this program, and many similar programs, required trainees to disclose their autism diagnosis, which may have affected who applied and the outcomes. Although disclosure can have benefits in terms of gaining reasonable accommodations, and is a predictor of employment status in autism (Ohl et al., 2017), many autistic individuals prefer not to disclose their diagnosis at work (Hedley et al., 2018; Johnson & Joshi, 2016). Although there are benefits to disclosure, we should acknowledge that not everyone is comfortable with it, and these different preferences would need to be respected within a truly inclusive employment program.

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## Appendix 1

### Focus Group Questions

1. Tell me who you are and what your role is at [organisation]
2. What do you know about the [employment program], and what have been your overall impressions of the program so far?
3. Thinking back to the beginning of the [employment program], what do you think was done well by the people who implemented the program? What could have been improved?
4. How has the [employment program] affected your personal daily work since its implementation?  
(Probe – What about your team's, teams you work closely with, or other people?)  
(Probe for direction – i.e. if positive answers, ask them to reflect on a time where their work may have been more difficult than usual.)
5. Consider the support from [your organisation] that was available to you after the implementation of the [employment program]. Do you feel that this was sufficient? Why/why not?
6. Since the introduction of the [employment program], have your feelings or perceptions about working for [your organisation] changed? Why/why not?
7. What word or emotion best describes how you feel about [your organisation's] participation in the [employment program]? Please write your answer on the sheet provided.
8. If you could give some advice for people in the future implementing a program like this, what would it be?
9. Finally, we would like to thank you for helping us evaluate the process of integrating a workplace diversity program such as the [employment program]. Before we close the session, was there anything that we may have missed? Is there anything you came wanting to say that you didn't get a chance to say?

**Table 1. Focus Group Demographics**

<b>Group</b>	<b>Role Composition</b>	<b>Gender Composition</b>	<b>Duration (minutes)</b>
1	2 X Technical	2 Female	67
2	1 X Technical	1 Female	email
3	1 X Manager 3 X Technical	1 Female 3 Male	72
4	1 X Technical	1 Female	29
5	3 X Manager 3 X Technical	3 Female 3 Male	49
6	6 X Technical	1 Female 5 Male	47
7	1 X Manager 2 X Technical	1 Female 2 Male	38
8	1 X Manager 1 X Support 3 X Technical	1 Female 4 Male	44
9	1 X Manager 1 X Support 2 X Technical	2 Female 2 Male	45

## AUTISM EMPLOYMENT IMPLEMENTATION

Figure 1. Thematic map of perceptions of the employment program. The number of groups and participants coded to each theme are provided in brackets.

