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create an initiative to recruit and hire
employees with Autism: How the
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higher performing, and agile while
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Kevin Au, *Simon Fraser University, Canada*

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Call for the Federal Public Service to create an initiative to recruit and hire employees with Autism: How the Service can become more diverse, higher performing, and agile while improving staff retention rates and reducing staffing/training costs

Kevin Au

Abstract

Individuals with autism, a neurological condition impacting everyday activities, make up about 1.5-2.5% of the population. Compared to people with other disabilities, those with autism are disproportionately unemployed and underemployed. The Canadian federal government's National Autism Strategy, consisting of research and funding to improve the health and well-being of those with autism, is led by the Public Health Authority of Canada (PHAC), but Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) plays an increasingly important role in supporting those on the spectrum through its programs and responsibility for implementing the Accessible Canada Act. ESDC, along with the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) are two of the largest federal public sector employers. The writer, an autistic individual themselves, advocates for ESDC and CRA to take the lead in creating a specialized hiring and retention process adapted to autistic individuals, as hiring and retaining autistic staff will likely produce a win-win result, helping the organizations become more diverse, higher performing and agile while reducing turnover and therefore staffing and training related costs.

¹ Simon Fraser University (MA Liberal Studies)

Résumé

Les personnes sur le spectre de l'autisme, un trouble neurologique affectant les activités quotidiennes, représentent environ 1,5 à 2,5 % de la population. Par rapport aux autres personnes en situation de handicap, les personnes autistes connaissent un taux de chômage et de sous-emploi disproportionné. La Stratégie nationale sur l'autisme du gouvernement fédéral canadien, qui consiste en une recherche et un financement pour améliorer la santé et le bien-être des personnes autistes, est dirigée par l'Autorité de la santé publique du Canada (ASPC), mais Emploi et Développement social Canada (EDSC) joue un rôle de plus en plus important dans le soutien aux personnes sur le spectre par le biais de ses programmes et sa responsabilité de mettre en œuvre la Loi canadienne sur l'accessibilité. EDSC et l'Agence du revenu du Canada (ARC) sont deux des plus grands employeurs du secteur public fédéral. L'auteur, lui-même une personne autiste, préconise que EDSC et l'ARC prennent l'initiative de créer un processus d'embauche et de maintien en poste spécialisé et adapté aux personnes autistes, car l'embauche et le maintien en poste de personnel autiste produiront probablement un résultat gagnant-gagnant, aidant les organisations à devenir plus diversifiées, plus performantes et agiles tout en réduisant le roulement du personnel et, par conséquent, les coûts liés au personnel et à la formation.

Keywords

Autism, Employment, Hiring, Initiative, Government of Canada

Mots Clés

Autisme, Emploi, Embauche, Initiative, Gouvernement du Canada

Autism is a lifelong neurological condition that results in challenges in communication and social interaction skills, in addition to the presence of restricted and repetitive behaviours, interests or activities. According to the Public Health Agency of Canada (Ofner et al., 2018), the combined prevalence among children and youth aged 5-17 in Canada, in the year 2015, is 1 in 42 among males, 1 in 165 among females, with a total result of 1 in 66 overall. Incidence rates have been steadily increasing, with the increase generally attributed to increased awareness, better diagnostic tools, as well as a broadening of what falls under the ASD umbrella as per the 5th edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, which now includes previously separate diagnoses such as Asperger's Syndrome and PDD-NOS. The Centre for Interdisciplinary Research and Collaboration in Autism (2021) at UBC reports that the overall prevalence rate in British Columbia as of February 2020 to be 1 in 40. However, many autistic adults remain undiagnosed, and members of some demographics, such as those residing in rural areas, face additional barriers to obtaining a diagnosis and supports, and so the statistics cited in this paper are invariably impacted as such.

Autism and Employment

Those with ASD face significant barriers to obtaining and maintaining employment that are more significant than those with other barriers. These barriers include but are not limited to traditional hiring and interviewing processes, insufficient employer support on the job, misunderstandings due to different communication styles, stigma and discrimination (Baranger et al., 2014; Scott et al., 2017).

Autistic individuals are underutilized in the workforce and as such represent a pool of labour that employers can access to meet their staffing needs. The 2017 Canadian Survey on

Disability (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2020 May), which is based on the 2016 Canadian long form census, found that just 33% of adults with autism report being employed (in any capacity) compared to 79% for those without disability. The same survey (Statistics Canada, 2018) found that the employment rate for those with any disability to be 59%, meaning that autistic individuals are underutilized in the workforce relative not only to those without disability, but also those with other disabilities. These findings mirror an American study (Roux et al, 2017) which found “About half (53.4%) of young adults with autism had never worked for pay outside the home since leaving high school, the lowest rate among disability groups.” The underemployment of autistic individuals is not due to a lack of willingness to work, but rather, the lack of appropriate supports. In Britain, 79% of those reliant on government financial support expressed a desire to work, if appropriate support were provided (Henricks, 2010).

Autistic employees often possess qualities that are attractive to employers, such as being reliable, persistent, technically able, attentive to detail, logical, conscience, loyal and honest (Attwood, 2015), and employers rate autistic employees as having better work ethics and also performing better at tasks requiring attention to detail (Scott et al., 2017). Employers who offer supports and adaptations to their hiring processes and on the job can therefore increase their likelihood of recruiting and retaining autistic employees whose diverse skills, ideas, and talent will bring positive improvements to their organizational effectiveness and bottom line.

The Government of Canada’s Staffing Needs

The Canadian federal public service is one of the largest employers in Canada, with 287,978 active employees in 2019. 42.1% are in the National Capital Region, and 57.9% are in the regions, throughout the rest of the country (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2020 August). The two largest departments or agencies by size are the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) and Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC), with 45019 and 27115 employees respectively in 2020 (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2020 August). This is not surprising as these two organizations are responsible for many programs that impact many Canadians on a regular basis: tax collection, the provision of various benefits (e.g. Canada Child Tax Benefit, Employment Insurance, Canada Pension Plan, Old Age Security, Canadian Emergency Response Benefits) and services (e.g. Social Insurance Numbers, Canada Student Loans). These two organizations also have offices across Canada, and have positions in a variety of fields, including not just research and public policy, but also many positions in offices and in the field, providing a wide variety of potential employment types and opportunities.

As their joint roll-out of the Canadian Emergency Response Benefits showed, the value and importance of the services these two organizations delivered to Canadians throughout the pandemic and in the recovery is immeasurable. The importance of maintaining a stable workforce for both organizations cannot be understated as such. An initiative by these organizations to recruit, support, and retain autistic employees may prove effective in finding dedicated employees while making them more organizationally diverse, higher performing, and agile.

The Employment Equity Act

Section 5 of the Employment Equity Act requires the federal public service and certain private sector employers to “implement employment equity by identifying and eliminating employment barriers against persons in designated groups that result from the employer’s employment systems, policies and practices that are not authorized by law and instituting such positive policies and practices and making such reasonable accommodations as will ensure that

persons in designated groups achieve a degree of representation in each occupational group in the employer's workforce that reflects their representation in the Canadian workforce or those segments of the Canadian workforce that are identifiable by qualification, eligibility or geography and from which the employer may reasonably be expected to draw employees."

The Public Service Commission's Audit of Employment Equity Representation in Recruitment

The Public Service Commission published its Audit of Employment Equity Representation in Recruitment in January 2021. The results clearly showed that persons with disabilities were underrepresented in applications for positions in the public service (4.4% of all applications, while making up 9.0% percent of the labour market), fared well in being screened in, but became even further underrepresented among candidates who passed the assessment stage (3.6%), with an even more dramatic underrepresentation when it came to actually being appointed to a position (2.4%).

The audit (Public Service Commission, 2021) also showed that "54% of hiring managers reported they were not aware that the PSC's Personnel Psychology Centre offered expertise in assessment accommodation and on developing bias-free assessment methods and tools" and that only 66% of candidates with disabilities who requested accommodation were satisfied with the accommodation provided. The audit concluded with a call to action for departments to explore their own hiring processes and practices and to identify and remove barriers to improve the success of various employment equity groups at various stages of hiring. The PSC also noted that it will create new guides on inclusive assessment methods and advance diverse interview boards as a leading practice to improve the quality of assessment of all candidates.

The Joint Union / Management Task Force on Diversity and Inclusion in the Public Service Report

In 2017, a Joint Union / Management Task Force on Diversity and Inclusion in the Public Service reported that a recruitment initiative Youth with Disabilities Summer Employment Opportunity (YwDSEO) was piloted in the National Capital Region to foster positive "early career experiences and develop a better understanding of career opportunities and support for accommodations available in the public service" (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2018 January).

The Task Force reported the initiative as being a success, and recommended that "information about their approach and results should be circulated widely within the public service and elsewhere. To achieve their full potential, these programs need to be expanded into regions outside the National Capital Region, and any changes must be made based on participants' feedback." Bringing in students and young workers is important, as the Treasury Board reported that in 2019, among federal public servants who self-identified as having a disability, 20.9% were aged 20-39 and 79.1% were aged 40+ (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2020 November).

The Case for Recruiting Autistic Employees

Autistic workers can bring with them diverse ways of thinking, permitting them to be innovative in their work, resulting in their popularity among tech companies, some of whom, like Microsoft and SAP, have dedicated hiring processes. (Alton, 2019; Annabi et al., 2019). ESDC's mission is "to build a stronger and more inclusive Canada, to support Canadians in helping them live productive and rewarding lives and to improve Canadians' quality of life" (2018). By creating a specialized process to hire autistic employees, ESDC could itself embody said support and thus be a leader in the field, as the majority of initiatives to recruit and hire autistic employees are in

the private sector rather than in the public and non-profit sectors (Bernick, 2021). Additional anticipated benefits include improved staff retention and therefore reduced resources spent on recruitment and training, as well as helping the department meet its employment equity targets for employees with disabilities.

The department has, in the 2019-2020 fiscal year, brought on 6 employees through LiveWorkPlay placements and also 4 employees through the Federal Internship Program for Canadians with Disabilities, and as such has already used specialized programs for hiring, and has the potential and capacity for further initiatives (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2020). LiveWorkPlay is an Ottawa based organization that assists people with intellectual disabilities and autistic persons with employment supports and independent living. ESDC has hired staff through them since 2015. Public Services and Procurement Canada (PSPC) has already availed itself of the ESDC-funded Ready, Willing and Able initiative to recruit and hire autistic employees, winning accolades for the hiring manager for his efforts in creating a more diverse workplace (Ready Willing Able, 2019). Those efforts were hailed in the Public Service Commission's 2018-19 annual report (2020):

“Public Services and Procurement Canada collaborated with Ready, Willing and Able and its local delivery partner, Autism Nova Scotia, to recruit for positions in their Atlantic offices. The team harnessed the strengths and talents of job seekers on the autism spectrum to fill positions that required skills not common in neuro-typical job seekers. The department's innovative approach to recruitment included a working interview, where candidates performed the duties that would be part of the job instead of simulations or tests, which helped determine right fit for the positions. Several managers and employees also completed training on autism in the workplace and integrated best practices for employment supports. To date, this collaboration has resulted in 3 hires and established a model that other departments and agencies can follow to create a more inclusive public service.”

Furthermore, the Treasury Board (2020) wishes for the Federal Public Service to hire 5000 persons with disabilities by 2025, and support will be made available for that, and ESDC and the CRA, as the largest units, would naturally be expected to take a leadership role in that process. The two agencies also have a large presence outside of the National Capital Region, permitting them to take the lead in piloting the expansion of both student hiring initiatives, and also specialized targeted hiring as PSPC has done.

A mechanism to recruit and retain workers with autism would likely assist ESDC and the CRA in improving retention rates, bring in new approaches to work which may result in improvements for everyone, and enrich their workforces, helping them become higher achieving organizations that are more nimble and agile. It would help make them models among public sector organizations and show that they not only provide funding and support for those on the spectrum, but are also employers of choice for those on the spectrum.

The question thus for the federal public service is not if it too will be a leader in the field of recruiting autistic employees and becoming an employer of choice, but when. And the time is now.

ORCID iD

Kevin Au  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6739-3783>

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