



Autism in hospitality

Recruitment guide for employers

Supported by a grant from the Office of Autism, Government of South Australia

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About the project:

Unlocking Workforce Potential

Utilising Autistic Talent to Address Staff Shortages in South Australia's Venues

The project

The 'Unlocking Workforce Potential: Utilising Autistic Talent to Address Staff Shortages in South Australia's Venues' Project aims to unlock the talent pool of autistic jobseekers by supporting hospitality venues to implement neuro-inclusive recruitment, onboarding, and workplace practices. This project, supported by a grant from the Office of Autism, Government of South Australia, is a 12 month initiative championed by Autism SA.

Community need

South Australia's hospitality industry is facing a long-term workforce crisis. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, staff shortages have intensified across all levels of the sector. According to the Australian Hotels Association (SA), some venues report receiving no applications for critical roles.

In Hotels SA Magazine (June 2024), AHA's Owen Webb stated:

"The labour shortage, particularly post-Covid, has been crippling for our industry. We have instances of members not getting a single applicant for a job, and hotels having to reduce trade and services because they simply don't have the staff to service customers."

The same edition reported **12,000 vacancies for cooks and chefs and an urgent need for hotel and restaurant managers.**



The Tourism and Hospitality Workforce Survey Report (Deloitte Access Economics, 2021) further highlights that 55% of SA businesses are short-staffed, 68% report difficulties recruiting, and 89% cite a low number of applications. More than half of vacancies remain unfilled beyond 30 days. Retention is also a major challenge, particularly in food and beverage, where 77% of businesses cite issues with employee reliability. These shortages have resulted in substantial financial impacts, with 50% of businesses losing over 5% in revenue.

In contrast, Australia's autistic population remains significantly underemployed. As of 2022, 290,900 Australians identified as autistic, with an unemployment rate of 18.2%, three times that of people with other disabilities 7.5% and nearly six times that of the general population 3.1%.

Despite possessing strengths that align with hospitality work, including focus, reliability, attention to detail, and consumer understanding, autistic individuals are often excluded due to inaccessible recruitment methods and unsupported workplace environments.

Autism in hospitality:

Understanding neurodiversity

Creating an inclusive, neurodiverse workplace starts with understanding.

What is neurodiversity?

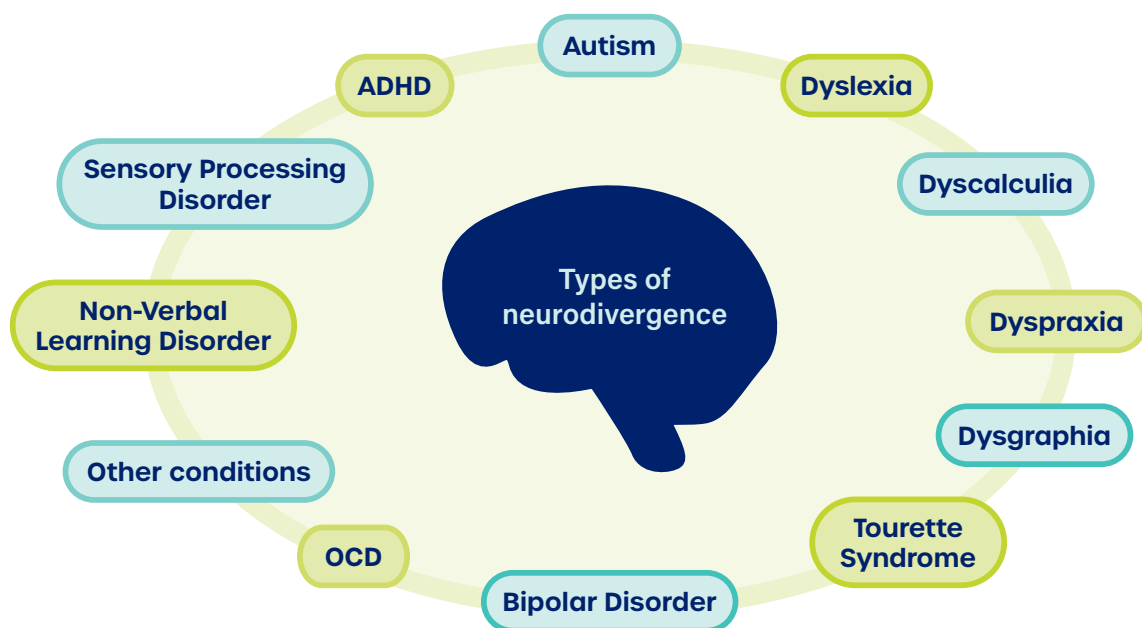
Neurodiversity is the idea that everyone experiences and engages with the world in their own way. It recognises and values the diversity of human brain functioning, challenging the notion that there is one 'correct' way to think, learn, or behave.

The term "neurodiversity" was coined in the late 1990s by sociologist Judy Singer and journalist Harvey Blume. It challenges the misconception that only some people are neurodiverse, highlighting that every brain works differently.

Instead of looking for "cures", Singer encouraged creating environments that support and celebrate all kinds of minds. Singer's advocacy is about seeing neurodiversity as a natural, important part of human diversity and recognising the strengths neurodivergence can bring.

Types of neurodivergence

Neurodivergent conditions include a wide range of neurological differences including:



What is autism?

Autism is a neurological developmental difference that changes the way an individual relates to the environment and people in it.

There is not one way that an autistic individual experiences the world, this is why the term 'spectrum' is used- this is to reflect the fact that every individual's lived experience of autism is different.

Autistic people may have skills in areas, while finding other aspects of life particularly challenging.

**More than 290,900 Australians,
or 1 in 91 people, are autistic.**



Autism in the workplace

Autistic employees can have many strengths that are valuable in the workplace.

These strengths can include:



High attention to detail

Autistic employees can excel in maintaining a laser-sharp focus on intricate details, ensuring their work is thorough and precise.



Pattern recognition and systematic thinking

Autistic individuals often possess an exceptional ability to recognise patterns and connections within data or processes.



Ability to hyperfocus

Autistic employees can have a capacity for intense focus, especially on tasks that pique their interest. They can immerse themselves in tasks for extended periods, achieving high levels of productivity and thoroughness.

And many more!

"When a task falls inside an area of interest, I can stay with it for hours at a time, problem-solving or repeating tasks if necessary."

- Autistic person

The benefits of neurodiversity in the workplace

Neurodivergent employees often possess unique talents, such as exceptional creativity, problem-solving skills, attention to detail, and resilience. These qualities can offer significant benefits to workplaces.

Some of the benefits of employing neurodivergent employees and embracing neurodiversity in the workplace include:



Productivity and performance

Companies with neurodiverse teams see up to a 30% increase in productivity.



Innovation and creativity

Organisations that embrace neurodiversity report a 20% rise in innovation.



Workplace culture and staff retention

Companies that are inclusive are twice as likely to meet or exceed financial targets.

By understanding the strengths of neurodivergent individuals and recognising the value of neurodiversity, organisations can harness the benefits of a neuro-inclusive workplace.



"I'd love to see companies that are open-minded about how their employees work!" By catering to the individual needs and strengths of employees, companies can foster a more engaged, productive, and satisfied workforce."

- Employer

Autism in hospitality:

Misconceptions and biases

People often have misconceptions around autism in hospitality. It is important to remember that all autistic people have different strengths and support needs. It is essential to get to know the employee on an individual level to ensure that they can thrive in the workplace.

Common misconceptions

✗ **Misconception:** Autistic people are only suited to non-customer-facing roles

✓ **Truth:** Each autistic person has different strengths and skills. Some autistic people enjoy interacting with customers.

“When I worked in hospitality I enjoyed interacting with customers. To ensure I wouldn’t get too overwhelmed I would take short drink breaks to reset.

Although it can be tiring, I like helping people and making them feel welcome”

- Autistic person



❌ **Misconception:** Support needs will be costly or too difficult to accommodate

✅ **Truth:** Many accommodations and adjustments for autistic individuals, using headphones, direct communication, and the use of technology or sensory aids, are often without any cost or can be cost-effective as they can improve productivity and satisfaction for all employees.

Some autistic employees may not need any accommodations. It is best to work with the individual to understand their needs.



❌ **Misconception:** Autistic people need constant supervision

✅ **Truth:** Neurodivergent people are often highly independent and capable. While some may require clear instructions or a structured environment, they can perform tasks with minimal to no supervision once expectations are understood.



"I manage several teams, with the majority of my team members being neurodivergent. They are often the most independent and self-motivated employees, consistently performing to a high standard."

- Employer

Inclusive recruitment:

An autism-friendly approach

A neuro-inclusive recruitment approach aims to create a fair, accessible, and supportive hiring process that values the unique strengths of every candidate.

Tips for creating a neuro-inclusive recruitment process

1

Job advertisement and design

Job descriptions can either attract or deter neurodivergent candidates. When roles are clearly defined, use plain language, and focus on the tasks and skills required for the role, they are more accessible to a wider range of applicants. In contrast, job ads that include jargon, unclear expectations, or long lists of requirements can discourage capable candidates from applying, even when they have the skills.

Top tips

- Use clear, direct language
- Only include essential requirements for the role
- Avoid jargon and vague terms
- Clearly state that your workplace is inclusive.

2

Application process

The application stage should be simple, clear, and flexible. Traditional application processes that rely heavily on written responses or complex systems can create unnecessary barriers. When the process is easy to understand and navigate, candidates are better able to engage and demonstrate their interest in the role.

Top tips

- Provide clear instructions and timelines
- Keep application steps simple
- Offer flexibility in how candidates apply
- Allow candidates to request adjustments.

3

Assessment of skills

Assessment methods should focus on a candidate's ability to perform the role rather than how they present in an interview. Traditional interviews often prioritise social confidence and communication style, which may not reflect the priority skills needed for the job. Use practical, job-related assessments such as work trials or task-based activities to allow candidates to demonstrate their strengths.

Top tips

- Use practical, job-related tasks to assess skills
- Clearly explain the process in advance.



"I've often felt anxious when job descriptions are filled with jargon. It makes me feel the job isn't a good fit, even before I've applied. Clear, simple language would make the process much easier."

- Neurodivergent employee

Inclusive recruitment:

Choosing an assessment method

Recruitment assessment methods are tools that can help organisations evaluate the suitability of candidates for specific roles.

Choosing the right assessment method for the role

The recruitment assessment method used should vary depending on what employers are looking to evaluate. Methods range from more traditional face-to-face interviews to practical simulations. Choosing the right assessment method supports employers to find the best candidate for the role.

Types of assessment methods



Interviews

A job interview is a structured conversation used to assess whether a candidate is suitable for a role. However, interviews often focus on communication in a high-pressure setting. For some autistic candidates, this may not reflect their actual ability. For this reason, interviews work best when combined with other methods, such as practical tasks.



Skills assessments

Skills assessments evaluate a candidate's ability to complete job-related tasks. They help employers understand whether someone has the practical skills needed for the role. To be effective and inclusive, assessments should be relevant, clearly explained, and flexible. Poorly designed assessments may create barriers and not reflect true ability.



Skills demonstrations

Skills demonstrations assess a candidate by having them complete tasks similar to the job. This allows employers to see how skills are applied in real work situations. When designed well, they provide a clear and accurate picture of how a candidate will perform.



Work samples

Work samples are examples of a candidate's previous work used to demonstrate their skills and abilities. These may include portfolios, photos, videos, or digital work. They help employers see the quality, style, and consistency of a candidate's work, providing a more practical and realistic view of performance than interviews alone.

Assessment methods for hospitality roles

The recruitment assessment method used should vary depending on what employers are looking to evaluate. These methods range from more traditional face-to-face interviews to approaches like practical simulations. Choosing the right assessment method for the role can support employers to find the best candidate for the position.

★ Best ✓ Can use ✗ Not ideal

Role	Skills to assess	Example task	Interviews	Skills Assessments	Skills Demonstrations	Samples of Work
Reception 	Problem-solving, communication	Role play scenario Mock check-in	✓	★	★	✗
Restaurant staff	Interacting with customers	Role play scenario Take order at table	✓	★	★	✗
Bar staff 	Multitasking, attention to detail, communication	On the job interview Take a drink order and explain menu	✓	★	★	✓
Room cleaners 	Attention to detail	Job trial Replicate clean room	✗	★	★	✗
Chefs 	Technical, time management	Job trial Prepare a simple dish	✗	★	★	✓
Kitchen assistants	Task following, teamwork, organisation	Job trial Complete a basic food prep or cleaning task from a checklist	✗	✓	★	✗
Dishwashing staff	Routine following, efficiency, consistency	Simulated work task Demonstrate dishwashing process	✗	✓	★	✗
Event planning 	Organisation, multitasking, communication	Plan a simple event	✓	★	✓	★
Managers	Leadership, strategic thinking, problem-solving	Respond to a business scenario	✓	✓	✓	✗
Human Resources	Problem solving and resilience.	Take home assignment about a HR scenario	✓	✓	✓	✗

Inclusive recruitment:

Assessment methods in action

Inclusive practical assessment methods can help showcase the talents of autistic applicants through the recruitment process.

Assessment methods that may suit the hospitality industry

1. Role play scenarios

Role play scenarios involve creating realistic situations that candidates are likely to encounter in their future roles. They're tasked to handle these scenarios using their skills and knowledge while being assessed. This method tests how candidates react in real-time to situations relevant to the job, offering insights into their problem-solving skills, communication style, teamwork abilities, and how they handle pressure.

Example of a role play in action:

Front-of-house



Role play scenario

A candidate for a front-of-house hospitality role is asked to complete a role play where they take a customer's order at a table.



Actions taken

- ✓ The task is clearly explained, including what is expected when taking an order and what the candidate should focus on during the interaction.
- ✓ The exercise is conducted in a controlled environment.
- ✓ The candidate is given the scenario before the assessment to ensure they feel prepared.



Outcome

The candidate was able to demonstrate how they would interact with a customer.



This role play allows candidate to demonstrate skills in a relevant context.



2. Job, work trials and internships

Job, work trials and internships are types of skills demonstrations that are different yet closely related, used by companies to evaluate candidates. These methods allow employers to assess both a candidate's practical skills and how their values align with an organisation. They allow candidates to be assessed in real-work scenarios, prior to deciding on whether to hire a potential candidate.

Example of a job trial in action:



Housekeeping

Job trial scenario

An autistic individual applies for a housekeeping role at a hotel. They are offered a work trial to evaluate their ability to prepare guest rooms and follow cleaning procedures in a real work environment.



Actions taken

- ✓ The candidate is first given time to observe the prepared room and is encouraged to take notes or photos to support their understanding.
- ✓ A clear, written checklist of room setup requirements is provided, alongside visual examples of how each element should look.
- ✓ The candidate is given sufficient time to complete the task and can ask questions or refer back to the reference room as needed.



Outcome

These adjustments support the candidate to show their attention to detail and ability to follow processes, giving a clear understanding of how they would perform in the role.



This simple task allows applicants to demonstrate attention to detail and pattern recognition in a controlled environment.

Inclusive recruitment:

Creating inclusive assessments

Assessments must be designed to be inclusive and supportive. Follow these tips as a guide to help create an inclusive assessment experience.

Tips for creating inclusive recruitment assessments

1

Pre-assessment preparation

- ☐ Ensure assessors have an understanding of autism and neurodiversity in the workplace
- ☐ Provide the candidate with information about the assessment process, where to go and how to get to the venue, any dress code requirements and documents to bring along
- ☐ Ask candidates if they require any accommodations to support during the assessment
- ☐ Provide scenario details and any questions or tasks in advance
- ☐ Inform the candidate if they can bring a support person.

Prepare the environment

- ☐ Offer a workplace visit to allow candidates to familiarise themselves with the setting
- ☐ Provide a sensory friendly setting including dimming lights and reducing noise (if possible)
- ☐ Identify a place where the candidate can take a break if they need to.

2

During the assessment

- ☐ Allow candidates time to get comfortable in the interview setting and address any potential distractions or causes of anxiety
- ☐ Equip interviewers with a checklist to focus on performance-relevant criteria and job qualifications rather than social or behavioural characteristics
- ☐ Use direct and clear communication
- ☐ Provide detailed instructions in writing in addition to verbal
- ☐ Allow additional time to complete the task or respond to a question
- ☐ Use specific prompts to guide detailed responses.

3

After the assessment

- ☐ Provide timelines for when or if outcomes will be communicated
- ☐ Provide feedback post-interview, outlining where the candidate performed well and where they could improve
- ☐ Collect feedback from candidates on their experience to improve the recruitment process.



"Inclusive recruitment is about acknowledging and removing our biases to create an environment where each individual can showcase their strengths. By applying a rigid template, we risk limiting our talent pool and potentially overlook top talent."

- Employer

Resources:

Access additional resources

Autism information

Autism SA

Autism SA is South Australia's peak body for autism, and the oldest organisation of its kind in Australia, established in 1964 by parents of autistic children. Guided by the priorities of the Autistic community, Autism SA provides information, resources, education, and promotes research and collaboration that reflect lived experience. We are dedicated to strengthening the capacity of society to embrace accessibility and inclusion, leading to better outcomes for autistic people.



Autistics' Guide to Adulthood

The Autistics' Guide to Adulthood is a self-paced online life exploration resource to guide autistic people in navigating adulthood. Co-developed by autistic adults, this resource aims to provide you with useful information for dealing with adulthood.



The Spectrum

The Spectrum is a free online resource that helps to answer questions about autism, and explains many facts and common misconceptions around diagnosis, communication, emotions and more.



The
Spectrum



Creating inclusive workplaces

Neuro-inclusive Recruiting

Neuro-inclusive Recruiting is a free, online resource designed to support employers to create and maintain neuro-inclusive workplaces. The co-designed guide builds employers capacity to attract, employ and retain neurodivergent talent.



Creating autism friendly spaces

The Autism Friendly Charter

The Autism Friendly Charter is a free online learning platform and inclusive business directory designed to help businesses, organisations, and venues enhance their understanding of autism and build capacity to increase access and inclusion for all.

