



# Autism in the Workplace

Creating opportunity  
for autistic people

*A collaborative research report by:*



**IRISHJOBS**

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# Foreword



**Following on from our first Autism in the Workplace Report, published in 2021, IrishJobs is proud to partner once again with Ireland's National Autism Charity, AsIAM, to publish this second report. Building on previous research, this report assesses the attitudes of Ireland's autistic community to the workplace, including their perceived and experienced challenges, and the attitudes of business recruiters to recruiting and retaining autistic talent.**

Research tells us that at least 1 in 65 people in Ireland are autistic. We also know that autistic people face many barriers to full participation in the workforce. By learning more about the employment landscape for autistic people in Ireland, together businesses and key stakeholders can help to create the right conditions for autistic people to feel valued as members of the workforce and to thrive.

Our research this year indicates that businesses and organisations are performing better in some areas than they were in 2021, but that several barriers remain to autistic people enjoying a fulfilling career in their chosen field.

Encouragingly, the vast majority of employers believe autistic people make a positive contribution to the workplace. 50% claim to have at least one autistic staff member, up slightly on the previous report. Meanwhile, 58% of organisations said their recruitment process is accessible, up from just over a third in 2021.

However, employers are not always clear on how accessible their business is to autistic people. Half of recruiters said they don't know what reasonable accommodations an autistic staff member might require. The majority also believe it would be more difficult to recruit an autistic person. And while most businesses have an official diversity and inclusion policy in place, this policy only covers people with autism in less than a quarter of cases.

It is not surprising, therefore, that 84% of autistic people said they do not feel confident that employers, managers and colleagues know enough about autism to support them in the workplace.

A lack of understanding still clearly hinders employers. This leads many not only to underutilise the talents of autistic people at work - 94% of whom believe that with the right supports, they would be an asset to any business or organisation - but to discourage autistic people from applying for roles in the first place.

To help bridge this gap, supports and information for businesses are vital. However, while again improved on 2021, many employers are still unaware of current supports and schemes available to them, nor do they think they are sufficient. This highlights the key role that education and outreach has to play in supporting employers to unlock autistic talent.

Last year, to help address this need, IrishJobs partnered once again with AsIAM to launch our Same Chance Commitment.

Complemented by our Same Chance toolkit, which offers a step-by-step guide to becoming an autism-friendly employer, every employer who signs up to the Same Chance Commitment makes pledges ranging from the development of more inclusive recruitment processes to providing training for autistic people to help them pursue jobs and develop their career within an organisation.

While changes such as these might seem small to businesses, they can make the world of difference to autistic people as they embark on or look to progress on their career journey. At IrishJobs, through our partnership with AsIAM, we're committed to continuing our advocacy around the changes that can support more autistic people in the workplace, and to inform and educate businesses as they journey towards a more inclusive and accessible future.

**Sam McIlveen**

*Managing Director, StepStone Ireland  
(IrishJobs.ie, Jobs.ie and NIJobs)*



# Foreword



**AsIAM, Ireland's National Autism Charity, is delighted to present our Autism in the Workplace Report 2023, in partnership with IrishJobs. The publication of this report builds on the findings made in our first edition in 2021 and on the significant work undertaken by our two organisations in opening a dialogue with employers on the importance of creating opportunities for autistic talent.**

Securing and maintaining a job is a rite of passage for most. But for autistic people significant barriers are presented which deprive them of the same chance in finding a job and developing a career. Indeed, it is estimated that 85% of autistic people are unemployed or underemployed. This not only has significant financial consequences for our community, but also often contributes to social isolation and a loss of independence and dignity. Critically, it represents a major loss of talent to both employers and our society. We know diverse workplaces are more successful and yet the knowledge, experience, expertise and unique perspective of our community is all too often lost.

The findings presented in this report represent a snapshot in time and we are grateful to the employers and autistic adults who so generously shared of their experiences in our survey in order to gain an insight into the reality on the ground. The picture they have helped us to form is insightful and points to a number of key issues which, if addressed, could contribute significantly to lowering the unemployment rate within our community.

The findings call into question many of the assumptions which may exist about autistic talent. It is clear that the challenges which autistic people seeking work or maintaining employment face are multifaceted and

complex and a range of responses are required in order to meaningfully address them.

There is an urgent need for proactive leadership to address the stigma and fear experienced by autistic people in choosing to share their experiences in the workplace or ask for reasonable accommodations. This requires a strengths-based approach to how autistic people are supported in work and a greater emphasis on peer-based support and colleague education within the workplace.

The survey clearly shows that autistic people would be more inclined to share their experiences and access support in the workplace if they could be confident in the response of employers. This requires planned outreach by employers and an openness to different approaches to recruitment than the traditional interview process which, built on the unknown and abstract, is the first great hurdle for many within our community.

Despite the barriers that exist, there is evidence of green shoots that we must redouble our efforts to accelerate. Compared to 2021, we see more employers reporting that they have autism-friendly practices in place and are accessing supports that they need to recruit in this area. It is also clear that when employers have direct experience in working with autistic people, they tend to have positive experiences and attitudes. AsIAM and IrishJobs are determined to create further opportunities for employers to take steps not only to learn about autism but to be supported in recruiting autistic talent.

Whilst in places there can be disconnect between the attitudes of employers and the experiences of autistic people, both agree that changes to the world of work – from increased remote working to a greater flexibility in workplaces practices – have created new opportunities in this space. Even as we look to overcome existing challenges, we must seize this opportunity to give autistic people and employers the same chance to benefit from the creation of neuro-affirmative workplaces.

**Adam Harris**

*CEO and Founder, AsIAM*

# Key Findings

**The Autism in The Workplace Report was carried out across March 2023 and assessed the attitudes of more than 461 Irish autistic people and businesses of the workplace and employment.**

Irish autistic people responded to questions regarding finding employment in a neurotypical workplace, the challenges they face in those

spaces, and their understanding of supports, either from their employer or from external parties, such as the government, and the accessibility of these supports.

Employers were asked about their organisation's attitudes to hiring and retaining autistic talent, the structures in place to facilitate these processes, and the perceived and experienced barriers to recruiting and supporting autistic employees.

## How the autistic community perceives the neurotypical workplace



**60% of all autistic people don't believe or are unsure about whether they have the same chance of career progression as non-autistic employees.**

58% also don't believe or are unsure about whether there are opportunities for them to progress their career at companies/organisation other than their current employer.



**84% do not feel confident that employers, managers, colleagues and clients know enough about autism to support them in the workplace.**

However, 94% believe that with the right supports, they would be an asset to any business or organisation.



**Just 18% have received supports or reasonable accommodations during the recruitment process for their current role.**

The majority (58%) feel that requesting reasonable accommodations would worsen their chances of finding their preferred role.

# Key Findings

## How recruiters perceive the hiring and retention of autistic talent



**67% of recruiters said they believe it would be more difficult to hire an autistic person or are unsure about the process.**

Many respondents say they don't know what reasonable accommodations an autistic staff member might require.



**58% of recruiters don't provide unconscious bias training to interview panels which includes information about autism.**

Yet, over half of businesses say they think autistic people would find their job application and interview process accessible.



**58% of businesses say they are unaware of the current supports and schemes available to assist them in recruiting or retaining autistic talent.**

Only 40% believe there are sufficient supports and information in place for businesses to recruit autistic talent.



# The autistic community's experience of the workplace



# AUTISTIC COMMUNITY

**The autistic community faces a number of barriers to the traditional neurotypical workplace, including a lack of accommodations and supports and perceptions of discrimination and bias towards autistic people.**

While 64% of respondents agree that their current role matches their work experience and expertise, **60% of all autistic people don't believe or are unsure about whether they have the same chance of career progression as non-autistic employees.** 58% also don't believe or are unsure about whether there are opportunities for them to progress their career at companies/organisation other than their current employer.

Indeed, **96% of autistic people believe that it would be more difficult to find the job they want in comparison to a neurotypical person.**

Much of this seems to come down to the recruitment process in the first instance. While 58% of companies find their recruitment processes to be accessible to autistic people, almost **8 in 10 autistic people disagree.**

Even after the recruitment process, autistic people perceive challenges.

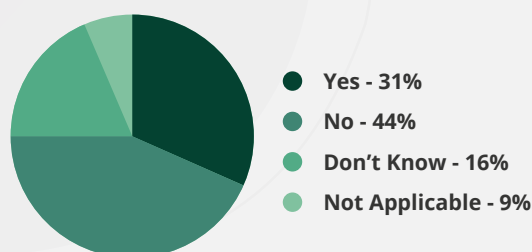
**84% of respondents do not feel confident that employers, managers and colleagues know enough about autism to support them in the workplace.** Meanwhile, fewer than 5% feel that the same cohort know enough about autism for them to be open about their diagnosis in the workplace.

It's clear, however, that with the right supports in place, autistic people would be encouraged to be more open about their diagnosis in the workplace. **An overwhelming majority (80%) said they would be likely to disclose their autism diagnosis to an employer if they were sure they would be supportive.**

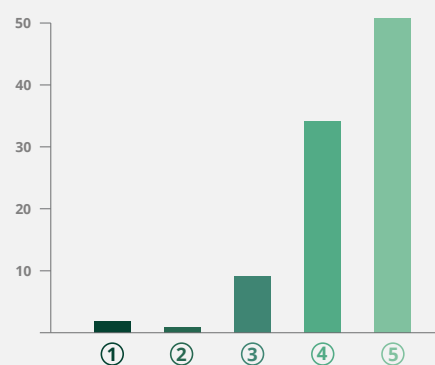
It seems employers have more to do to prove to autistic people they can support them in this regard. For example, **82% of respondents do not believe or are unsure about whether their current employer has a disability, autism and neurodiversity employee resource group,** while over half do not believe or are unsure about whether their employer has an employee assistance programme.

There are also a number of more general negative perceptions at play. 62% of respondents agree that organisations believe that employment and/or supporting autistic employees would be too costly or expensive, while **almost 8 in 10 respondents agree that the majority of employers believe hiring autistic people is too high risk.**

**Do you believe you have the same chance at career progression as non-autistic employees?**



**How much do you agree or disagree with this statement: I feel confident that employers, managers, colleagues and clients know enough about autism to support me in the workplace.**



1. Strongly agree: 2%
2. Agree - 1%
3. Neither Agree nor Disagree - 9%
4. Disagree - 34%
5. Strongly Disagree - 51%



# REASONABLE ACCOMMODATIONS

**Reasonable Accommodations are changes or adaptations an employer makes to the workplace, such as adjustments to the workplace environment or to a specific work routine or practice, which supports autistic people and people with other disabilities to carry out their work and access the same training and development opportunities on an equal footing as their non-disabled colleagues.**

**Reasonable accommodations might, for example, include regular breaks, quiet spaces, written rather than verbal instructions and a support person sitting in on an interview, all of which a number of autistic people said would be of benefit to them.**

60% of all respondents said they require supports or reasonable accommodations in the workplace.

However, fewer than 20% said they received any supports or reasonable accommodations during the recruitment process for their current role, with 40% not making their current employer aware of their diagnosis at any stage of the recruitment journey.

Sadly, this lack of transparency seems to stem from fear, with **58% of respondents saying they feel that requesting reasonable accommodations would worsen their chances of finding their preferred role.**

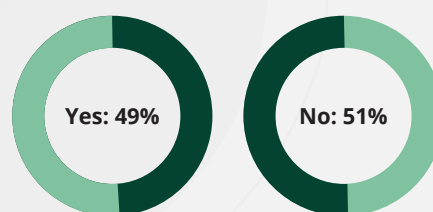
This becomes a vicious cycle for both autistic people and employers, with **more than half the respondents (51%) admitting that they find current supports and reasonable accommodations from their employer insufficient.** This is despite the fact that, with the right supports, 94% of autistic people believe that they would be an asset to any business or organisation.

However, not all the onus for improving this is perceived to be on the employer.

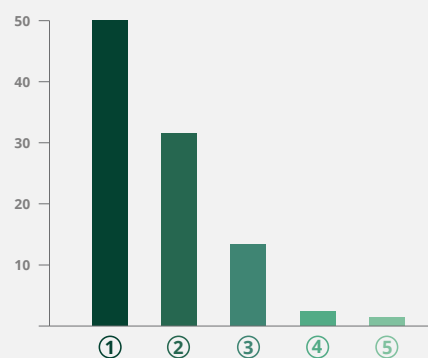
**Fewer than 6% of respondents think that organisations receive enough support to effectively attract and recruit autistic people.** And while 96% believe that businesses and organisations can do more to provide employment or entrepreneurship opportunities for autistic people, **over 80% feel that the government does not do enough to support autistic people in securing and retaining employment.**

In a nod to a brighter future, in line with the view of most employers, the majority of respondents (82%) agree that remote working and new flexible approaches to work post-pandemic open up new opportunities for autistic talent.

**Are the current supports or reasonable accommodations you receive from your employer sufficient?**



**How much do you agree or disagree with this statement: Remote working and new flexible approaches to work post-pandemic open up new opportunities for autistic talent.**



1. Strongly agree: 50%
2. Agree - 32%
3. Neither Agree nor Disagree - 13%
4. Disagree - 3%
5. Strongly Disagree - 2%



# How businesses understand and support autistic people in the workplace

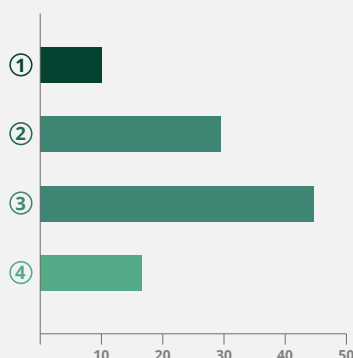
# BUSINESSES AND AUTISTIC PEOPLE

Although better than 2021, **lack of understanding and a lack of support structures around autism** in the workplace are still the biggest barriers separating autistic people and businesses with a predominantly neurotypical workforce.

Our research shows that the vast majority of business believe autistic people make a positive contribution to the workplace, with **65% claiming to have at least one member of staff with a disability and 50% an autistic staff member**, up 21% on the previous report. Meanwhile, **58% of organisations said their recruitment process is accessible**, up from just over a third in 2021.

Despite this, **half of the organisations surveyed said they don't know what reasonable accommodations an autistic staff member might require**. And while the majority of businesses have an official diversity and inclusion policy, **only 23% said their policy covers people with autism**. In addition, despite a 15% improvement on 2021, the majority of businesses (61%) do not have or are unsure about whether they have a dedicated autism friendly policy. 10% said their business has one but they are not familiar with it, while 29% said their business has one and it is strongly implemented.

## Does your organisation have a dedicated autism friendly policy?



1. Yes, but I'm not familiar with it - 10%

2. Yes, it is strongly implemented in the workplace - 29%

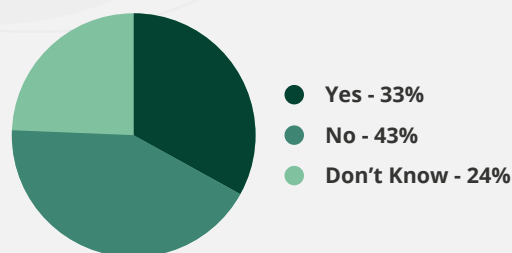
3. No - 44%

4. Unsure - 17%

A lack of autism-friendly workplace policies means that employees are generally not aware of how to support autistic colleagues and adds to negative perceptions among autistic employees. This remains true for this cohort of Irish business, **only just over a third of whom believe their staff know enough about autism to support an autistic colleague**.

When it comes to the recruitment process, again lack of education and understanding comes into play. While 43% of recruiters believe it would not be more difficult to recruit an autistic person over a neurotypical person, **almost 6 in 10 (57%) either do not know or believe it would be**.

## Do you believe that it would be more difficult to recruit an autistic person?



When considering the potential challenges of recruiting an autistic person, many recruiters cited the difficulties an autistic person might encounter with the typical interview process, as well as lack of awareness and understanding among senior leadership and more generally within the business. Others believe their **staff might be unconsciously biased against autistic people or the business might struggle to identify a role for the autistic employee that matches their skillset appropriately**.

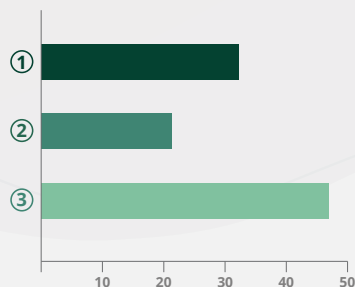
When asked what an autistic member of staff might require, most recruiters suggested a quiet space in which to work with flexible work hours or fewer working hours if required.

Others stressed that it would vary from person to person, while a smaller number suggested having written procedures in place to aid understanding among the rest of the staff.

# WORK EXPERIENCE AND EXTERNAL SUPPORTS

Almost half (47%) of recruiters still do not offer work experience opportunities for autistic people. However, this is an improvement from 2021, when 57% of businesses said they did not provide such work experience opportunities. Meanwhile, 32% of businesses today say they do provide them, while 21% proactively use them to recruit talent to their organisation.

## Does your organisation provide work experience opportunities for autistic people?



1. Yes - 32%
2. Yes, and we use this to support recruitment - 21%
3. No - 47%

One of the reasons for this may lie in the fact that the majority of businesses are unaware of current supports and schemes available to assist them in recruiting or retaining autistic talent.

**While a 26% improvement on 2021, 58% of businesses say they are unaware of the current supports and schemes**, suggesting that education has a role to play in highlighting the supports available to employers.

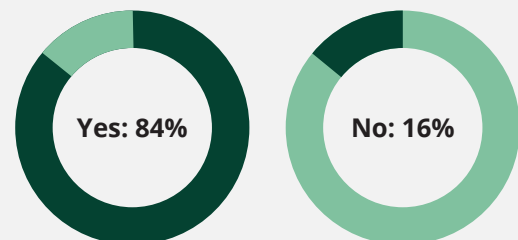
Perhaps for this reason, almost the same number (59%) believe there aren't enough supports and information for businesses to recruit autistic talent nor have they availed of any government support or schemes to aid them in this process.

The same issue arises when it comes to availing of supported employment or advocacy organisations. Just 23% of businesses have used supported employment or advocacy organisations to assist in recruiting or retaining autistic talent in the past, while almost a quarter are unsure if they have.

However, new ways of working are opening up new opportunities for supporting the recruitment and retention of autistic staff. 85% of organisations have said that the pandemic has changed how they recruit staff, with 62% saying more staff work from home, 73% saying more meetings are held online and 52% saying they have introduced video recruitment.

Almost the same number (84%) say these new ways of working create opportunities to recruit autistic talent.

## Do you believe new ways of working create opportunities for you to recruit autistic talent?





# INSIGHTS

Based on this report's findings, AsIAM and IrishJobs have determined six key insights that show how employers and broader society, including NGOs, can help make the world of work a more inclusive, understanding, and productive space for Ireland's autistic community.

## 1 Transparency leads to trust

In order to assuage autistic people's fears about disclosing their diagnosis and requesting reasonable accommodations, employers should actively promote and be more transparent about the supports and accommodations they offer autistic people at all stages of the recruitment journey.

## 2 Training for awareness

Regular unconscious bias training for both recruitment panels and neurotypical staff will help to ensure that autistic people feel better supported in the workplace while also creating conditions that are more conducive to them believing they have the same chance of career progression as non-autistic employees.

## 3 New ways of working

Autistic people and employers recognise that we are experiencing a time of change within our workplaces which presents opportunities for our community. Businesses and stakeholders must explore how autistic talent can benefit from new recruitment opportunities owing to remote working / online meetings / more liberal workplace practices.

## 4 Addressing talent challenges

Almost all autistic people who responded to the survey (94%) said that, with the right supports, they would be an asset to any business or organisation. 82% also said being autistic gives them specific strengths in their current role. With unemployment estimated to be at 85% among the autistic community, amidst a tighter labour market for employers, it's clear that creating more pathways for autistic people into employment could play a vital role in helping to tackle current talent challenges.

## 5 Exposure matters

Employers engaged in hiring autistic talent can see the benefits. There is a significant need to debunk and demystify common misconceptions about autism and the workplace which are creating barriers to recruitment. This includes a recognition that there is no one "type" of job that suits autistic people.

## 6 Support from Government and NGOs

Relatively few employers and autistic people are accessing supports from government and NGOs - more must be done to reach both communities to ensure they have the opportunity to benefit from inclusive recruitment practices and employment opportunities.

# METHODOLOGY / ABOUT

## About AsIAm



AsIAm is Ireland's National Autism Charity. We are working to create a society in which every autistic person is empowered to reach their own personal potential and fully participate in society. We believe that by developing the capacity of the autism community and addressing the societal barriers to inclusion we can make Ireland the world's most autism-friendly country. What began in 2014 as an online platform for the community to access information and share experiences, has quickly grown into a movement for change for the autism community. Today, AsIAm is Ireland's largest autism charity with a team of 14 staff, half of whom are on the autism spectrum.

## About IrishJobs

# IRISHJOBS

IrishJobs is the leading and trusted e-recruitment partner, part of the world's leading e-recruitment group, StepStone. Helping talent and companies connect, IrishJobs has 1.1 million registered career seekers and 694k active monthly users on our platform. IrishJobs.ie delivers quality local and international talent to organisations through innovative and leading technology, all with a human touch.

### **Research was carried out by AsIAm and IrishJobs among samples of their member databases.**

- AsIAm surveyed 336 autistic people between 3rd and 16th March 2023
- IrishJobs surveyed 125 businesses of various sizes and industries from across Ireland between 1st and 13th March 2023

# CONTACT

## AsIAm

Rock House, Main Street, Blackrock  
Co Dublin, A94 V9P1  
+353 (0)1 445 3203  
[www.asiam.ie](http://www.asiam.ie)

## IrishJobs

Waterways House, Grand Canal Quay  
Dublin 2, D02 NF40  
+353 (0)1 670 9900  
[www.irishjobs.ie](http://www.irishjobs.ie)

