

View from the Chair; Business Newsletter; 28 September 2021 Geraldine McGahey, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI

Autism and Recruitment

There's no doubt, that for large employers, high volume recruiting is a useful tool that enables an organisation to sift quickly through large numbers of applicants for their posts. But it's also true that one size doesn't fit all, and nowhere is that more painfully obvious than with job applicants with conditions such as autism, ADHD or Tourette's Syndrome.

We have seen several cases recently where people with autism have run into problems with bulk recruitment processes. One which we published last week involved a young man with autism who had worked determinedly to come to terms with his condition and applied for an administrative post with the PSNI.

The man had disclosed that he had autism on his application form. No one followed up on this until he had successfully completed two parts of the three-stage recruitment process.

The third stage was a group interview and report. The man and his father made several phone calls to Honeycomb Jobs Ltd to let them know that, because of his autism, the man would have severe difficulties effectively communicating within the planned group interview. His father tried to arrange reasonable adjustments to allow his son to show that he met the relevant competencies for the job.

While the man was given extra time to read the pre-briefing (which he did not need) and an extra ten minutes and a word processor to write up what was discussed, he did not believe that effective reasonable adjustments were made at the group interview itself, which meant that due to his disability he was not able to actively participate. He completed the written report and scored well in all areas of the overall selection process with the exception of the group interview.

He came to us to help him take a disability discrimination case, which ended with the recruitment agency Honeycomb Jobs Ltd and the PSNI, for whom they were recruiting, each paying the man £6,250 without admission of liability. Importantly too, the PSNI has reviewed and improved its recruitment practices to be more inclusive of people with autism.

Another large employer, BT, lost its appeal in 2019 against a decision of the Industrial Tribunal to award £18,400 to Kevin Meier from Belfast. He has a very high

IQ, but also dyslexia, dyspraxia and Asperger's Syndrome. He declared his disability on his application form, but this was not included in the information that went to the Graduate Recruitment Team. Unaware of his disability, the team did not include him in BT's Disability Confident Guarantee Scheme and did not put him forward for an online situational strengths test, which would put someone with an autistic spectrum disorder at a disadvantage.

What these cases show us is that inclusion should be considered at every stage of recruitment. The Disability Discrimination Act covers every aspect of the recruitment process, including setting job criteria which could exclude people with autism.

As an employer, you don't need to be a clinical expert in autism, you just need to know that when someone declares a disability on their application form, this should trigger a discussion with the applicant about what could help them compete on an equal basis for the job with everyone else.

Every disabled person's experiences and capabilities are different – this means that you need to talk to disabled candidates to find out what they need in terms of reasonable adjustments.

You also need to know that the inclusion of disabled workers doesn't always mean expensive reasonable adjustments, it can be something simple such as extra time, but it does have to be something agreed with the job applicant that is relevant and useful.

If you are in any doubt, give us a ring 028 90 500 600, [check our website](#) or email edenquiries@equalityni.org for advice and information.