

government departments now provides questions in advance, “because we want to employ people with the skill set, not just someone who can answer a question on the spot.”

Whitehouse says employers need to understand “the enormous strength” autistic people can bring to the workplace. “Not just in the context of diversity, but also in terms of simple value add,” he says.

‘[Autistic people can] lose their jobs, not because of a lack of technical abilities, but social skills.’

Bodo Mann from information technology firm auticon

“We haven’t got workplaces that are set up to support that. So if we can find work systems that not just accommodate, but embrace, the employment of autistic adults, the business will not just benefit in terms of work culture, but almost without doubt, productivity as well.”

Information technology firm auticon is doing that work. It pairs autistic employees with client companies and helps everyone work together. Bodo Mann, the Australia and New Zealand chief executive, says awareness is the starting point.

“A lot of emphasis is on the strength autistic people bring: the ability to concentrate for long periods of time, detect errors, pattern recognition. There’s a brutal honesty that often comes with autism. If you don’t know that, it can be very confronting,” he says.

“One of the challenges our autistic consultants have – many were unemployed before – is they’re uncomfortable with social cues and there’s a fair bit of anxiety that comes from that. In a workplace where there’s corporate politics, if you don’t know how to play that game, they get sidelined or in worst case they get bullied. They lose their jobs, not because of a lack of technical abilities, but social skills.”

For employers, it’s not just about turning the lights down or giving someone a corner desk away from the noise. “What I would like from corporate Australia is a little more courage,” Mann says. “Innovation comes from creating a diverse team, so you look at things from different angles. By definition, autistic people think differently.”

For James Van Dyke, who was diagnosed with autism at four years old, workplace awareness has made a massive difference. He never struggled too much with school, but finding work took more than a year. “After graduating, I applied to a whole bunch of different companies. I didn’t really hear back from many of them and for others, I didn’t get far through the whole interview process.”



Nicole Rogerson and her 28-year-old son Jack, who has autism. Nicole is an advocate for parents of autistic children. NICK MOIR

He didn’t feel comfortable telling the companies he was autistic, lest they assumed it would render him unable to work. It made job interviews especially challenging. “I’m a person that enjoys putting stuff in writing more than speaking one-on-one, just because I struggle with social cues. And so I think that factored into those companies’ decisions to not hire me,” he says.

What worked for him, in the end, was shorter video interviews and technical challenges that allowed him to demonstrate his abilities.

“I would like to live in a world in the future where it is possible to disclose your diagnosis and have companies be OK with that,” he says. Van Dyke is now working on automation and coding for ASX companies in cybersecurity. “If there’s something I really enjoy, they’ll let me just work on that, which is helpful because I’m good at

really focusing and deep diving on particular topics that I enjoy for long periods.”

Bourke says her mission is to build that kind of knowledge across all government departments, from the justice system to public infrastructure and major events.

She’s partnered with the Australian Hotels Association to get someone training up pubs and clubs in making their environments more accommodating. “The autistic community want to be able to go out and enjoy their 21st bubbles in a pub, and they can’t do it at the moment because it’s too overwhelming,” she says. The local supermarket chain Drakes now does quiet shopping hours, has changed its lights so they dim, and has reduced sound on its cash registers. But Bourke says the most important thing it did was train its staff. “Most of them are at school, and are going to go on to the next workplace or networks with that new knowledge.”



Tim Chan uses an electronic voice-output device, with his mother Sarah Chan, in 2014. PAUL JEFFERS

Sharon Fraser, chief executive of autistic-led organisation Reframing Autism, says society must change how it interacts with autistic people. “Because what is so frustrating is that a lot of the challenges that autistic people face are not because of

their inherent being,” she says.

“You can’t change my sensory profile, right? But you can support or accommodate me to be in a space with you.”

There’s a lot of catching up to do. For Tim Chan, who lost his speech at 14 months, early childhood was “one big jumbo of confusion”.

“I didn’t understand that the sounds people made stood for language until around age five,” he says, by typing on a speech-generating device. Sensory and movement issues mean he has limited control over his body, which affects his ability to engage comfortably with the world around him.

With support and years of effort at finding ways to communicate, mainly through typing, he’s graduated with an honours degree and is now doing a PhD on how neurodiversity applies to people with complex communication needs.

“Living with non-speaking autism is not easy,” he says. “I would like to see augmentative and alternative communication – [when a person uses something other than speech to communicate] – become accepted and embraced by society. That way, non-speakers can participate in the community more equitably.”

Professor Cheryl Dissanayake says a lot of disability in autism comes from societal barriers. “We’re learning more about how to change the way society operates. We need to listen to autistic people and their families,” she says.

“We can alter the ways in which we teach, employ and work, to make sure they thrive. I do think we need to talk more about all of this, because it’s not just about awareness, it’s about acceptance and then making the adjustments.”

This is the final part of a series about how our understanding of autism has changed and what it means for Australia. Read [part one](#) and [part two](#).

Cut through the noise of federal politics with news, views and expert analysis from Jacqueline Maley. [Subscribers can sign up to our weekly Inside Politics newsletter here.](#)



Natassia Chrysanthos is the federal health reporter for The Sydney Morning Herald and The Age, based at Parliament House in Canberra. Connect via [Twitter](#) or [email](#).
