

“Integrating Autism in the Workplace”

This is Cathryn. She works for Hewlett Packard and specialises in supporting those who find themselves on the Autism spectrum, where the brain develops differently to others.

Unfortunately a lot of people on the spectrum struggle with the social communication areas so they don't actually get through job interviews – traditional job interviews where you go in front of a panel of four or five people and you try to sell yourself.

So, for the first time in Australia, Hewlett Packard began the Dandelion Program, hiring those with autism for the specialist task of software functional testing.

But like anyone starting a new job, they needed support.

So to support them with communication we've created some, what we call, visual supports for them – checklists and to do lists. Make sure that we have very clear communication with the team. Often it's better to communicate with the written word rather than verbally.

And there was some office environment matters to initially take care of as well.

So some of the lights in the ceiling were too bright for a couple of the guys so we've simply got an electrician in and removed the light globes from above their desk area. And some of the guys wear headphones while they're working so that they can block out any background noise. So that's got to do with the sensory processing difficulties.

Part of the support team is to teach them the technicalities of the job, another is to train them in the workplace. Cathryn meets with the Dandelion workers regularly to chat.

She also works hard with the customer workforce to help them understand autism. That means awareness sessions before the team arrives as well as daily support.

I'm a great believer that with knowledge comes understanding and therefore acceptance will hopefully follow. So if you educate people about Autism and you expose them to people with Autism who are very, very skilled and lovely people to be with, eventually you break down those stereotypes and negative stigma that has been attached to the label of Autism.

The result of working with both the Dandelion team and the customer's IT team is that both groups have grown and developed.

We've had a lot of people say to us, or come up to us and say to us, "I've never met somebody with Autism before, and they're just like everybody else." I've heard that several times from customer employees and from HP employees who've never met somebody with Autism.

But the biggest impact is crossing over to a new life for the people so often overlooked and misunderstood in the workforce.

Their confidence, their sense of being valued, having a purpose, getting up in the morning and going to work. I've seen them be able to spend money on things that they've never been able to spend money on before because they're earning a good wage. It's changed them. We're changing lives here.

(Silence)

This is programme two in a three part series.

Watch the others:

1. A Journey to Work
3. Testing and the Autism Advantage