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## Employee referrals hinder neurodiverse hiring

*Qualified candidates on the autism spectrum often struggle to find jobs that match their qualifications and skills. **Daniela Lup** and **Esther Canonico** write that employee referrals are a powerful recruiting channel for neurodiverse talent. However, left unchecked, they hinder neurodiverse hiring.*

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The UK National Autistic Society estimates that only **22 per cent** of working-age adults on the autism spectrum are in regular full-time employment, with a similarly low rate even for people at high-functioning levels of the condition, such as those with Asperger's syndrome. Recent figures from the Office for National Statistics also show an **autism pay gap** of 27.9 per cent. Similarly, across **Europe**, estimates indicate that less than 10 per cent of adults with autism are in employment and that, like in the UK and the US, unemployment disproportionately affects individuals with **high-functioning autism** and above-average education. Such high levels of unemployment and underemployment not only have a long-term negative impact on people's quality of life and mental health but also represent a significant loss of talent for organisations.

Our recent **research** investigates an overlooked factor contributing to the employment and pay gap among highly qualified individuals with autism: employee referrals.

Employee referral programs are among the most widely used **recruitment tools**, with 30-50 per cent of all hires arriving in organisations referred by a current employee. But while referrals are often seen as a way to tap into hidden talent, our research shows that they can also act as an unintended gatekeeping mechanism, screening out highly skilled neurodivergent candidates rather than helping them get in.

To understand referral hiring for neurodivergent talent, we explored the decisions of 268 professionals from the UK who considered referring a highly qualified contact on the autism spectrum for an opening in their company. We also explored the reasons behind their decisions to

refer or not. Our study uncovered several hidden barriers to referring highly qualified candidates on the autism spectrum.

## “Ideal worker” bias

Most employees in our sample hesitate to refer highly qualified contacts on the autism spectrum because they unconsciously assess candidates against an unspoken standard of the “ideal worker”. This standard includes social ease, strong interpersonal skills, empathy, and adaptability—traits that neurodivergent candidates may not express in conventional ways.

When current employees imagine how a referred candidate might perform in an organisation, they assume that neurodivergent individuals will struggle in team environments, behave inappropriately, cause disturbances, or fail to navigate social environments. These assumptions—often incorrect—trigger reputational concern and lead them to exclude qualified candidates from consideration.

Our research shows that when it comes to referring autistic talent, the “ideal worker” bias results in choosing ‘fit’ over merit.

## Disclosure and gender stereotypes

Our study finds that candidates who disclose their condition to potential referrers are more likely to be referred, but only if they are men. However, this apparent advantage is fraught with stereotypes.

For male candidates, disclosure appears to trigger stereotypes that align with workplace strengths, such as attention to detail or analytical thinking. Although male candidates with autism benefit from this stereotyping, referrers’ perceptions remain superficial and disconnected from genuine recognition of a candidate’s skills and abilities.

For female candidates, disclosure does not provide the same advantage. Gender biases compound the challenge, as women with autism are perceived as deviating not only from the “ideal worker” stereotype but also from societal gender norms such as warmth and friendliness.

These stereotypes create a dilemma for neurodivergent job seekers: should they disclose their condition to increase their chances of a referral, even if it means being evaluated through a stereotyped lens?

## Unprepared and exclusionary

Our findings show that even when employees want to refer a highly skilled candidate on the autism spectrum, they hesitate if they believe their organisation is not ready to support that candidate’s

success. Employees worry that autistic candidates will be treated poorly and rejected during recruiting or that the candidate will struggle due to a lack of workplace accommodations. This hesitation is particularly strong in companies with unclear or weak diversity and inclusion policies.

One way in which employees detect their company's neuro-inclusion stance is via job ads. When job ads include **requirements** such as communication and team skills, passion, leadership or ability to influence (to mention just a few of the increasing number of personal skills requirements in job ads), employees are even less likely to refer neurodivergent contacts.

These findings show the importance of visibly demonstrating an organisation's commitment to inclusion in job advertising and everyday workplace interactions.

## How to make referrals work

Below, we suggest a few actions that arise directly from our research.

### Challenge the "ideal worker" bias

Organisational leaders and human resources managers should rethink how they frame the "ideal worker", both in job descriptions and everyday discourse. Overemphasis on "people skills" can signal—intentionally or not—that candidates on the autism spectrum are unsuitable, even when they have exceptional job-related competencies and skills. Hiring managers should consider role-specific competencies instead of perpetuating an unrealistic image of the perfectly socially fluent employee. Training employees to recognise different strengths and how they contribute to business success can also shift the focus from "fit" to "value".

### Make inclusion policies visible and actionable

Having inclusive policies is not enough. Employees must be made aware of these policies and, very importantly, see them in practice. Many employees in our study hesitated to refer neurodivergent candidates because they were unsure whether their organisation would support their development. We propose that leaders must explicitly communicate inclusion efforts, share success stories, and offer concrete assurances that neurodivergent employees—regardless of whether they choose to disclose—will be supported once hired. Without such visible commitment, even well-intentioned employees may avoid referring qualified candidates on the autism spectrum.

### Train employees on ethical and inclusive referrals

We know that inclusion training does not always have a good name. Yet, our study shows the harm that a lack of awareness in handling referrals of individuals with invisible or undisclosed conditions

could do. For instance, many respondents in our study considered having informal “heads-up” conversations with recruiters and colleagues about a candidate’s autism condition—an approach riddled with ethical and confidentiality issues. Managers must consider ways to educate staff on best practices to prevent well-intentioned but problematic behaviours that could breach privacy or perpetuate biases and stereotypes about people on the autism spectrum. Furthermore, HR leaders and hiring managers must receive training on handling identity disclosures at various stages of the employment cycle.

Employee referrals are a powerful hiring tool. However, left unchecked, they can unintentionally screen out talent. By addressing some of the hidden barriers uncovered in our study, organisations can transform referrals from a gatekeeping mechanism into a bridge for neurodiverse talent.

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