



# **Autism Advantage at Work Program evaluation | Final report**

Specialisterne

29 August 2023



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This artwork was developed by Marcus Lee Design to reflect Nous Group's Reconciliation Action Plan and our aspirations for respectful and productive engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.

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# 1 Executive summary

The Autism Advantage at Work (AAW) Program (the Program) aims to create more inclusive pathways to meaningful employment for autistic adults and to equip businesses (both employers and recruitment firms) with the knowledge and tools to implement inclusive recruitment and workplace practices. This in turn will increase opportunities for autistic adults to gain work in more meaningful employment.

Specialisterne engaged Nous to conduct an independent formative and summative evaluation of the Program. The evaluation commenced in November 2020 and concluded in August 2023. This report contains the overall findings and summative analysis.

The Program tackles barriers to recruitment through a tailored approach that utilised practical showcases, provides autistic adults with the opportunity to view the workplace of employers, and educates hiring managers and recruiters on autism. The delivery of the Program evolved over time, but included three major assessment rounds, or 'hubs', in addition to a number of discrete Business Capacity Building Sessions.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about a complete transformation of the employment market and had a significant impact on the overall implementation and resulting outcomes of the Program. Specialisterne had to extensively revise its design and delivery to respond to increasing restrictions, significant uncertainty, and reduced employment opportunities. This involved reducing the size of the hubs and scaling up business engagement and capacity development.

Hubs 1 and 2 focused on recruiting candidates to jobs in the information technology field. Hub 1 was open to candidates and businesses in Brisbane and Canberra and took place over three weeks between 11 October and 29 October 2021. Prior to Hub 1, Specialisterne delivered business education and coaching sessions. The hub itself consisted of individual activities in week one, group activities in week two and employer-led activities in week three. Hub 1 was largely delivered virtually but some activities, such as a 'Day in the Life' where candidates visited employers' workplaces, were delivered in person.

For Hub 2, Specialisterne moved to a new delivery model, which involved a series of shorter programs delivered to smaller cohorts of businesses and participants. The new delivery model was designed to achieve efficiencies in Specialisterne's recruitment and program delivery and provide greater flexibility and accessibility for candidates and businesses who had more opportunities to take part in the Program. Hub 2 thus encompassed two programs, a talent demonstration hub run by Specialisterne over four days between 19 April and 22 April 2022, and a recruitment drive run by Specialisterne's delivery partner Employ for Ability between June 2022 and December 2022.

Hub 3 focused on recruiting roles in the hospitality and tourism industry in Southeast Queensland, one of the largest employing industries in the region. As employers in these industries spend comparatively little time on recruitment, Specialisterne designed the final hub as a half-day workshop. Hub 3 took place in-person on 5 June 2023.

Specialisterne's Capacity Building Sessions were aimed at building businesses' understanding of autism and their capability and confidence to successfully recruit, onboard and support autistic adults, while also benefitting from their professional skills.



## 1.1 Findings and considerations

### Hub-based activities

Findings are grouped by timing (prior to the hub, during the hub and after the hub).

#### Prior to the hubs

**The set up for the hubs was most successful when Specialisterne was able to respond to individual businesses recruitment needs.** There were challenges in securing employers for the hubs who were willing to make roles available and participate in recruitment processes. The planning and set up for Hub 1 were significantly impacted by COVID-19, and the ambiguity of the uncertain job market meant employers were reluctant to make roles available when they weren't strictly needed. Specialisterne addressed this for Hub 2 through the redesign of the Program. For instance, the new delivery model meant program dates were no longer fixed, but rather Specialisterne ran individualised programs in partnership with businesses when they needed staff. The length of the Program was also cut down from three weeks to four days. For Hub 3, Specialisterne did not require employers to make roles available but rather created opportunities for employers and candidates to get to know one another.

**Specialisterne's most effective strategies for attracting applicants involved making specific jobs available and reaching out to previously registered candidates.** Assembling a pool of suitably qualified candidates in the numbers anticipated was also a challenge for Specialisterne. For Hub 1, applications were elicited from candidates prior to the precise roles being announced, which may have discouraged some autistic adults from applying. The lack of clarity in roles was also reported to create challenges for candidates to tailor the way they constructed their applications to best reflect employers' needs. For Hub 2, Specialisterne waited to advertise the Program until the roles were confirmed and this was associated with an 84 per cent increase the number of applicants. To encourage job seekers to participate, Specialisterne also spent time reviewing candidates from previous programs and reached out to those that matched the available roles directly. The program team reported this made the biggest difference in recruiting candidates. For Hub 3, Specialisterne struggled to recruit enough candidates. This may be due in part to employers not making available specific jobs.

**There are enduring questions about the industries and locations in which Specialisterne should invest effort.** Hub 1 and 2 had strong interest from employers but not as many candidates, which reflects the tighter job market and existence of other inclusive recruitment services in Canberra. It is possible that Specialisterne could have greater impact if it worked in locations that are less well serviced, or where job seeker demand was greater. While Hub 3 was run out of South East Queensland, it focused on employment in the hospitality and tourism sector and this may have created a different challenge in sourcing candidates, as Specialisterne's 2021 Career Preferences did not identify this industry as a priority for autistic respondents, who rather wanted to work in information technology and other fields.

#### During the hubs

**The hubs demonstrated that a skills-based assessment process is valuable, but there is a balance to strike around the time investment required.**

In Hubs 1 and 2, candidates indicated the activities enabled them to showcase their skills and provided them with additional benefits including feedback, relationship building and personal development. The candidate who participated in Hub 3 benefited from personalised attention to get them more comfortable with the recruitment and interview process. Employers reported to be very impressed with the talent-demonstration model of the Program during Hub 1 and 2 and

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"I loved the program because it was about working out what we're really good at and focus on that."  
- Candidate

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"We got strong insights into our successful candidate throughout the program."  
- Employer

noted that seeing candidates working was more helpful in assessing capability than a traditional interview. Feedback from Hub 1 and 2 emphasised that the process was quite a departure from their normal approach to recruitment and was significantly more time-intensive.

**Hybrid delivery models both allowed candidates to ease into the process and reduce travel time.** Hubs 1 and 2 were delivered primarily virtually, and candidates reported this to be a strength of the Program’s design, as it allowed them to ‘warm up’ over time as they became more comfortable. However, candidates and employers both reported enjoying the face-to-face elements. Hub 3 was delivered entirely in person, and was quite focused on the single participating candidate, which could have been a bit overwhelming.

**To increase the number of successful placements, Specialisterne could support employers further to consider how roles can be adapted for promising candidates.** Employers in both Hubs 1 and 2 were unable to fill some available roles and may need more support to consider how they could adapt roles for high potential candidates. For Hub 1, this was due to available candidates not being based in Canberra and not wishing to relocate. Other reasons included candidates receiving other offers due to the length of the hub and candidates not having the right skill level or interest for the role. Similarly, while six candidates were initially successful in gaining roles at the end of Hub 2, there were challenges with finalising these roles. These challenges included: the employer changing their position on considering out-of-state candidates and significant communication delays as the recruitment for the Program sat outside the employers’ traditional recruiting structures.

### After the hubs

**The AAW Program has had a positive effect on the quality of life of candidates, regardless of the employment outcome.** Most participants in Hubs 1 and 2 saw improvements in their quality of life, especially in their sense of control and confidence in the future. The successful candidates also felt a ‘drastic improvement’ in their relationships, feelings of connection and ability to contribute. No data about the candidate experience is available for Hub 3. The evaluation also identified that one year on, many candidates who were not successful in gaining employment directly through the hub process had since gained employment, and attributed their success in some part to skills they learned through the Program. Involvement in Specialisterne’s AAW Program has had many indirect employment benefits, including participants being more familiar with the recruitment and interview process, being comfortable to ask for adjustments, knowing the value they can bring to the workplace and being able to effectively communicate their skills and abilities.

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“Without Specialisterne I wouldn’t have accelerated. I’ll be honest it [their confidence in their skills] was multiplied by ten. Even at work, I have more confidence to stand up for myself and say it how it is.”  
- *Unsuccessful candidate*

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“Going through the program has given me more confidence...I now feel like it’s possible to really succeed.”  
- *Unsuccessful candidate*

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“I am enjoying being part of something and wanted to be part of something for a long time – that certainly wasn’t happening before.”  
- *Successful candidate*

**Following the hubs, businesses have a better understanding of the barriers autistic adults face and are more likely to engage in inclusive recruitment and workplace practices.**

Businesses saw improvements including an increased understanding of the barriers that autistic adults face in mainstream recruitment. However, they did not experience large shifts in their attitudes towards employing autistic adults. For example, an employer that came in with concerns had similar feelings after participating in the Program. Other businesses entered the Program with an existing appreciation of the value of employing autistic

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“We are restructuring recruitment so that there are no surprises, as opposed to putting people on the spot.”  
- *Employer*

adults, and this remained the same. After both hubs, businesses felt more confident to engage in inclusive recruitment and workplace practices. All employers valued the practical advice and tips Specialisterne provided. Businesses stated they were likely to replicate inclusive recruitment, onboarding and workplace practices learned during the Program. Some shared they were interested in taking on more autistic employees and working with Specialisterne in the future.

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“Definitely, without a doubt we will continue to use Specialisterne as we broaden the program.”  
– Employer

**Specialisterne’s post-placement support distinguishes the Program from other inclusive recruitment processes.** Employers valued Specialisterne’s tailored approach to post-placement support that includes training sessions and one-on-one coaching. This helped ensure long-term success for the candidate and employer.

**Hiring an autistic employee has provided direct and indirect value to the employer from Hub 1.** The employer noted there were additional costs to recruit, onboard and employ an autistic adult through the AAW Program but identified benefits in terms of the autistic employee’s performance, such as their ability to bring unique perspectives and ideas to the workplace and challenge existing groupthink. Indirect benefits included being able to demonstrate their commitment to diversity and other employees in the workplace feeling more comfortable to disclose their neurodiversity.

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“There are many flow-on benefits. We don’t see this as ‘We’ve done you a favour, here’s a job’.”  
– Employer

## Capacity Building and Business Readiness Training

**Specialisterne’s capacity building sessions helped businesses understand how they can support autistic adults in the workplace.** In total, Specialisterne provided training and coaching sessions to over 690 staff from over 160 businesses and recruitment agencies over the course of the Program. These sessions were designed to provide businesses with the tools and supports they need to build an autism inclusive workplace culture before hiring. Businesses who participated in Specialisterne’s Capacity Building and Business Readiness sessions noted that it was a “really good experience”, and they were “very professional and well-run sessions”. The sessions were reported to have helped businesses address their misconceptions that autistic employees may disrupt the workplace, understand how employers can support autistic adults drive positive outcomes, and identify how their own recruitment policies may be unintentionally excluding autistic adults.

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“I have a fuller understanding of the aspects of standard recruitment practices and their biases.”  
– Coaching session attendee

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“Specialisterne showed neurodiversity, not as a detriment, but as a positive.”  
– Coaching session attendee

## 1.2 Impact of the Program and considerations for the future

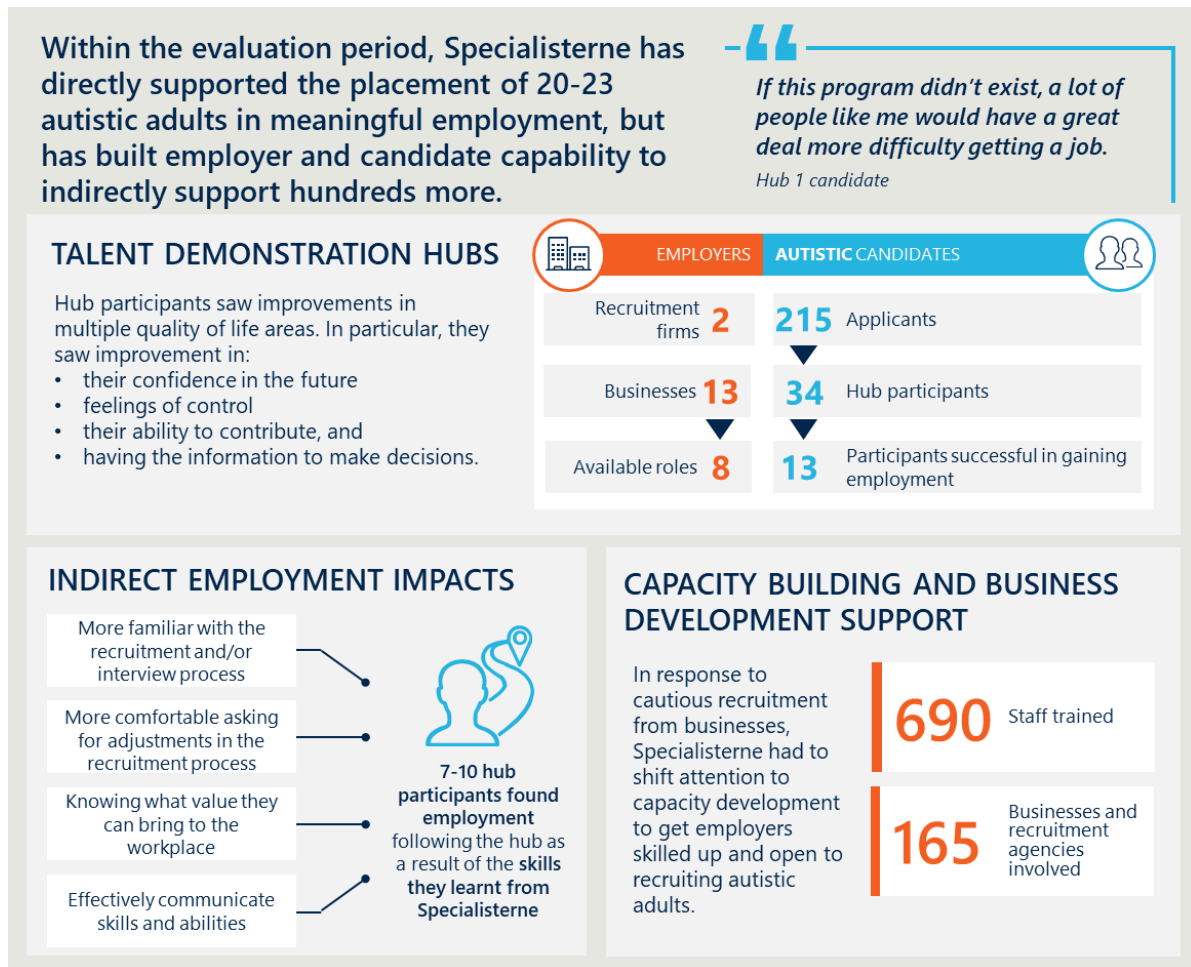
The Program was largely successful. In total 20-23 autistic adults have directly or indirectly found employment, 27 autistic participants have seen improvements in their quality of life, and over 690 staff from over 165 businesses and recruitment agencies have undertaken capacity building and readiness training.

Given that many of the challenges encountered during program delivery were directly caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, Nous is confident that future iterations of the Program could achieve the target job placements. That said, by leaving businesses in a stronger position to replicate their own inclusive recruitment practices, the Program has likely created hundreds of indirect employment opportunities, that have not been fully captured in this evaluation.

Figure 1 | Impact of the AAW Program Figure 1 gives an overview of the impact of the AAW Program over

the evaluation period.

Figure 1 | Impact of the AAW Program



Illustrative quotes from participants are shown below.

“Even though I was not hired from this program, I still managed to do so well that 'mainstream' recruitment feels like a waste of energy.”  
– Hub 1 candidate

“If this program didn’t exist, it would be way more difficult to get a job. If it didn’t exist, a lot of people like me would have a great deal more difficulty getting a job.”  
– Hub 1 candidate

“It gives me hope for the future that I just need be patient and wait for Specialisterne to match me to an employer with a suitable role.”  
– Hub 1 candidate



There are several changes Specialisterne could make to improve future program delivery (Figure 2).

Figure 2 | Summary of recommendations

**FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Create resources that capture current trends around employee attraction and retention, including the call for greater flexibility and hybrid working, and how this is shifting concepts of modern workplaces. Highlight the value of employers considering how autistic adults can be part of their future workforces to create more dynamic, inclusive and productive cultures.
2. Revise hub design to capitalise on lessons learned.
  - a. Streamline recruitment of candidates who have previously taken part in Specialisterne's programs. For example, through sending out automated emails.
  - b. Refresh criteria for fast-track candidates and consider restricting entrance to the fast-track pathway to candidates who have previously taken part in a Specialisterne program.
  - c. Continue with the rolling assessment model, with a strong focus on pre-hub screening and assessment, followed by a targeted (3-4 day) Hub experience.
  - d. Further iterate 'my Autism' modules to provide a more personalised experience, incorporating time for reflection and discussion about how autism manifests in different cohorts (e.g. autistic women or non-binary autistic people).
  - e. Maintain the hybrid delivery model, ensuring that all candidates participate in an in-person 'Day in the Life' session to create opportunities for employees to get to know one another better and understand the 'real' experiences of the role.
  - f. Include additional modules in the Hub to maximise connections and foster opportunities for candidates to showcase their skills and capabilities. This includes an optional social networking session focused on giving autistic adults the opportunity to get to know one another, as well as a 'role play' section where candidates are faced with specific challenges and can demonstrate their ability to navigate these.
  - g. Build in a half day 'pause' into the program to allow for candidates and employers to decompress between intense sessions.
  - h. Create a non-Program Microsoft Teams channel to give candidates a space to chat, share personal pictures and discuss their interests outside of work.
  - i. Set clear expectations with employers to minimise delays and anxiety for successful candidates. For example, this might include the timeframes within which employers are expected to hire successful candidates, and the frequency of communication with successful candidates.
  - j. Communicate positive outcomes for candidates and businesses to support recruitment.
3. Consider whether Specialisterne is having the greatest impact when focused on recruiting in Canberra.
4. Continue to collect data and assess whether the tourism and hospitality industry has enough interest from autistic adults.
5. Consider offering autistic adults, who are not selected to participate in the hubs, the opportunity to participate in coaching sessions to get them job-ready. This might include sharing webinars such as 'Understanding my Autism', 'Work Readiness' and 'Stress and Anxiety in the Workplace'.
6. Maintain Capacity Building and Business Readiness Training as a core component of the Program.
  - a. Tailor Autism Awareness Training to different organisational levels. Board-level, executive-level and operational teams will have different needs from the session.
  - b. Include live testimonials or Q&As with employers and autistic candidates who previously took part in Specialisterne's inclusive recruitment program.
7. Target learning about recruiting and employing autistic adults to the current state of each business. i.e. for those that already have a positive perspective, consider what additional value Specialisterne can provide. For those that are hesitant, have more personalised discussions to change perspectives and address concerns.

Discontinuing the program would have detrimental impacts on autistic job seekers, who would struggle to find meaningful employment through mainstream recruitment. But the positive impact of Specialisterne's work may not stop there. Specialisterne is already taking action to make available its Program to job seekers with other forms of diversity (such as ADHD), it is also evolving its service offerings to meet market demand.

For example, with rates of adult diagnosis of neurodiversity increasing in the last few years alone<sup>1</sup>, more individuals who have successfully navigated mainstream recruitment processes are now needing support in their workplaces to be successful. Given that there are significant financial and emotional costs involved with employee attrition (particularly in hard to fill roles) there are significant benefits to employers to be more accommodating. Specialisterne could further support good employment outcomes for neurodiverse adults by scaling up its work in this area.

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<sup>1</sup> S Bain, What's behind the rise in adult ADHD?, Financial Review, 2022. <https://www.afr.com/life-and-luxury/health-and-wellness/what-s-behind-the-rise-in-adult-adhd-20221130-p5c2nh>