

The Rise@DHHS autism hiring program: Examining the impact on the individual and their workplace. FEBRUARY 2019



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1. Summary

The 'Rise@DHHS' autism hiring program was an initiative where the Victorian State Government Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) employed eight autistic individuals as Records Management Officers on two-year full time contracts from July 2017. Specialisterne Australia were contracted to conduct an alternative recruitment process specifically targeted towards autistic job seekers, and to provide support to both DHHS and the new employees in their transition into the workplace.

A research project was conducted by the La Trobe University Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre (OTARC) in conjunction with Specialisterne Australia for DHHS. The research involved an examination of the impact of the hiring program on the existing DHHS employees and the new autistic employees. This report describes the Rise@DHHS initiative and details the research project and findings.

Key findings¹

- **Taking the time to understand autism, and the needs of each individual is important, particularly for supervisors and managers.** The autistic employees reported feeling supported due to their supervisors and managers taking the time to learn about autism and their individual needs. The autistic employees also reported that the support of their supervisors and managers contributed to their work success.
- **Opportunities for professional development are important.** The autistic employees commented that the program provided opportunities for development of professional networks, personal and professional skills, and that they felt their future employability was improved due to participating in this employment program - all positive outcomes.
- **Awareness training is important for co-workers and others in the organisation.** While co-workers in focus groups reported the information provided to them added to their knowledge regarding autism, and the quantitative data indicated that the majority of co-workers who participated valued the program, a few comments suggested that they thought the program was biased against people who weren't autistic. Thus, it is important to inform co-workers why autistic individuals receive support they may not be receiving themselves.
- **Giving people a chance, and including them as equal employees, can change their lives.** In addition to talking about how supported, included, and integrated they felt at DHHS, the autistic employees commented on several positive outcomes as a result of the Rise@DHHS program. These included financial and personal independence, mental and physical wellbeing, personal and professional development, and social relationships.

¹ Key findings were determined from the qualitative data.

1a. Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the DHHS employees (new and existing) who participated in the research project. Their willingness has allowed us to learn and report from these learnings so that programs such as Rise@DHHS can be understood, and any challenges remedied for future iterations so that the positive impact of employment can be shared. We would also like to thank William Vennell (DHHS), who assisted with the logistics of conducting data collection onsite at DHHS, and Ensu Sahin (OTARC), who undertook data collection, analysis of the qualitative data, and provided research support.

This research was funded by a La Trobe University School of Psychology and Public Health Engagement Income Growth Grant awarded to Darren Hedley, Rebecca Flower, Jennifer Spoor, and Cheryl Dissanayake, and a financial contribution from the Victorian State Government Department of Health and Human Services. In kind support was provided by Specialisterne Australia (Dr Rebecca Flower), the OTARC (Dr Darren Hedley, Professor Cheryl Dissanayake, Dr Rebecca Flower), and the La Trobe Business School (Dr Jennifer Spoor).

1b. Conflicts of interest

Conflict of interest issues and management of these were evaluated by the La Trobe University Human Ethics Committee. As an employee of Specialisterne at the time of data collection, Dr Flower and other Specialisterne employees were not involved in participant recruitment and were blinded to participant identity. Dr Flower was not involved in data collection or coding of qualitative data, and only analysed anonymous, quantitative data collected from the existing DHHS employees.

1c. Terminology

Autism Spectrum Disorder is a neurodevelopmental condition as defined in the 5th edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). There are currently no formal recommendations for terminology regarding autism in Australia. Studies have indicated that preferences differ among groups, with many autistic individuals reporting a preference for identity-first language (e.g., 'autistic'; see Kenny et al., 2016).

The language used to refer to autism in this document is that which is preferred by the Rise@DHHS team themselves and terms such as 'autism' 'autism spectrum', and 'autistic' are used interchangeably.

1d. Suggested citation

Flower, R. L., Hedley, D., Spoor, J.,R., & Dissanayake, C. The Rise@DHHS autism hiring program: Examining the impact on the individual and their workplace, Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre (OTARC), La Trobe University, Melbourne, 2019.

2. Foreword: Autism and employment

Autistic Australians are often willing and able potential employees, but also face several challenges when seeking and maintaining work (e.g., Baldwin, Costley, & Warren, 2014; Harmuth et al., 2018; López & Keenan, 2014; Wei et al., 2018). The most recent available data reports that the unemployment rate for autistic individuals of working age (i.e., 15 - 64 years) is 31.6%, which is over three times the rate of unemployment among people with a disability (10%), and approximately six times that among people without a disability (5%; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015). Moreover, autistic individuals are over-represented within the casual workforce, are often over-educated for the roles for which they are employed (Baldwin et al., 2014; National Autistic Society [NAS], 2016), and are more likely to work in temporary roles (Wei et al., 2018).

Autistic individuals face several barriers to employment. Traditional recruitment processes typically involve an interview, which relies on the ability of the candidate to process and respond to questions within a short period of time, to build rapport with the interviewees, and to sell oneself as desirable employee. As a function of their condition, autistic individuals socially relate and communicate differently to non-autistic individuals, potentially disadvantaging them in attaining employment (Harmuth et al., 2018, Hendricks, 2010). Other barriers include lack of access to employment support programs, negative attitudes of employers, and a lack of tailored workplace training (Harmuth et al., 2018). Due to these barriers, autistic individuals frequently experience long periods of time without work (e.g., NAS, 2016; Wei et al., 2018).

In an effort to address the difficulties faced by autistic individuals, a number of employment programs have recently begun to specifically target autistic employees (e.g., SAP, DXC Technology, Microsoft Corporation, Ford Motor Company, Earnst & Young). However, there is limited independent research regarding the success of these programs. To make progress in this area, it is important we understand the factors that lead to challenges and those that lead to success, so that such programs can be improved to ensure that more autistic individuals are meaningfully employed into the future.

This report presents data from an investigation into the autism hiring program at the Victorian DHHS implemented for autistic employees: The Rise@DHHS program.

“They just take us how we are, not as how they expect most people to be, which is really cool.”

- Autistic employee

3. Foreword: DHHS

It's a great privilege to have been a part of creating the Rise@DHHS program and an absolute a joy to witness the team grow in confidence and self-esteem. It is also a wonderful source of pride to see the positive impact the program and individual team members have made across the department and beyond.

The response to the program has been overwhelmingly positive. Of the eight original candidates, seven remain in the department, two of whom are currently on secondment, whilst one left for a full-time job with another government agency.

A new partnership with the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning will see up to three of the team transfer for a three-year term at a higher VPS grade, and I am very pleased to report that a second cohort of Rise@DHHS candidates has now been recruited.

Another recent highlight for the program is the establishment of an internal mentoring program which exposes the team members to other areas of the department and helps them with career progression and planning.

Interest in the Rise@DHHS program has brought invitations for Program Manager Chris Hofmann to undertake influential speaking engagements at external events and conferences including:

- Australasian Society for Autism Research inaugural state conference
- Diversity and Inclusion Community of Practice - Australian Network for Disability Melbourne Roundtable
- La Trobe University Research Showcase
- Disability Employment Australia's Conference

The program also featured at an Australia Pacific Autism Conference and a CPA Congress. It was mentioned in the Victorian Parliament and in a Herald Sun article. A significant achievement was being awarded the DHHS Excellence Award for Diversity and Inclusion, and the overall Champion Award at the recent #TechDiversity Awards.

We have also received requests to advise others considering setting up similar programs including the global consulting firm PwC and a New Zealand government agency.

Rise@DHHS has been a truly rewarding experience for all involved and I look forward to its continued success.



- Dr Steve Hodgkinson, CIO, DHHS

4. The Rise@DHHS autism hiring program

In 2017, DHHS hired eight autistic Records Management Officers through the Rise@DHHS autism hiring program in partnership with Specialisterne Australia. Specialisterne Australia is a not for profit that assists organisations in recruiting and supporting people on the autism spectrum into meaningful employment.

The Specialisterne process has five stages which are described below in relation to the Rise@DHHS program.



Figure 1. The Specialisterne process.

Stage 1: This stage involved Specialisterne representatives understanding the roles to be filled and the environment in which they would take place. Specialisterne representatives visited the DHHS worksite on several occasions to understand the environment, and Records Management staff demonstrated all aspects of the Records Management Officer role. The two parties worked together to determine ways to improve clarity in the roles (e.g., in the way instructions were provided). This information was then used to tailor each stage of the recruitment process to a) provide transparency to the candidates about the roles and the environment in which they would be working, and b) to ensure a high-quality assessment process, where candidates most suitable for the role were chosen.

Stage 2: The second stage involved sourcing autistic job candidates. As the Records Management roles were located in Melbourne, this involved contacting Victorian autism associations, disability employment services, and university career centres in person, by phone and/or email to advertise the opportunity. Interested candidates completed an online survey that enquired about skills preferences relating to the Records Management Officer role, and included an optional task created in collaboration with DHHS that was similar in nature to a key component of the role. Over a period of approximately four weeks, 52 applications were received for the eight positions.

Stage 3: Thirty of the 52 applicants were invited to attend one of three half-day workshops. The Principal Program Manager at DHHS (Chris Hoffman) attended the workshops to provide information about the opportunity and answer questions from applicants. Candidates then completed various assessment activities on which basis a reduced number (12) were shortlisted and invited to a paid 3-week training and assessment program.

The training and assessment program was held onsite at DHHS. Ten² individuals completed the three-week program, which involved various tasks facilitated by Specialisterne, and daily tasks facilitated by the DHHS Records Management team to simulate tasks completed by Records Management Officers. Further, DHHS arranged several speakers throughout the program to provide information to candidates about several aspects

² Two individuals chose to leave the program prior to completion.

of DHHS. The third week involved a sole focus on the Records Management role and was hosted by DHHS. At the conclusion of this program, Specialisterne provided recommendations to DHHS regarding the candidates they thought were most suited to the role, and DHHS made offers of employment to eight individuals.

Stage 4: Prior to and during the training and assessment program, Specialisterne engaged in a number of activities to train the existing DHHS workforce about autism, including group information sessions, distributing information flyers and communication tip sheets, and training for managers that was tailored to the new employees.

Transition activities for the autistic employees (the new 'Rise team') included the Thriving at Work program, a five-day transition to work program created for Specialisterne by Dr Michelle Garnett and Professor Tony Attwood of Minds & Hearts clinic, and specific information relating to the support services available locally and at DHHS.

Stage 5: For the first three months of employment, Specialisterne met regularly with the Records Management team (including both the managers and new employees) to ensure smooth transition of the employees into employment and were available on an as-needed basis. During this time several initiatives were discussed and implemented, including another Department wide training session (this time including members of the Rise team), and a mentoring program (including training for mentors, and mentor-mentee matching sessions). For the following three months Specialisterne remained available for support on an as-needed basis and worked with DHHS to establish the Rise@DHHS mentoring program.

Since the Rise@DHHS autism hiring program, the following activities have taken place:

- A pro-active mentoring program was established, supporting Rise team members to understand the wider department and further their career progression.
- Rise@DHHS program management and Rise team members pro-actively engaged with leaders across the Department to find suitable secondment opportunities. Several team members successfully started secondments, with their place on the Rise team replaced by a new candidate recruited through Specialisterne.
- Rise team members collaborated with other agency advocates from across the Victorian Government to launch the Victorian Public Service Autism Success Network.
- Rise team members provided input into the DHHS Disability Employment Strategy
- Asperger's Victoria have been subcontracted to provide regular support to the Rise team.
- A partnership with the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning was established that will result in three staff transferring to the new agency in February 2019.

Since the Rise@DHHS autism hiring program, the following speaking engagements have taken place:

November 2017: “Session Chair: Autism in Adolescents and Adulthood: Transition and Employment. Community perspectives on autism research”. Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre, Melbourne. Darren Hedley.

November 2017: “Session Chair: Adulthood, well-being, life satisfaction and employment”. Australasian Society for Autism Research inaugural state conference, Melbourne. Darren Hedley.

November 2017: “Hiring individuals on the autism spectrum: Examining change among co-workers.” Australasian Society for Autism Research inaugural state conference, Melbourne. Presented by Rebecca Flower, Darren Hedley, Jennifer Spoor, Cheryl Dissanayake, Timothy Bartram, & Amanda Richdale.

April 2018: “Autism in the workplace: The Rise@DHHS program”. Diversity and Inclusion Community of Practice - Autism Awareness: Rise@DHHS, Melbourne. Presented by Chris Hofmann, Amelia Stewart, Adam Walton (DHHS), Rebecca Flower (Specialisterne), Darren Hedley (OTARC, La Trobe University).

June 2018: “Inclusion by neurodiversity”. Australian Network for Disability Melbourne Roundtable, Melbourne. Presented by Rebecca Flower, Vicky Little (Specialisterne), Chris Hofmann, Louise Mackenzie (DHHS).

August 2018: “Hiring individuals with autism: Examining the impact on the individual and their workplace.” La Trobe University Research Showcase, Melbourne. Poster presented by Rebecca Flower (Specialisterne), and Darren Hedley (OTARC, La Trobe University).

September 2018: “Hiring individuals with autism: Examining the impact on the individual and their workplace”. Disability Employment Australia Conference, Adelaide. Presented by Rebecca Flower (Specialisterne), Chris Hofmann (DHHS).

February 2019: “Employing people with autism: Improving adult outcomes.” Invited keynote address at the University of Haifa Autism Conference, Israel. Presented by Darren Hedley.

5. The research project



5a. Project aims

The first Aim in the research was to understand the experience of the Rise@DHHS autism hiring program for the autistic individuals, including their perceptions of the alternative assessment program (including enablers and barriers) and the impact of the program on their life.

The second aim was to understand the experience of the Rise@DHHS autism hiring program for existing DHHS employees (hereafter referred to as co-workers), including their perceptions of the program, and assessing whether organisational factors such as engagement and organisational commitment were influenced by the program.

5b. Views of the autistic employees

Approximately four months into the Rise@DHHS program, the seven³ Rise team members were invited to participate in one-on-one interviews with a researcher (from OTARC at La Trobe University), who facilitated all interviews. Five employees from the Rise team chose to participate⁴ in these interviews, which were held onsite in a private meeting room (on a separate floor from the remaining team and team manager) to maintain confidentiality. A semi-structured format was used, where the researcher asked the autistic participants a series of questions which allowed discussion to go in different directions. Each interview lasted approximately 40 minutes and was audio recorded.

The interviews were transcribed and any identifying information about the autistic participants was removed. The data was then coded using inductive content analysis. NVivo 11 (QSR-International, 2015) was used to code and analyse all transcriptions. As displayed in Figure 2, within the four categories (Perception of program, Enablers, Challenges, and Program Outcome), 13 themes were identified, with 11 subthemes emerging from the data.

³ One Rise team member was offered another position interstate soon after starting a role at DHHS. He/she subsequently took that role and left the Department.

⁴ Please note that the authors of this report have not been informed which members of the Rise team participated in the research project. The photos of the Rise team members included in this report may or may not be the same members that participated in the interviews.

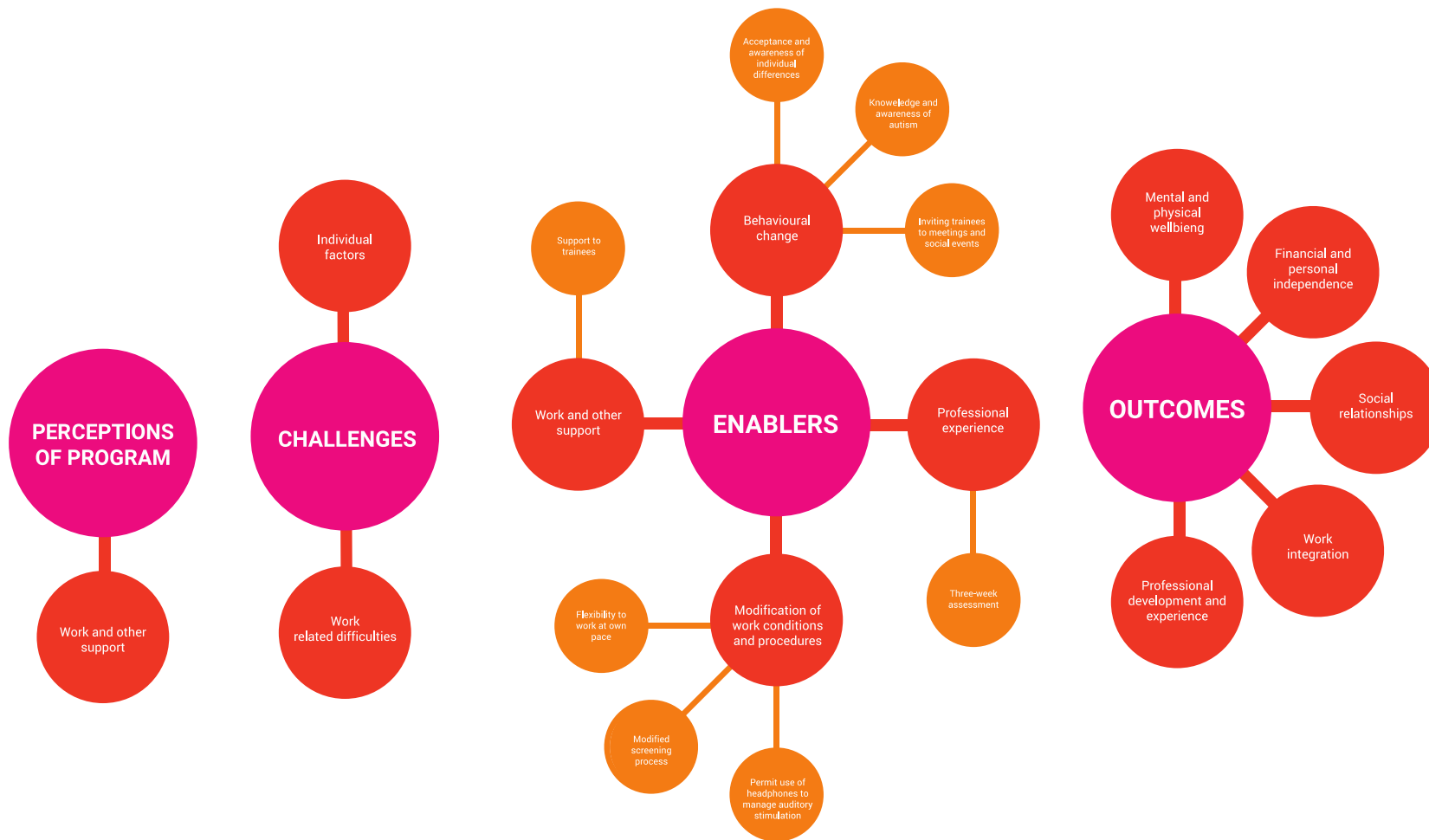


Figure 2. Themes identified in interviews with the Rise@DHHS autistic team members who chose to participate.



Below we describe each of the themes and subthemes presented in Figure 2 and provide example quotes.

Autistic employees' perceptions of the Rise@DHHS program

As described above, the three-week training and assessment program challenged the traditional recruitment process. The process involved simulated records management activities onsite at DHHS, and a number of activities facilitated by Specialisterne and DHHS.

Three-week assessment

The autistic employees commented on the three-week training and assessment program facilitated by Specialisterne, stating that it was stressful being assessed over a prolonged period of time.

"The assessment period was very stressful... A lot of that I recognised beforehand was going to be internally imposed, I would impose it upon myself rather than that being imposed by anyone outside.", and

"The three-week training program for this job was very stressful... It was like interview stress but kind of spread out over three weeks." and

"Our knowledge that the people from Specialisterne were watching us the whole time, writing things down and watching how we worked in pairs [that was stressful]."

During post-analysis clarification with the Rise team, one of the members stated the following about the information presented above:

"I disagree with these three statements above...I didn't find it as stressful as doing an interview. It was so much better than the interview process. I much preferred it over the interview process. I felt I was able to get across what I was capable of doing, which [I] haven't been able to do in an interview."

Enablers to success in the workplace for the autistic employees

It is important to understand which parts of the program the autistic employees found successful. In past studies of autism hiring programs, enablers to success reported by autistic employees have included environmental modifications, acceptance of autism, and support of co-workers, managers and support staff (Hedley et al., 2018; Remington & Pellicano, 2018).

"I really couldn't ask more from my supervisors, getting on-the-job support."

- Autistic employee

Behavioural change

Acceptance and awareness of individual differences. Autistic employees commented that the acceptance of existing DHHS employees had fostered good work relationships.

"Everyone's been a lot more friendly and accommodating."

Knowledge and awareness of autism. Autistic employees commented on how the autism knowledge of their manager and supervisors had supported the provision of necessary accommodations.

"I feel really supported because the manager actually researched about our different needs and what we might need for the job."

Inviting trainees to meetings and social events. Autistic employees noted that attending meetings and social events fostered a sense of work integration.

"We're always included in all the meetings and we have these little huddles every week - every Monday...So I feel like we're just part of the team."

Professional work experience

Three-week experience. Autistic employees noted the three-week training and assessment program was helpful in preparing them for their roles as Records Management Officers.

"I think what helped us get used to the job was the fact that we got challenges, when we were doing the three-week training and the challenges were really useful because it helped us know what we were getting prepared for."

Modification of work conditions and procedures

Flexibility to work at one's own pace. Autistic employees commented that they believed the workload was tailored to their abilities, and that this flexibility assisted with their workplace success.

"I think our workload is tailored directly towards our abilities. In a lot of ways it's not stressful... we're not given a KPI to - you have to make this or you'll get a telling off, or what have you... So I'm doing it at the rate that I should be, not what artificially constructed pressure that I put on - an arbitrary number that I put on myself that I have to do."

Modified screening process. Autistic employees commented that the alternative recruitment pathway was much better than the traditional recruitment process.

"The three-week assessment, the whole assessment process was much better than a job interview, than a regular standard process."

Permit use of headphones to manage auditory stimulation. Autistic employees noted that offering members of the team the opportunity to use headphones if needed assisted the team with being successful at work.

"I think for long term it's made this job a lot more sustainable."

Work and other support

Support to Rise team. Autistic employees commented that the support offered to them by DHHS, and in particular from their supervisors and manager, has contributed to their work success.

"He's very accommodating, my manager. He always answers any questions we have and if we make any mistakes, he's happy to tell us what to do better next time. He doesn't get cross if we make the errors."

Challenges/barriers to success in the workplace for the autistic employees

In past studies of autism hiring programs, barriers to success reported by autistic employees have included unfulfilling work, communication and social challenges, unfulfilled promises, and task related challenges (Hedley et al., 2018; Remington & Pellicano, 2018).

Individual factors

Autistic employees noted some of the challenges they faced, which included being able to focus, reporting that too much social interaction leads to tiredness, and needing notice about events in advance.

"...too much social interaction does tire me, especially with people I don't know well."

Work-related difficulties

Autistic employees noted difficulty directly related to their role - being able to adjust when their indexing instructions changed⁵, and remembering the new instructions. Such reports may relate to executive functioning difficulties experienced by autistic individuals.

"Every time we move to a new group of boxes, there's completely different rules sometimes [that's challenging]. So we need a new briefing from the managers and you have to really keep your head, in case you accidentally enter something wrong, which - oh I accidentally did this because it was of the last group. I thought, oh, I've been entering that all day and I accidentally did it on this one. Wasn't supposed to."

Outcomes of the Rise@DHHS program for the autistic employees

Outcomes for autistic individuals documented in studies of past autism hiring programs have included having a better understanding of autism, feeling a sense of purpose and independence, and improvements in social relationships (Hedley et al., 2018).

Financial and personal independence

Autistic employees noted being able to afford things they were unable to afford previously, and mentioned it being a step in a positive direction.

"I didn't think I'd be able to get a full-time job. I never quite believed that I would actually be employed. It's been a surprise, and the next step in my life, step ladder of success sort of thing."

Mental and physical well-being

Autistic employees noted that the program helped to improve their mental and physical wellbeing, specifically mentioning improved sleep patterns, increased happiness, and feeling a sense of balance.

"I've reached a life/life balance here."

⁵ As Records Management Officers, the Rise team are provided new indexing instructions for each project they work on, depending on the requirement of that project.

Social relationships

Autistic employees noted that the program increased their opportunity to develop social relationships.

"Over the three-week training course, I got to know everyone in the Rise program pretty well... So it's definitely helped build a connection with people."

Work integration

Autistic employees expressed a feeling of being well-integrated into their workplace.

"I feel we've integrated pretty well. We're always included in all the meetings and we have these little huddles every week."

Professional development and experience

Professional networks. Autistic employees commented that the program had provided opportunities to develop their professional networks within a short period of time.

Personal and professional skills. Autistic employees noted that the program provided opportunities to develop their personal and professional skills, including but not limited to computer skills, the ability to work in a team, problem solving, patience, and public speaking.

"I believe I'm picking up ancillary skills that I don't even realise are skills until I get put in a different environment."

Employability. Autistic employees believed their time in the program would help to improve their future employability.

"I'll actually have something to put down on my resume now that's actual employmentThat's going to really help with future employment."

5c. Views of the co-workers

Focus groups

Approximately four months after the Rise team began working at DHHS as Records Management Officers, existing DHHS employees in the Records Management Unit were invited to participate in either focus groups or one-on-one interviews. Ten of these DHHS employees participated in three focus groups, which were held onsite and lasted approximately 40 minutes.

The focus group data were transcribed and identifying information about participants was removed. As displayed in Figure 3, within the four categories (Perception of program, Enablers, Challenges, and Program Outcome), nine themes were identified, with eight subthemes emerging from the data.

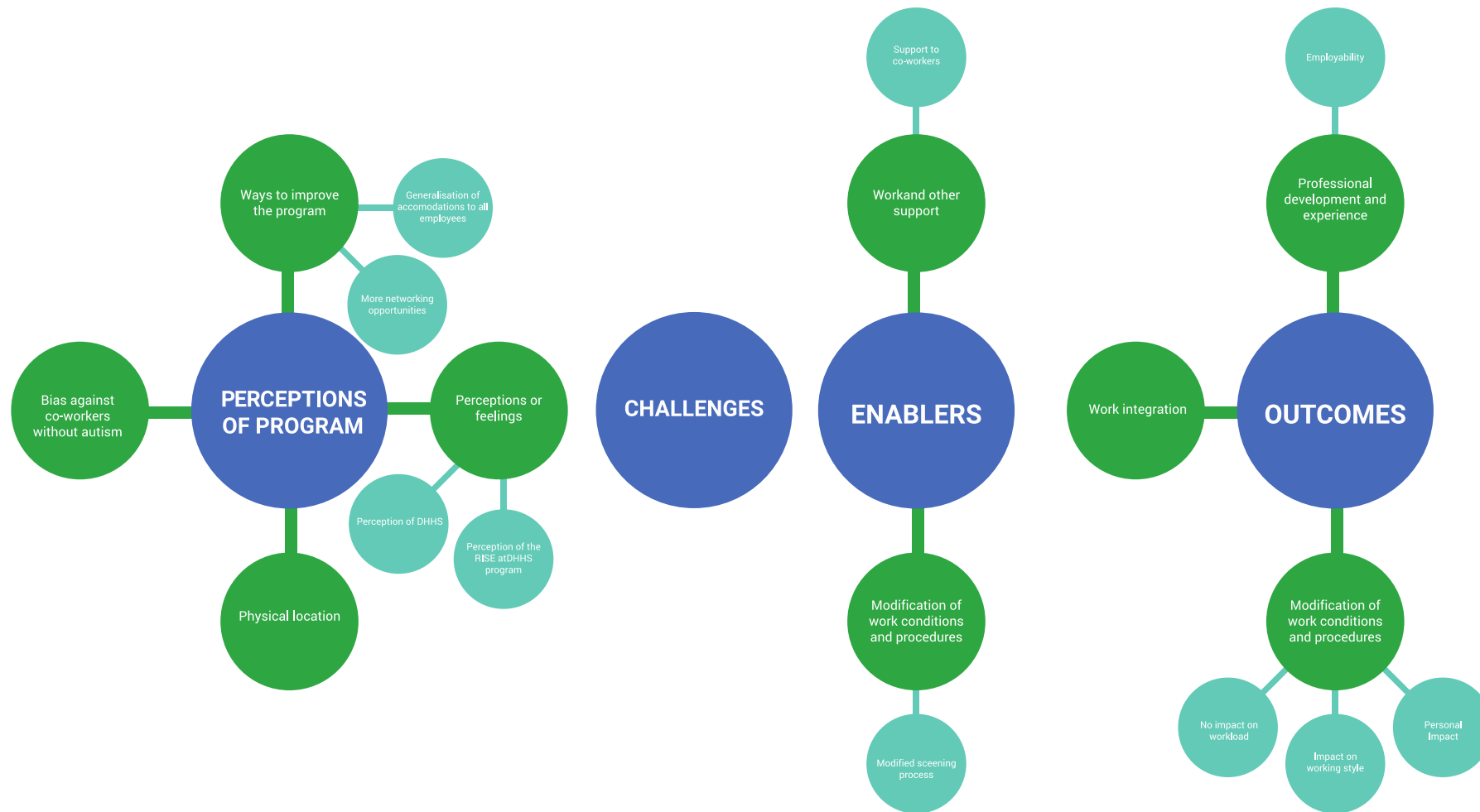


Figure 3. Themes identified in interviews with the Rise@DHHS existing team members who chose to participate.



Below we describe each of the themes and subthemes presented in Figure 3 and provide example quotes.

Co-workers' perceptions of the Rise@DHHS program

As described above, the three-week training and assessment program challenged the traditional recruitment process. The process involved simulated records management activities onsite at DHHS, and a number of activities facilitated by Specialisterne and DHHS. Co-workers were invited to attend the program and speak about DHHS or visit the assessment program as it was taking place.

Perceptions or feelings

Perception of DHHS. Co-workers expressed no change in their feeling and perceptions about working for DHHS but reported feeling proud.

"I don't think my perception or perspective has changed as such. I am very proud of the Department for being a pioneer in this program in terms of other state government agencies that could definitely benefit from following."

Perception of the Rise@DHHS program. Co-workers expressed positive perceptions towards the Rise@DHHS program including that they thought it was a great program, a positive step for the Department, and that it was a successful program.

"My perspective of the program is all very positive... To be involved in a program like the Rise program, which I think is something that the Department can be proud of. From my interaction with the individuals in the group, it seems they are very proud to be here too. I think that's really cool."

"All I could say is that it's 100 per cent worthwhile doing to make a difference in these people's lives and also it's something that any organisation should be proud to be a part of."

Physical location

Co-workers expressed concern that as the Rise team sit together, they may feel isolated, and they didn't want that to be the case.⁶

"I don't want them to feel like they're isolated because they're sitting all together."

Bias and learning

Some co-workers noted that they believed the program was biased against people without autism in that it allowed more leniency and excluded other groups of people. However, during the course of the focus group, some of these individuals changed their views and noted the additional leniency with regard to recruitment was required in order to give autistic people a fair go.

Ways to improve the program

More networking opportunities. Co-workers expressed the need to increase internal networking opportunities for the autistic employees.

Generalisation of accommodations to all employees. Co-workers commented that both the recruitment process and supports in the Rise program would be of benefit to many people, not just autistic employees and should be offered more broadly by the Department.

"I think this type of different process, where instead of having - giving people interviews and having them talk about what they can do or can't do, having a process where they're actually given tasks to do. You see how they go about actually doing those tasks, wouldn't just benefit for autism. I think it would benefit a lot of people."

"The HR process has to be able to accommodate this as a natural part of the process... - it shouldn't have to be a special circumstance."

⁶ DHHS noted that the team sit together not as they are autistic, because it is more efficient due to the nature of their shared work.

Enablers to success in the workplace for co-workers

In past studies of autism hiring programs, enablers to success reported by colleagues of autistic employees have included working in close proximity to the new employees, and being mindful of communication style (Hedley et al., 2018).

Modification of work conditions and procedures

Modified screening process. Co-workers commented that the screening process was quite different.

"It's quite an involved different recruitment process for people with autism."

Work and other support

Support to co-workers. Co-workers noted that the support provided (i.e., the information session about autism) was sufficient in order for them to know what to expect when working alongside autistic colleagues and improved their knowledge of autism.

"You have a different perception of it until you go there and listen... You get more of an understanding..."

Challenges/barriers to success in the workplace for co-workers

Challenges noted in past studies of autism hiring programs have included colleagues finding it challenging when autistic individuals did not follow expected social behaviour, managers and team members feeling that instructions and feedback were not taken on-board, and individuals becoming overly focussed on minor details (Remington & Pellicano, 2018).

In the current study, co-workers did not identify any challenges associated with the RISE program.

"I'm proud to say to people outside of this organisation - how proud and excited I am that we've got this team on-board."

- Co-worker

Outcomes of the Rise@DHHS program for co-workers

Outcomes for co-workers documented in studies of past autism hiring programs have included improved understanding of autism (e.g., feeling autistic individuals bring benefits to an organisation, changing perceptions of autism), and recognising a benefit in having individuals who will approach problems from a different perspective (Hedley et al., 2018; Remington & Pellicano, 2018).

Professional development and experience

Employability. Co-workers recognised that working at the Department would improve the employability of the Rise team.

Work integration

Co-workers expressed the opinion that the Rise team were well-integrated at DHHS.

Impact of program and trainees on co-workers

No impact on workload. Co-workers commented that the Rise team had not changed their workload.

"Whether it were this particular team, or another team brought in to continue this indexing work, it's really made no difference... No real impact on me whatsoever, to be perfectly honest."

Personal impact. Co-workers commented that the program had a positive impact on their personal life.

"I think we've benefitted more than what they may have benefitted. We get more out of seeing possibly them excel in this area as individuals, knowing that they are not separate from anyone."

Impact on working style. Co-workers noted some change in workload as a result of the Rise team being on-board, including less issues than in the past, and being mindful of things like clarity in communication.

"For work, it's easier, because something new about our day have been improved, input in the system."

"I've got to prepare briefings for the indexing that they're doing. It just requires more clarity and no ambiguity. You just need to be mindful of it."

"Thanks to getting that strong team leader into that team, there is not a lot of impact for me as well... Less than what I had before. I had large teams and small teams before, doing the same work, and I had more issues back then before than I have now."

"There is a slight impact, but it's very minimal and compared to previous teams who have been doing the same thing, it's a lot less."

Online survey (pre/post hire of the Rise team)



Prior to the Rise team commencing at DHHS, and three months following their commencement, co-workers in the Business Technology & Information Management Branch (in which the Records Management Unit sits) were invited to complete an online survey regarding their opinion of, and experiences with, the Rise@DHHS program. Co-workers were informed about the survey via email, which was sent out by the Manager of the Rise program. Responses were anonymous.

Sixty-three⁷ co-workers participated in the first phase of the study, which was sent out two weeks prior to the Rise team starting work and closed on the Rise team’s second full day as Records Management Officers.

Thirty-six⁸ co-workers participated in the second phase of the study (56% of whom also participated in Time 1), which was sent out 12 weeks following the Rise team starting work full time at DHHS and closed 22 weeks⁹ following their start date.

Table 1 displays the demographic data of the participants at Times 1 and 2.

Table 1. Age, gender, tenure and employment type of co-workers at Times 1 and 2.

Survey	Age	Gender	Employment type	Tenure at DHHS
Time 1 N = 63	19% ≤ 34 years	60% male	92% Full time	19% ≤ 2 years
	60% 35-54 years	38% female		19% 3-4 years
	21% 55+ years	2% prefer not to respond		62% 5+ years
Time 2 N = 36	11% ≤ 34 years	56% male	91% Full time	37% ≤ 2 years
	64% 35-54 years	39% female		20% 3-4 years
	25% 55+ years	5% prefer not to respond		43% 5+ years

⁷ N = 73 individuals opened the survey, however n = 13 were excluded, either as they did not respond to any items (n = 8), or as they included their demographic information but did not complete any of the scales (n = 5).

⁸ N = 60 individuals opened the survey, however n = 24 were excluded, either as they did not respond to any items (n = 11), or as they provided their demographic information but did not complete any of the scales (n = 13).

⁹ The survey remained open for longer than was originally planned for due to a slow completion rate.

Co-workers were asked about their knowledge of the Rise@DHHS program at both time points. Figure 4 displays their level of knowledge, and a number of people who participated in the surveys had no knowledge, or limited knowledge, of the program across both time points.

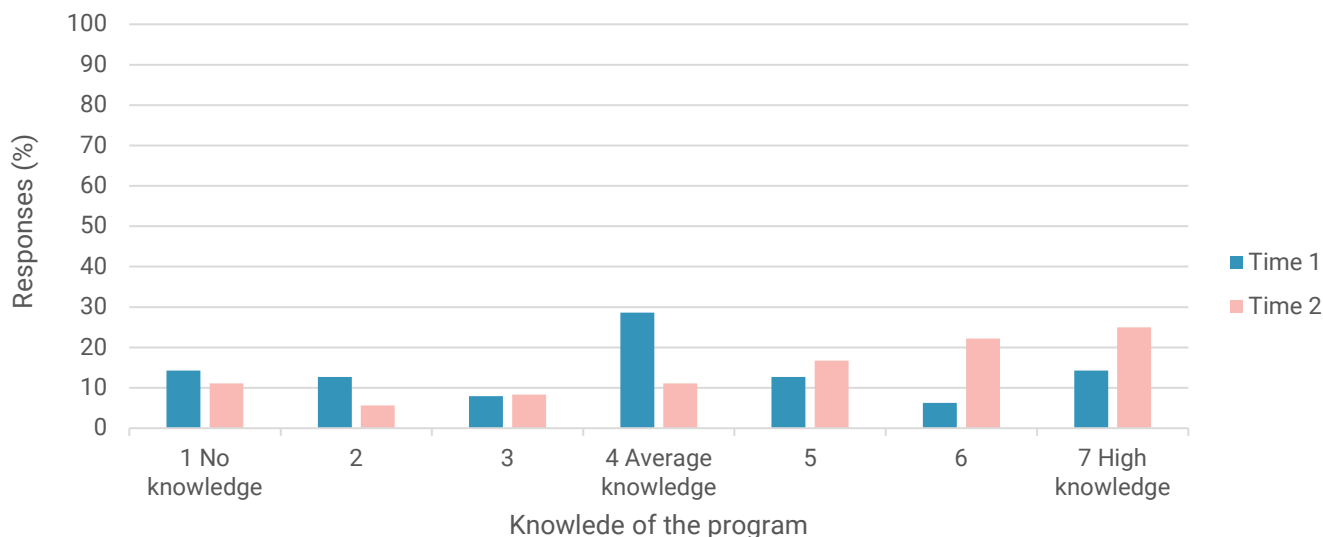


Figure 4. Co-workers' knowledge of the Rise@DHHS program at Time 1 (n = 63) and Time 2 (n = 36).

At Time 2, co-workers were also asked how frequently they interacted with the Rise team. Figure 5 displays the frequency with which participants reported interacting with the Rise team, with almost 40% of respondents never having interacted with the Rise team.

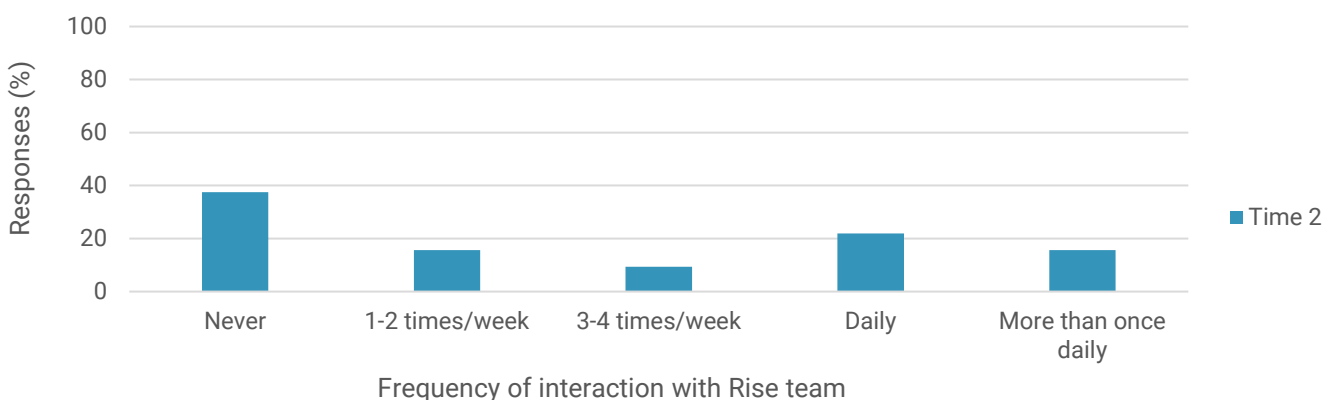


Figure 5. Frequency of co-worker's interaction with the Rise team.

Co-workers were asked to complete scales that measure Employee Engagement, Job Satisfaction, and Organisational Commitment.

Employee Engagement: The Employee Engagement scale created by Saks (2006) was used. Items include ‘I am highly engaged in this job’, and ‘Being a member of this organisation is exhilarating for me’. Participants were asked to respond on a 7-point scale with anchors ‘Strongly Disagree’ and ‘Strongly Agree’.

Job satisfaction: The study also used the Job Satisfaction scale created by Saks (2006). Items include ‘All in all, I am satisfied with my job’, and ‘In general, I like working here’. Participants were asked to respond on a 7-point scale with anchors ‘Strongly Disagree’ and ‘Strongly Agree’.

Organisational Commitment: The Organisational Commitment scale (Saks, 2006) included items ‘I feel a strong sense of belonging to my organization’, and ‘I am proud to tell others I work at my organization’. Participants were asked to respond on a 7-point scale with anchors ‘Strongly Disagree’ and ‘Strongly Agree’.

Table 2 displays the means and standard deviations on the three scales at Time 1 and Time 2¹⁰. It is apparent that there were no discernible differences in engagement, satisfaction, or organisational commitment across Times 1 and 2. However, it should be noted that only a small number of employees who completed the survey before the Rise team started work participated in the second survey. Therefore, we were unable to accurately determine whether these variables changed over time among co-workers.

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations for Employee Engagement, Job Satisfaction, and Organisational Commitment at Times 1 and 2.

Scale	Time 1	Time 2	Time 2 (those who participated in both Time 1 and Time 2)
Employee Engagement	M = 53.91 SD = 12.17 n = 54	M = 52.97 SD = 11.04 n = 29	M = 52.06 SD = 12.62 n = 17
Job Satisfaction	M = 17.34 SD = 3.19 n = 58	M = 17.68 SD = 2.98 n = 31	M = 17.05 SD = 3.00 n = 19
Organisational Commitment	M = 33.17 SD = 7.16 n = 54	M = 34.73 SD = 7.98 n = 30	M = 34.22 SD = 8.32 n = 18

Note. The total possible scores for the Employee Engagement scale was 77; for the Job Satisfaction scale was 21; and for the Organisational Commitment scale was 49.

Co-workers were also asked questions about their commitment to organisational change, and openness to diversity. The following Figures 6, 7, and 8, display their responses from the Time 2 survey. As can be seen in Figures 6, 7, and 8, the majority of responses about the program were quite positive, with no negative responses for any of the three items. Interestingly, a number of participants did not respond to the items. In these cases,

¹⁰ Note that the number of participants who responded to each scale differs, as some participants responded to some scales and not others. For the purpose of this report, participants were excluded for any scales where they missed an item or skipped the whole scale but were included in analyses for scales for which they completed all items.

they missed the whole scale, not just these items (and it was common for participants to skip one or more whole scales while completing the study- ten of 36 participants in Time 2 did this).

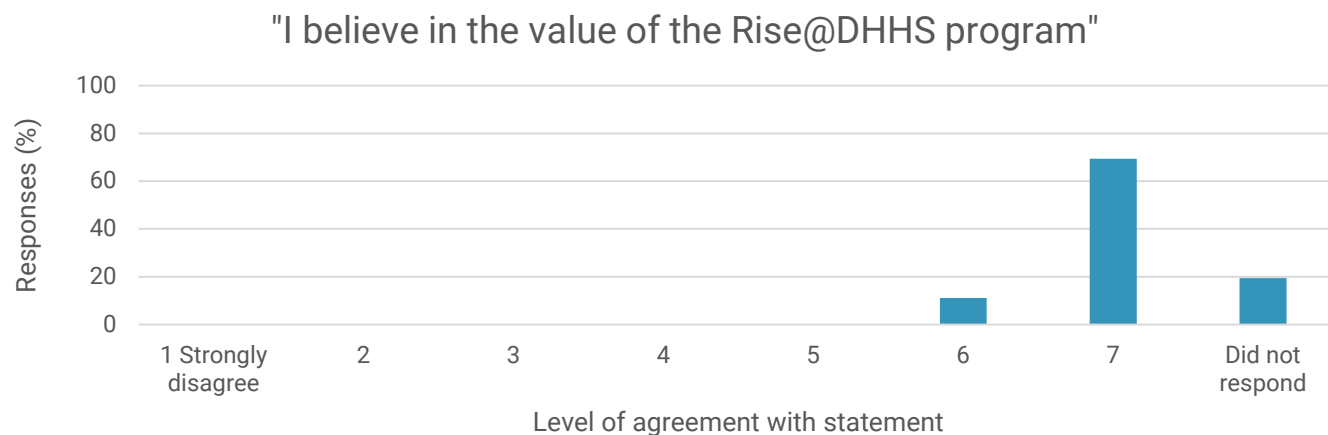


Figure 5. Co-workers' belief in the value of the Rise@DHHS program.

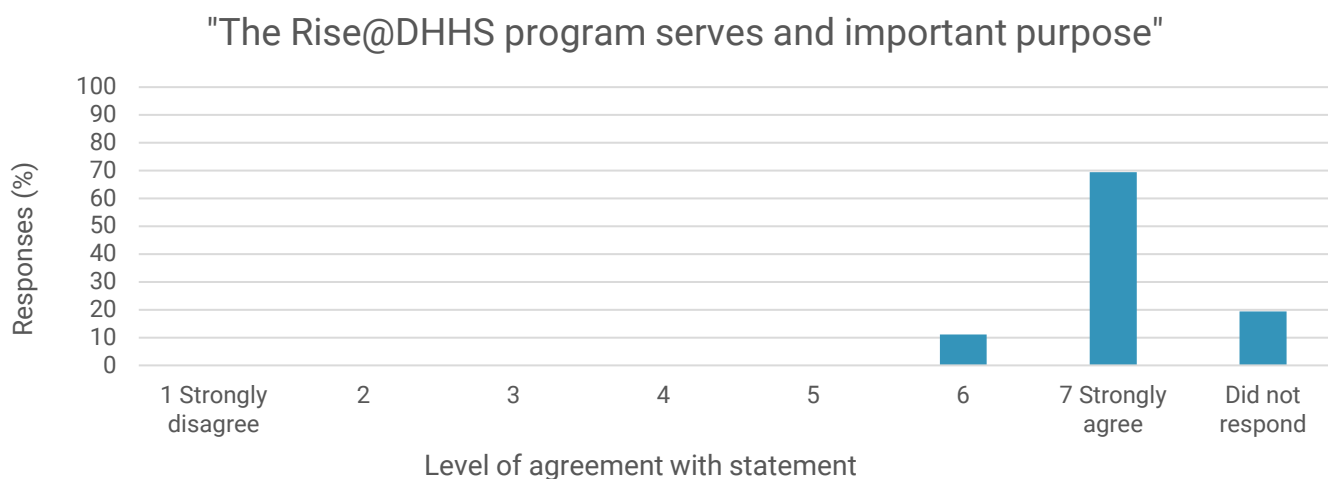


Figure 6. Co-workers' level of agreement regarding the importance of the Rise@DHHS program.

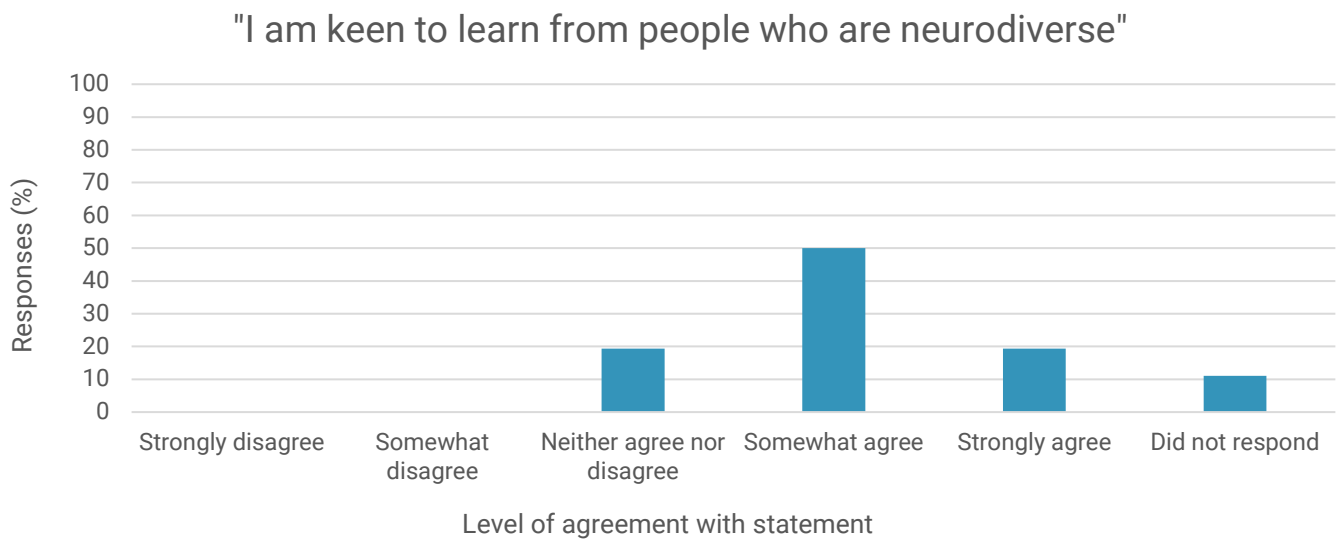


Figure 7. Co-workers' reported motivation to learn from neurodiverse people.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

The research findings yielded largely positive responses about the Rise@DHHS program, as reported by both the autistic employees and the existing DHHS employees. Participants from the Rise team reported feeling included, accepted, and integrated into the DHHS workforce, and reported their employment having a positive impact on their health and wellbeing. The existing employees reported feeling proud of the Department for conducting the program, a positive impact on themselves as individuals (seeing others being given a change to excel), and most feeling like they had grown personally through their involvement with the program.

While organisational outcomes (such as employee engagement, job satisfaction and organisational commitment) did not change among existing employees as a result of the program, it is important to note that only a small number of employees participated in both the Time 1 and Time 2 surveys, which represents a limitation of the study. Therefore, the findings may not reflect actual change in these outcomes over time. Further, many of the participants in the surveys had not heard of the Rise@DHHS program and had never interacted with the Rise team members.

Of the participants who were existing employees who knew about the program, the majority reported believing in the value of the program and that the program as serving an important purpose.

Having more individuals participate in future studies, particularly those who interact with the team, would assist in achieving a better understanding the perspective of existing employees. While several strategies were attempted for recruitment, recruiting existing employees proved a challenge.

Based on the study findings, we recommend:

- Continuing to understand and support each team member as an individual with unique needs. The understanding and support from their management team was highlighted by the Rise team as beneficial to their success at DHHS.
- Discussing with the Rise team strategies they could implement to address individual challenges. While the individual challenges raised weren't mentioned as barriers to success in their current role, assisting the Rise employees in addressing areas where they have identified challenges may assist them in future roles and workplaces. For example, finding strategies to help them focus (e.g., scheduling regular breaks), in advocating for themselves (e.g., requesting information about events in advance), and strategies to assist them with remembering the new indexing instructions may benefit both the individual and the rest of the team.
- Continuing to provide professional development opportunities for the Rise team. Participants from the Rise team commented on opportunities to develop their professional network as a positive outcome of the program, while co-workers commented on the need to increase networking opportunities for the team. Mentors of the Rise team members should be encouraged to facilitate networking or professional development opportunities in line with their mentee's wishes.
- Ensuring information sessions explain why support is needed for autistic employees. While co-workers in focus groups reported the information provided to them added to their knowledge regarding autism, and the quantitative data indicated the majority of participants saw the value of the program, some comments made by co-workers suggested that they thought the program was biased against people who weren't autistic. It is important for co-workers to understand why autistic employees receive support that may not be available for non-autistic employees.

Overall, the data suggests the Rise@DHHS pilot program was a success, with many positive outcomes, and few challenges that could be readily addressed in future programs. The Rise@DHHS program, which challenged traditional Human Resource processes, may be suitable for extension to other areas of the Department.

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