

# “I Would Love to Just Be Myself”: What Autistic Women Want at Work

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## Abstract

**Background:** Autistic individuals experience barriers obtaining and sustaining employment. In the general population, gender also impacts labor market experiences. Understanding the occupational aspirations and expectations of individuals disaggregated by autism diagnosis and gender may assist the development of tailored workplace policies and support strategies.

**Methods:** We used inductive thematic analysis to understand the employment expectations of 89 participants (34 autistic women, 32 typically developing women, and 23 autistic men) who answered open-ended items in an online survey. Participants were ages 18 to 68 years. We identified themes and compared these by autism diagnosis and gender.

**Results:** The first major theme emerging from the data was the desire for an opportunity to have a fulfilling career (i.e., fit), with associated minor themes of job-person and person-environment fit. With no associated minor themes, the second and third major themes were desire for stable employment and low hope for finding meaningful work. Differences were apparent by autism diagnosis and not gender.

**Conclusions:** It is pertinent that autistic women have job-person and person-environment fit to thrive at work. Workplace policies and procedures influencing attitudinal, structural, and procedural change appear warranted to facilitate inclusion of autistic women in the labor market.

**Keywords:** ASD, Asperger’s, employment, female, job, sex

## Lay Summary

*Why was this study done?*

Autistic people have a lot of difficulties gaining and maintaining suitable work. Yet, no one has asked autistic women what they hope their future in the workforce could look like. Asking this question can highlight problems and possible solutions to help autistic women gain and maintain meaningful employment.

*What was the purpose of this study?*

To help understand the aspirations of autistic women regarding their employment.

*What did the researchers do?*

We asked autistic and nonautistic women, as well as autistic men, in Australia to answer open-ended questions in an online survey about work. One question was “what do you hope for your future in the workforce?” We organized people’s responses into categories, or themes, which described different aspects of participants’ answers. We then compared written responses of the autistic and nonautistic women, as well as the answers of autistic women and men.

*What were the results of the study?*

Participants’ responses can be described with three major themes: (1) an opportunity to have a fulfilling career that matches interests and skills in a suitable environment; (2) wanting stable employment; and (3) having low hope

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for finding meaningful work. Finding a job that suits interests, skills, and work preferences within a supportive environment was mentioned as vital for sustained participation in the labor market by autistic women. Although these things were also mentioned by nonautistic women, they were much more important for autistic women. Furthermore, autistic women's and men's aspirations are similar, and of equal importance to each of them.

*What do these findings add to what was already known?*

Much is already known about the experiences of autistic men in the workplace. This study addresses and builds on the little research about the occupational aspirations and expectations of autistic women. The results of this study suggest that autistic women want an opportunity to find meaningful and stable work where they “fit in” with the freedom to be themselves. Because some similarities were found between what autistic and nonautistic women (as well as autistic men) need in the workplace, if changes affecting businesses are made to help autistic women, more people would benefit.

*What are potential weaknesses in the study?*

This research is limited by the way information was obtained from participants, and sample characteristics; for example, the autistic women were diagnosed with autism at a younger age than the autistic men. It is a small, qualitative study from a single open-ended survey item. Obtaining participants using social media may mean people in metropolitan areas more likely participated. Furthermore, the sample was from Australia only, looked at people who identified as women or men, and did not address racial or ethnic diversity.

*How will these findings help autistic adults now or in the future?*

Understanding the aspirations of autistic women can suggest interventions that help them succeed in the workforce. The strong desire for job-person-environment fit by autistic women could, for example, suggest encouraging more flexible workplace practices supportive of career development. Or, it could suggest creating a free, or subsidized, support service to help autistic people of all ages find work that matches (or can be molded) to suit their skills, abilities, work preferences, and environmental (e.g., sensory) needs.

## Introduction

MEANINGFUL OCCUPATION, INCLUDING PAID WORK, is a basic human right.<sup>1</sup> Yet, gaining and maintaining employment are challenging for autistic people who do not have a comorbid intellectual disability.<sup>2,3</sup> These individuals commonly report workplace difficulties relating to unemployment<sup>3-5</sup> and underemployment,<sup>3,5,6</sup> as well as negative social, economic, and health outcomes.<sup>3-6</sup> Although social and communication issues appear to be a central vocational obstacle,<sup>2,7</sup> and are a key characteristic of an autism diagnosis,<sup>8</sup> the culture of many organizations today overemphasizes social and communication proficiency. It is seen as vital for individuals to obtain and sustain employment<sup>9,10</sup>; for example, by passing a traditional interview and taking verbal instruction. Yet, maximizing the fit between individual characteristics, skills, and aspirations within the inherent requirements of a workplace can benefit employee and employer.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, understanding the future vocational aspirations and expectations of autistic people may suggest ways the fit between these individuals and employers can be maximized to support them toward meaningful yet sustainable work.

Current evidence regarding the labor market support needs of autistic people focuses on past employment experiences.<sup>2,6,12,13</sup> This is with the exception of literature on autistic students' readiness to enter the workforce.<sup>14</sup> These students, for example, describe wanting to obtain an enjoyable job that is not stressful. Few articles examine the vocational aspirations and expectations of autistic people already in the labor market, which could aid understanding of what they see as needed for future meaningful and sustainable participation. Three articles found that

autistic participants want greater understanding of their needs at work.<sup>3,5,6</sup> They also desire access to workplace counseling or support for social and communication challenges.<sup>3</sup> One published report stated that their sample of autistic people want to obtain a new job, move into self-employment, advance their career, or become better at their current role.<sup>4</sup>

Of the studies examining retrospective accounts of autistic employees' vocational needs, few have used a control group of same gendered typically developing (TD) individuals. In addition, most of what is known concerning autistic employees' future vocational needs is either dominated by male participants<sup>4-6</sup> or data disaggregated by gender are not reported.<sup>3</sup> United Nations reports reveal that women with disability face considerably more and stronger vocational barriers compared with both women without disability and men with disability.<sup>1</sup> Understanding differences between groups of autistic and TD women, as well as autistic women and men, may facilitate development of customized organizational diversity management strategies, leading to enhanced inclusion. On the contrary, if there are similarities between these groups, this could stress the importance of more general workforce inclusion strategies.

Comparing autistic and TD women, it is known that the former group is less likely to be represented in full-time employment.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, autistic women are more likely than TD women to describe difficulty obtaining as well as sustaining employment, and experience social exclusion.<sup>2</sup> To date, occupational differences have not been found between autistic women and men.<sup>2,15</sup> Given little literature available, comparing women and men more broadly, women experience decreased representation in the labor market.<sup>16</sup> Women

also have more difficulties maintaining employment.<sup>16–18</sup> They also face further barriers developing careers consistent with their skills and achieving career advancement known as *glass ceiling* effects.<sup>19–21</sup>

Thus, it is not yet known if the future career aspirations of autistic women differ from TD women, or autistic men. This study aims to understand the desires of autistic women, including those currently in the labor market, and if these differ by autism diagnosis or gender. As autistic women are the focus of this study, their accounts are compared with TD women and autistic men.

## Methods

We developed an anonymous online survey asking for written feedback, as evidence suggests autistic individuals prefer online and written communication.<sup>22,23</sup> Combining these two elements provides a medium conducive to supporting self-expression and comprehension.<sup>24</sup>

The survey in its entirety was designed to enquire about different aspects of general employment experiences; for example, past, present, and future. The information reported in this article was captured solely from online survey responses. The survey provided up to seven opportunities for

participants to provide open responses, including but not limited to topics of underemployment, employment history, experiences of bullying and discrimination, as well as workplace support. It was developed primarily by an autistic woman and checked by one each of the following: an autistic woman, a TD woman, an autistic man, and a TD man. Checking was deemed necessary to ensure the questions would be widely understood without being leading. The specific question reported upon herein was designed to capture future employment aspirations and expectations with the aim of description without inference. This question was, “what do you hope for your future in the workforce?”

## Participants

We collected data from 89 participants, all of whom resided in Australia and were older than 18 years. The survey asked participants to identify as autistic or not autistic, and whether or not they had a formal diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder, Asperger’s disorder, or “high functioning autism.” We excluded data from 31 self-identified autistic participants as they reported having not received a formal autism diagnosis. The survey asked participants to indicate if they currently (at the time of taking the survey) identified as a woman; man;

TABLE 1. PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

	Autistic		Typically developing
	Women (%)	Men (%)	Women (%)
Autism diagnosis from (selecting all that applied)			
Psychologist	69	84	N/A
Psychiatrist	34	32	N/A
Pediatrician	0	4	N/A
Other health professionals	11	4	N/A
Highest level of educational attainment			
Year 9 or below	0	4	0
Completion of year 10 high school or junior vocational school	0	9	3
Completion of high school or advanced vocational school	34 <sup>a</sup>	26	3 <sup>a</sup>
Diploma or advanced diploma	19	9	12
Bachelor degree including honors or equivalent	34	48	56
Master’s degree	13	0	15
Doctoral degree	0	4	12
Current employment			
Not working, that is, unemployed (inclusive of studying full-time and not working)	14	20	12
Casual	17	20	6
Part-time	17	28	18
Full-time	26 <sup>a</sup>	24	56 <sup>a</sup>
Studying full-time and working casually/part-time	20 <sup>b</sup>	0 <sup>b</sup>	9
Volunteer	6	8	0
Health conditions (selecting all that applied)			
Anxiety disorder	66 <sup>a</sup>	44	24 <sup>a</sup>
Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder	16	4	3
Bipolar disorder	3	17	6
Depression	66	57	44
Eating disorder	6	4	3
Obsessive compulsive disorder	6	22	0
Personality disorder	6	4	3
Post-traumatic stress disorder	6	9	3
Other (e.g., asthma, polycystic ovary syndrome)	28 <sup>a</sup>	17	9 <sup>a</sup>
None (absence of any health condition)	16 <sup>a</sup>	26	56 <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Chi-square/FET, significant difference between autistic women versus typically developing women,  $p < 0.05$ .

<sup>b</sup>Chi-square/FET, significant difference between autistic women and men,  $p < 0.05$ .

FET, Fisher’s Exact Test; N/A, Not Applicable.

transgender person (male to female); transgender person (female to male); neither a man or woman (nonbinary); or preferred not to answer. Five participants indicated identifying as neither a woman, nor a man. We excluded these five participants from analysis in case their data presented additional levels of intersectionality, potentially confounding results. We did not consider them in a separate analysis because they represented too small a number of participants.

Thus, participant groups included the following: 32 autistic women, 34 TD women, and 23 autistic men. Women were ages 18 to 62 years (autistic,  $M=34.40$ ,  $SD=11.15$ ; TD,  $M=38.27$ ,  $SD=9.96$ ); the autistic men were ages 20 to 68 years ( $M=46.80$ ,  $SD=13.01$ ). Age, transformed logarithmically to normalize the data, did not differ between women (transformed,  $t(64)=1.97$ ,  $p \geq 0.05$ ; untransformed,  $t(64)=1.81$ ,  $p \geq 0.05$ ), although autistic women were significantly younger than the sample of men (transformed,  $t(53)=3.65$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $d=1.00$ ; untransformed,  $t(53)=3.94$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $d=1.08$ ). Sample demographics are reported in Table 1.

The autistic participants reported a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder, Asperger's disorder, or "high functioning autism" by a qualified professional who was independent of this study. Women reported being between 3 and 53 years of age when diagnosed with autism ( $M=28.72$ ,  $SD=12.80$ ). Men reported being diagnosed between 7 and 58 years ( $M=38.83$ ,  $SD=14.26$ ). Women were significantly younger than men upon receipt of an autism diagnosis (transformed,  $t(53)=2.22$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $d=0.61$ ; untransformed,  $t(53)=2.75$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $d=0.76$ ).

We compared proportions of women and men in each category of educational attainment and current employment using chi-square or Fisher's exact test. Overall, most (75%,  $n=67$ ) participants had attained postsecondary education, that is, education beyond high school. Autistic women were less likely to have higher (postsecondary) educational attainment compared with TD women ( $\chi^2(1)=8.46$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $\phi=0.36$ ), but equally likely compared with autistic men ( $\chi^2(1)=0.05$ ,  $p \geq 0.05$ ). Most (91%,  $n=81$ ) participants were employed (vs. unemployed, i.e., not working, or a volunteer); autistic women as frequently as TD women ( $\chi^2(1)=0.77$ ,  $p \geq 0.05$ ) and autistic men ( $\chi^2(1)=0.26$ ,  $p \geq 0.05$ ).

Autistic women were significantly more likely than TD women to self-report a diagnosed health condition ( $\chi^2(1)=6.34$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $\phi=0.31$ ). Especially anxiety disorder ( $\chi^2(1)=11.86$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $\phi=0.42$ ) or other health conditions ( $\chi^2(1)=4.13$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $\phi=0.25$ ). We found no significant differences relating to diagnosed health conditions comparing autistic women and men ( $\chi^2(1)=1.77$ ,  $p \geq 0.05$ ). Autistic women and men were equally likely to have self-reported anxiety disorder ( $\chi^2(1)=1.82$ ,  $p \geq 0.05$ ) or other health conditions ( $\chi^2(1)=0.76$ ,  $p \geq 0.05$ ).

### Materials and procedure

After approval by the Human Research Ethics Committee from the overseeing university, we advertised the questionnaire over a period of 10 months via social media (e.g., Facebook and Twitter), plus autism organizations in Australia (e.g., Tony Attwood Clinic). Advertising invited the general public to share experiences relating to the workplace, and specifically mentioned that women and people who have or suspect they have autism spectrum disorder, Asperger's disorder, or "high functioning autism" were encouraged to par-

ticipate. Materials further noted that participation was welcome regardless of current employment status. The advertisement contained a hyperlink to the Plain Language Statement and Consent Form asking potential participants older than 18 years and with typical intellectual functioning to share their experiences and thoughts specifically relating to work.

### Analyses

As there are little data defining the employment aspirations and expectations of autistic women, data were analyzed using *inductive thematic analysis* (ITA<sup>25</sup>). Unlike other approaches, such as interpretative phenomenological analysis, ITA is not limited to application of a specific theoretical framework.<sup>26</sup>

We organized the data in NVivo (QSR International, 2015) where a single blind procedure was performed. Thus, during all aspects of the analytical process, participant groups were not identified until after conclusion of analyses. During the process of ITA, the primary researcher, who is also an autistic woman and the study's principal investigator, read responses from all participant groups at least three times before open coding.<sup>27,28</sup> Coding followed the process suggested by Braun and Clarke.<sup>27</sup> Themes were identified by the primary researcher from participants' responses (as a whole) where there were distinct commonalities or relationships between responses, or striking differences. These were not determined by the frequency of participant responses.

During the ITA, a *peer debriefing* process assisted trustworthiness of coding.<sup>29</sup> After the primary researcher engaged in the open coding process, an independent secondary researcher, a TD woman who knew little about autism, and the study's research assistant, double coded 10% (9) of responses at random from each theme already coded by the primary researcher. The secondary researcher was guided by the theme definitions set by the primary researcher. Thus, the secondary researcher double coded a minimum of nine responses for each theme, including minor themes. If there were less than nine responses coded to a theme, all were checked by the secondary researcher. During this process, the secondary researcher voiced overcoding of the data as some themes were similar. As such, the primary researcher merged and refined these themes by agreement with the secondary researcher. The primary and secondary researchers evidenced a high level of inter-rater reliability on response placement to themes ( $\kappa=0.99$ ). However, where there were discrepancies, the primary and secondary researchers compared and discussed coding, and agreed upon placement of discrepant responses to themes.<sup>30,31</sup> Often this required both coders to read over the participants' entire survey responses to each question to provide greater context.

Analysis by the primary researcher continued after saturation,<sup>32,33</sup> which was evident following analysis of data from nine participants as a whole group. As member checking was not a viable option, owing to the anonymous nature of data collection, additional thick descriptions are incorporated into the reported findings so that the reader may evaluate the data.<sup>32,34</sup> Finally, thematic comparisons were made by the participant group.

### Findings

From the ITA, three major themes emerged with two minor themes. The first major theme was *fit*, with the associated minor

themes of *job-person fit* and *person-environment fit*. The second and third major themes were *stability in employment*, and *low hope for finding meaningful work*. The authors added content, denoted by square brackets within quotes, to provide context or clarity to a response for the reader. The field the participant currently works in is provided after each quote.

#### Major theme one: fit

Most participants (64%,  $n=57$ ) reflected on desires for an opportunity to have a fulfilling career. Two things are required to achieve this; the right job and the right environment. Participants included in this theme were ages 18 to 65 years ( $M=37.12$ ,  $SD=11.19$ ).

Minor theme one: job-person fit. Many (45%,  $n=40$ ) respondents wished to develop new skills and apply them in the workforce. Others held skills they wanted to match with a career. The resounding statement was that participants wished for an opportunity for growth and development, a job match. To illustrate:

“I moved back to live with family... Now I can afford to retrain” (autistic woman, aged 43, industry; community and personal services).

“I want to realise my dream of being a full time Field Botanist. I have the qualifications and experience ... My work is my overwhelming obsession and passion” (autistic woman, aged 45, industry; resource and environmental protection).

“I’m hoping to get ... work in an industry where I can utilise my language skills. [I am a translator]” (autistic woman, aged 26, industry; community and personal services).

“To be fully employed in a challenging position that has room for growth” (autistic man, aged 57, industry; manufacturing and labor services).

“I want to lead more confidently. I want to stop questioning my abilities and go with my own successes a bit more easily. I want to learn to lead in more creative and impactful ways” (TD woman, aged 38, industry; technology and communications).

Minor theme two: person-environment fit. To have the opportunity to develop oneself, the right environment is required; one that is accepting and inclusive. Respondents (19%,  $n=17$ ) commented on the importance of workplaces that value diversity. Having their differences recognized, yet wanting to be accepted as part of a team, understood, and valued. Here, the values and practices of employers and colleagues were described as key to workplace inclusion. Mostly autistic individuals reported wanting person-environment fit. Where comments were made by TD women, little detail was provided. Example comments to this theme included:

“I’d love to work in academia!! My supervisor said that’s the only place (really) where you can be as eccentric as you like, but as long as you are ethical and work hard, they’ll love you ... I honestly hope to get a salaried job, and I hope I can pass the interview ... because although I know how to “pretend” in order to pass interviews, I would love to just be myself and get the job because [I] am ME” (autistic woman, aged 34, industry; self-employed).

“Working in a positive and relaxing environment. Working with children or young people. Being close to co[-]workers who understand me and how I function” (autistic woman, aged 21, industry; community and personal services).

“To be valued for my natural abilities in logical thinking and creative ingenuity ... I hope to one day be allowed to be myself at 100% and accepted, appreciated and respected for it” (autistic woman, aged 44, industry; hospitality or trades).

“I want to feel included but also that people have my back if [I] slip up. I want to have my own space. But [I] don’t know my boundaries yet. I am still finding them. I like focussing on one thing at a time” (autistic woman, aged 21, industry; community and personal services).

“That people with mental health and Asperger[’]s can voice without fear and retribution[,] and employers [to] have skills in knowing how to work with us and with all [people with] disabilities” (autistic woman, aged 53, industry; community and personal services).

“More specific disability advisors in the work place for staff ... EQUALITY for all” (TD woman, aged 52, industry; community and personal services).

#### Major theme two: stable employment

Thirty-six percent ( $n=32$ ) of participants wanted stable employment. Although some participants wished for employment stability for financial security, most did not indicate reasons. Participants included in this theme were ages 19 to 68 years ( $M=38.78$ ,  $SD=12.91$ ). Example comments included:

“To have [a] stable income so I can buy a house and pay my bills” (autistic woman, 26 years, industry; community and personal services).

“Gain and sustain meaningful employment for the next 10 years, at a sufficient remuneration to provide for my family” (autistic man, 57 years, unemployed).

“In the short term, more short-term contracts mean [I] work less than 6 months of the year, [I] would really like a job that lasts at least two years” (autistic man, 58 years, industry; hospitality or trades).

“I hope to be made permanent. I would also like to go part-time because full-time work is stressful and exhausting physically and mentally” (autistic woman, 31 years, industry; clerical and administration).

“Full time employment would be nice” (TD woman, aged 31, industry; community and personal services).

“Permanent employment within my field” (TD woman, aged 22, industry; higher education).

“To maintain stable employment to ensure [a] secure income” (TD woman, aged 24, industry; community and personal services).

Some respondents reported to be in favorable employment positions, such as having found job-person-environment fit, and sought to maintain these. Some owing to convenience, while others appeared to be motivated by anxiety related to change. Many participants recognized the value of stable employment to their psychological well-being and positive sense of identity. To illustrate:

“Continue to work and study. I worry about moving jobs as it takes a while for me to settle and for people to see my strang[n]e[s] not just my oddness” (autistic woman, aged 45, industry; community and personal services).

“I am fortunate that the years I endured my ASD [autism spectrum disorder] related problems mean that I am in quite a good financial position and have more options than most. In recent years, I have progressively wound back my hours and how demanding the work I do is. I see that continuing. Part of me yearns not to have to go out to work and all of the problems that poses. However, I’ve come to realise that I need a certain mini-

mum prescribed amount of human contact to avoid becoming lonely and depressed and “weird”. Finding the right balance between human interaction and me-time is my current challenge” (autistic man, aged 48, industry; clerical and administration).

“I am hoping to continue in my current professional role. It allows me to live independently and contribute to the knowledge of the profession[,] and also to the safety of the community. It is an area that I am passionate about and aligns with my skills and interests” (autistic woman, aged 32, industry; science).

“Continue to undertake stimulating work as a researcher in areas of interest with organisations that have a healthy work culture and who share my values” (TD woman, aged 56, industry; science).

### *Major theme three: low hope for meaningful work*

It appeared from participant responses that without adequate organizational support and considerations, some (15%;  $n = 13$ ) individuals held low hope for finding meaningful employment in the open labor market because the barriers faced were not easily overcome. Usually these were due to participants’ perception of their own characteristics; autistic traits, age, or mental health as a barrier to obtaining suitable employment. Participants included in this theme were ages 34 to 62 years ( $M = 47.85$ ,  $SD = 7.76$ ). Example quotes included:

“Get real. I’m 52, two degrees, haven’t worked a real job since 1997 unless you count \$20/hour dogsbody stuff for [employer name omitted] which ended back in 2008. I’m either hopelessly overqualified or I haven’t worked in my field since 1997, seriously, for all that I could do a lot for the right people, nobody sets out to employ someone like me. Even if I had a sound career behind me, I’m a 52 y[ear] o[l]d unemployed engineer. Perhaps I could work a school crossing? Except people. People are every bloody where” (autistic man, aged 52, unemployed).

“Maybe in fifty years, if we start now, by identifying communication problems and teaching children to listen and think we may reach as stage where workplace bullying and stress are minimised for the ASD person. [I] really do not hold out any hope for ASD people in the majority of workplaces because of entrenched attitudes in supervisors who value conformity above competence ... but I am not hopeful; age, over-qualification and ASD make it easy to fail the interview and hard to keep the job in an industry where young is synonymous with computer skills and many managers really do not know what the workers actually do” (autistic man, aged 58; industry; hospitality or trades).

“Not sure I will ever re-enter the paid workforce. I achieve far more in voluntary employment than I was ever allowed in paid work” (autistic man, aged 42, industry; community and personal services).

“I just want to keep my job until I reach retirement age and my biggest hope is to avoid descending into another paralysing depression. I fear my next depression will be “unrecoverable” and if that, or redundancy, causes me to lose my job I fear not having enough money to pay for housing and especially for mental health care and medication in my old age. I genuinely think if I do not have adequate income in old age my depression will be unmanaged and I will end up homeless” (TD woman, aged 52, industry; community and personal services).

## **Discussion**

The present study addresses and builds on the paucity of research concerning the vocational aspirations and expectations of autistic women. These were further explored in re-

lation to potential differences based on autism diagnosis and gender. Differences were apparent between autistic and TD women relating to job-person-environment fit. These findings are consistent with autistic traits appearing to be central to the occupational experiences of autistic women, compared to TD women.<sup>2</sup> The current results are also consistent with reports of no gender differences on occupational experiences between autistic women and men.<sup>2,15</sup> What was evident in this research was that autistic women held mostly similar career aspirations as autistic men, and shared similarities with TD women. Thus, highlighting that organizational diversity management strategies could provide greater reach to a larger proportion of the workforce, not one group of individuals.

Employment that provides an opportunity for *fit* was desired by most, almost two-thirds, of the present sample. However, autistic women more readily than TD women identify wanting job-person and person-environment fit. Differences between autistic and TD women on educational attainment may have contributed to this result, as those with higher education may be better able to achieve this. However, it could indicate lack of support to obtain employment matching skills and abilities, consistent with Müller et al.’s<sup>15</sup> results concerning lack of opportunity and subsequent underemployment among autistic individuals broadly.

The autistic women in our study frequently described their current job as not meeting their aspirations to make use of their skills and training, suggesting both underemployment and mismatched employment. Underemployment is working in a role where experience, knowledge, and skill are not completely utilized.<sup>35</sup> It is a recognized issue among women broadly.<sup>36,37</sup> Therefore, this finding supports literature concerning underemployment among autistic people generally.<sup>3,6,15,38</sup> Similar to underemployment is mismatched employment, where skills and interests do not fit the job.<sup>39</sup> Such situations are known to place individuals at risk of negative well-being.<sup>40–42</sup> Given the potential for underemployment and mismatched employment, it is suggested that vocational services are enabled to assist autistic women to identify and obtain careers that align with their skills and interests. As with Müller et al.’s<sup>15</sup> sample and findings regarding underemployment, it was apparent that participants largely consisted of academically capable people because most possessed post-secondary education. This stresses that supports are required for autistic women regardless of educational attainment.

Employer intervention could also help improve fit. For example, encouraging flexible and supportive workplace policies to empower women such that they can balance their career, and while nurturing career development. In conjunction with this, free or subsidized specialized career guidance programs for autistic individuals could be offered within, as well as external to, educational institutions. These programs might facilitate opportunities with potential employers to help them tailor careers to individual interests and strengths, similar to the discovery process, a phase of customized employment,<sup>43,44</sup> or vocational fit assessments such as that used in Project SEARCH®.<sup>45</sup> Customized employment has been effective among the autistic population and may assist with maintenance of employment.<sup>46</sup> At present, there are no specialist services with this purpose for autistic adults in Australia.

Others have noted that autistic people want greater understanding of their needs at work,<sup>3,5,6</sup> and that employer, collegial, and external supports as important vocational

enablers.<sup>47</sup> This literature can further suggest ways to improve job-person-environment fit.

Intervention to improve job-person-environment fit could involve the autistic employees helping to educate employers and colleagues about autism and how it impacts them at work. This could take many forms depending on how the individual is comfortable engaging their workplace. For example, by a verbal presentation to a work group, a written information package, or via an advocate. Employer and coworker education and awareness of autism may assist to alleviate misunderstandings and misconceptions of the condition.<sup>5</sup>

Policies that enable and reinforce organizational and workplace cultural change with respect to both how work is undertaken and that foster positive attitudes in the workplace conducive to acceptance and inclusion of difference could also help meet aspirations. Considering some participants desired stability in employment but had not yet realized this aspiration supports known difficulties maintaining employment for autistic people, and women generally.<sup>3,5,15,19–21</sup>

It appeared that age does not ease difficulties, considering the age of participants in the present research. Perhaps it is fortunate that for some, at least, coping skills have been found by another study to increase with age.<sup>48</sup> It is unfortunate that for others, here where age averaged mid-40s, some participants stated holding little hope for their vocational future. This supports Müller et al.'s<sup>15</sup> findings that negative employment experiences are common among older autistic people. While timely intervention is ideal to limit the potential for future issues, it is apparent by the older mean age of participants generally in the present study (autistic women,  $M=34.40$  years; autistic men,  $M=46.80$  years) that specialized autism career services need to be inclusive of an older age group.

#### *Limitations and recommendations for future research*

The results reported in this study are potentially limited by the online format that data were gathered. Online methods can attract samples with higher educational attainment, such as postsecondary education.<sup>49–51</sup> In addition, these methods may attract participants residing in metropolitan (vs. remote) areas because they may have better Internet access.<sup>52</sup> The chosen data collection method also prevented the researcher probing and seeking reasons for responses, which would have added further richness to the data to better inform intervention strategies and understand differences between participant groups. For example, clarity could have been sought concerning reasons for wanting vocational stability; many participants did not provide explanations.

Given the anonymity of the data collection method, member checking of results was not feasible. However, we took other steps to ensure credibility of findings via data analyses by the autistic primary who provided insight, and peer debriefing with the secondary TD researcher.

Further studies might also consider the impact and potential importance of age of autism diagnosis, chronological age, postsecondary educational attainment, and health conditions. Race or ethnicity can also impact occupational experiences (i.e., discrimination), but was not captured in this research because of the multicultural nature of Australia.<sup>53</sup> Almost half (49%) of Australians are either first- or second-generation Australian<sup>54</sup>; cultural diversity is generally well accepted.<sup>55</sup> As such, the results reported here may not generalize to those outside Australia.

Adding to this, having larger samples of those who identify as transgender and nonbinary would strengthen future studies considering gender variances particularly among autistic women.<sup>56,57</sup> This research excluded the small sample of people who identified outside the gender binary potentially limiting the present findings to those people identifying as gender binary.

Autistic women were diagnosed with autism at a significantly younger age than autistic men in the current sample. This may have confounded gender comparisons. To illustrate, those with improved adaptive or executive function are more likely to be diagnosed when older.<sup>58,59</sup> In addition, individuals who have better cognitive<sup>48,60</sup> and verbal skills, plus enhanced cognitive processing speed, may be less likely to have communication barriers.<sup>61</sup> Communication difficulty is a core element in an autism diagnosis.<sup>8</sup> However, it is acknowledged that there may be other factors which impact age of diagnosis, including gender differences in help seeking behaviors,<sup>62,63</sup> and challenges meeting gendered social and communication expectations.<sup>64</sup>

Future research could further consider the TD sample in relation to potentially confounding variables. It is not known if the TD sample had elevated autistic traits despite not having an autism diagnosis, resulting in fewer qualitative differences between women. Screening by a registered health professional would have assisted in determining this.

#### **Conclusion**

This study provides preliminary insight into the vocational aspirations and expectations of autistic women. Autism diagnosis appeared to impact vocational expectations more than gender. Autistic women desired improved job-person-environment fit regardless of their academic achievements and ability to obtain employment. The low expectations, particularly of older participants, suggest support be provided as early as possible with flexibility to include those of all ages. Assistance to improve job-person-environment fit and stability for autistic individuals could include autism education of employers and colleagues. To support autistic women toward meaningful and sustainable work, policies to influence attitudinal, structural, and procedural change in the workplace could be helpful.

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#### **Authorship Confirmation Statement**

Dr. Susan Hayward designed the study, recruited participants, and collected the data presented in this article as part of her doctoral work. She conducted the analyses, and led in preparing the article, including doing the majority of the writing. Prof. Keith McVilly codesigned the study, critically reviewed both the original doctoral thesis and this article, contributing expertise and suggestions for the write-up of the data. Assoc. Prof. Mark Stokes codesigned the study, critically reviewed this article, and contributed expertise and suggestions for the interpretation and write-up of the data. All coauthors have reviewed and approved of the article before submission.

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