Closing the Fair Work gap: making work fair for autistic people in Scotland

Summary Report and Recommendations
From the full report: ‘An Intersectional Fair Work Framework for the Autistic Workforce’

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About Into Work

Into Work is an established charity that, since 1993, has been working with disabled and neurodivergent people, and those with long-term health conditions in Edinburgh and the Lothians to achieve their employment goals and potential. Our aim is to close the disability employment gap.

Into Work provides wrap-around person-centred employment advice and practical support with achieving financial inclusion and wellbeing. We help people who come to us to secure fair, meaningful and sustainable employment.

Into Work also provides training and advice for employers on developing more inclusive teams, workplaces and practices. Lived experience is central to the support we offer. Throughout our work, we uphold the value that neurodivergent and disabled staff can bring to their organisations.

Acknowledgements

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1. Executive Summary

**Key research issue:** There is a chronic lack of fair work available to autistic people. They face high levels of unemployment and under-employment compared to the rest of the workforce. They also face discrimination and marginalisation due to organisational cultures and workplace architecture designed for the neurotypical workforce.

**Scope:** The research aims to identify what fair work should look like for Scotland’s autistic workforce. It is primarily aimed at employers, but also key stakeholders to the Fair Work Framework: the Scottish Government, trade unions and civil society organisations.

**Research questions:** What does work look like for autistic working people? How do autism and gender intersect with dimensions of fair work? What are the main barriers and facilitators to fair work for the autistic workforce? How can the Fair Work Framework be advanced to be more inclusive of the autistic workforce?

**Methodology:** The research involves surveys and interviews with autistic employees and their employers/managers. The theoretical framework is based on lived experience, the Fair Work Framework, social model of disability, and intersectionality.

**Key findings:** There is no single experience of being autistic at work, and autistic women and men can experience work differently. Respondents’ greatest satisfaction at work is with fulfilment and autonomously using their skills, while their greatest dissatisfaction is with having an effective voice and receiving reasonable adjustments. There are several clear key areas where improvement could be achieved through policy, adjustment of workplace structures, training, and clearer understanding of autistic workers’ needs.

**Action points:** Adapt the Fair Work Framework to encompass inclusion; recognise intersecting identities; implement autism-inclusive HR policies and practices; uphold the social model of disability and the value of lived experience in shaping change; reduce the burden on individual employees to access adjustments; and take a collaborative, multi-stakeholder approach to addressing employee and employer-focused barriers to fair work.
2. Fair Work and Autism

Autism

Autism is a lifelong neurodevelopmental difference in the way a person communicates, interacts and processes the world around them. Autism is commonly associated with the term neurodiversity, which means that cognitive differences, such as those associated with autism, attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD), dyslexia and dyspraxia, are natural variations in the way people think and process information. The concept recognises both the difficulties neurodivergent people may encounter and the strengths that can derive from thinking differently.

Despite evidence of disability discrimination, there is debate among autistic people over whether they consider themselves ‘disabled’ or simply ‘different’ from neurotypical people. This is an important distinction, as an autistic employee is legally considered disabled and therefore protected by the UK Equality Act (2010). However, if an employee is viewed by their employer, or self-identifies, as different rather than disabled in the context of accessing workplace adjustments, they are less likely to benefit from Equality Act protections.

Even though many autistic people do not see themselves as disabled, the lack of fair work available to them is a serious problem. This study draws upon the social model of disability, which holds that disability is created by barriers in society to catering for different needs. In this case, employers are failing to provide a fully inclusive work environment. Workplace barriers may involve the physical environment (e.g., inaccessible buildings and workspace set-up), people’s attitudes (e.g., stereotyping, discrimination and prejudice), and organisational policies, practices and procedures.

Autism and unfair work

Autistic people encounter widespread and complex barriers at work. National Census data shows that autistic adults aged 16-64 in the UK have almost the lowest rate of employment of any disability group at just 29%. In contrast, 53.5% of all disabled adults are employed, compared with 81.6% of non-disabled adults.¹

Existing studies suggest that the majority of employers fall short of providing fair work for autistic working people. They also suggest that employers would benefit from clear, shared guidelines to facilitate fair work for the autistic workforce.

Efforts to improve the inclusion of autistic employees tend to focus on autistic men, neglecting the range of intersecting identities. This study focuses on understanding the intersection of gender and autism. It reflects the growing incidence of women receiving an autism diagnosis as well as the shortage of research into different groups of working individuals’ lived experience of their work worlds.

The Fair Work Framework

In 2016, the Fair Work Convention was introduced, with the aim of making Scotland a ‘Fair Work nation’ by 2025. It identified a Fair Work Framework to describe ‘work that offers effective voice, opportunity, security, fulfilment and respect; that balances the rights and responsibilities of employers and employees and that can generate benefits for individuals, organisations and society.’ The five dimensions of Fair Work under the Framework – effective voice, opportunity, security, fulfilment and respect – are explained in more detail in the methodology in Section 3 below.

The Fair Work Framework is centred on ‘inclusive growth’ that employees as well as employers and wider society benefit from. The Fair Work Framework is core to removing barriers to employment, and to closing the employment gap between the autistic and wider workforce.

What does Fair Work mean for autistic people?

When asked, ‘What does a fair workplace look like to you?’ several autistic employees who were interviewed in this study highlighted the acceptance and inclusion of autistic workers in decisions and policies relating to them, as illustrated in the quotes below.

A place where you’re accepted as you are, whatever you are; you’re welcome, you’re respected… you’re valued for what you are. (Sam)

Involve autistic people… rather than treating them as different and segregating them out. You need to involve autistic people in things, and that way you get the wider perspective, you get the different views. You learn to work… and people learn to work together and appreciate different skills, different abilities. (Andy)

Autistic employees also pointed to the importance of inclusive structural support. This was also a key theme of managers’ responses.

A fair workplace for me takes that decision-making away from the person who needs the help and support and it puts it in place for everybody, so that everybody has that support, whether they need it or not. (James)

Challenges for the Fair Work Framework

Despite its clear potential, a weakness of the current Fair Work approach is that it does not reflect the full range of needs relating to autism, neurodivergence, disability and intersectionality. So far, the Fair Work Framework has attracted limited primary research, which means that its impact is unclear. Where evidence has been gathered, the lived experiences, especially of women and disabled people, vary considerably.

COVID-19 slowed progress in achieving the Framework’s key goals and inequalities for disabled employees may actually have worsened during the pandemic. In order to achieve the Framework’s goals, employers – particularly small or medium-sized businesses – would benefit from support. Current goals of the Fair Work Framework are laudable but recommended measures are not comprehensive, and there is no compulsion for employers to implement them – even in the public sector.

Identification of good practice and further research around intersectionality and the social model of disability could help the Fair Work Framework to benefit the autistic workforce and other marginalised groups.
3. Methodology and Research Design

Before exploring the findings of this study, it is important to situate it within its theoretical framework. Structured around the key dimensions of the Fair Work Framework, this study also incorporates the importance of lived experience, the social model of disability, and the intersectionality between autism and gender.

The Fair Work Framework describes what a ‘fair’ workplace looks like for, among others, autistic, employees. It involves five key dimensions – defined in this study as follows:

- **Effective voice**: employers and employees have open and positive communication regarding autism. Employees can safely express their views in a range of ways, and have access to a staff representative or independent advocate.
- **Opportunity**: employees have access to reasonable adjustments during recruitment and selection, as well as training and development, mentorship, and opportunities for promotion and progression.
- **Security**: employees have secure, stable employment and are paid a wage reflecting their experience, skills and qualifications. They have effective reasonable adjustments enabling them to do their best work, which are regularly reviewed, and their employer understands and respects their employment rights.
- **Fulfilment**: employees have opportunities to work autonomously, solve problems and make a difference. Their job allows them to effectively use their skills, knowledge and experience. Reasonable adjustments are made to allow them to develop and learn new skills for career development.
- **Respect**: employees feel understood as autistic people. Their employers support them, and their colleagues understand their needs in the workplace. There is meaningful training on inclusion and diversity which is effective in policy and practice, and employees are confident of receiving support regarding bullying and harassment.

Research questions

With these in mind, the research questions for this study are:

- What does ‘fair work’ look like for autistic employees?
- How do autism and gender intersect with dimensions of fair work?
- What are the main barriers and facilitators to fair work for the autistic workforce?
- How can the Fair Work Framework become more inclusive of the autistic workforce?

Data collection

The study collected data in two ways:

- **Quantitative data** were collected via Qualtrics surveys of employers and employees. These collected demographic information, and included questions about the five dimensions of the Fair Work Framework, sub-divided into 21 aspects of fair work. Data collection used a 5-point Likert scale (‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’).
  - The data were then cleaned up and analysed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics were analysed, with some inferential techniques used. Means were calculated and used to compare variables, and the experiences of men and women. T-tests were applied to assess statistical significance.
- The convenience sample included 191 employee usable survey responses and 32 employer usable survey responses, for a total of 223 responses.

- **Qualitative data** were collected from employees and employers through open comments in the surveys, as well as through interviews conducted on Microsoft Teams by an autistic researcher.
  - The interviews were transcribed verbatim. Template analysis was used, with priori codes taken from the theoretical framing. Key themes were identified and highlighted, including: hybrid working, flexible working, demands of work, organisational structure, shift patterns, and teamworking, as well as specific barriers and facilitators to fair work.
  - The sample included 199 employee survey comments and 17 employer survey comments; 21 employee interviews and 5 employer interviews.

**Participant recruitment**

- Participants for the surveys were recruited through Twitter, the networks of study partners, and personal LinkedIn pages. Recruitment and surveys were undertaken between May and September 2022.
- Participants for the interviews were recruited via the surveys and partner networks, and the interviews were conducted in December 2022 by an autistic researcher.

**Research ethics and data management**

- Separate ethical approval was obtained for the surveys and the interviews.
- The survey platform and data storage were both GDPR compliant.
- The surveys included an information page, and the interviews included an information sheet and consent forms.
- Qualitative data were anonymised, and pseudonyms are used in quotes and case studies.
4. Characteristics of Research Participants and their Employers

The section below describes the characteristics of the survey participants (employees and managers). This provides key contextual details of the research sample.

In the employee survey, 48.2% of participants identified as women, 41.8% identified as men, and 8.7% either identified as non-binary or preferred not to say. Around half of respondents were employed in the public sector (47.0%), and 38.0% described themselves as having a professional occupation.

Three-quarters of the employee survey participants (75.0%) were employed by large employers, and four-fifths (80.3%) said they had access to an equal opportunities policy, although only 6.2% said they had access to a specific policy on autism or neurodiversity. Around half of the employee participants (48.2%) identified as ‘disabled’, and 86.4% identified as ‘neurodivergent’, although (as shown in Table 1) these proportions varied between genders.

Table 1: Key characteristics of employee survey participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic (employee)</th>
<th>All participants (%)</th>
<th>Women (%)</th>
<th>Men (%)</th>
<th>Non-binary or preferred not to say (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>48.2</td>
<td>41.8</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional occupations</td>
<td>38.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public sector employment</td>
<td>47.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed by large employers</td>
<td>75.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to equal opportunities policy</td>
<td>80.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to autism/neurodiversity policy</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify as disabled</td>
<td>48.2</td>
<td>64.4</td>
<td>40.9</td>
<td>83.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify as neurodivergent</td>
<td>86.4</td>
<td>88.9</td>
<td>71.2</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Among the managers who gave responses to the employer survey, every participant said their organisation had access to an HR professional and an equal opportunities policy, while 46.2% said they had a specific policy on autism or neurodiversity. Three-fifths of manager respondents (61.5%) said they recognised at least one trade union, and 30.8% said they had used an external organisation for autism training. 84.6% of employer survey participants said they were confident that they could support autistic employees.
### Table 2: Key characteristics of employer survey participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic (manager)</th>
<th>All participants (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Access to a HR professional</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognise at least one trade union</td>
<td>61.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use external organisation for autism training</td>
<td>30.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have equal opportunities policy</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have an autism/neurodiversity policy</td>
<td>46.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confident can support autistic employees</td>
<td>84.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Appendix (Tables A1 and A2) provides pseudonymised details of the participants in the interviews exploring fair work in greater depth, from the perspective of employees and managers.
5. The Five Dimensions of Fair Work – Key Quantitative Findings

The data in this section reflect participants’ responses from the two surveys of employees and managers/employers (see methodology in Section 3). The survey questions were based on the five dimensions of fair work identified in the Framework: Effective voice, Opportunity, Security, Fulfilment, and Respect. These five dimensions were then sub-divided into the 21 aspects outlined in Table 3 below.

The data were collected using a five-point Likert scale, where 1 means ‘strongly agree’ and indicates a very high rating of the participant’s experience, whereas 5 means ‘strongly disagree’ and indicates a very low rating. The numbers in this section are calculated as the mean (average) of the participants’ ratings.

As well as describing each of the 21 aspects of fair work, Table 3 gives each aspect an employee ranking from most positively experienced (rated 1) to least positively experienced (rated 21). The autistic employees surveyed had the most positive experiences of opportunities to ‘work autonomously, solve problems and make a difference’, followed by having a job that allows use of their ‘skills, knowledge and experience’. In Table 3, the three highest ranked aspects are highlighted in green, and the three lowest ranked aspects are highlighted in orange.

Conversely, autistic employees had least access to ‘regular reviews of reasonable adjustments’, followed by having colleagues with a ‘good understanding of the needs of autistic workers’.

Table 3 provides an overview of the areas where employers do best at providing access to fair work for their autistic employees and the areas where they do less well.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension of fair work</th>
<th>Aspect of dimension</th>
<th>Mean (all employees)</th>
<th>Employee ranking (agreement to disagreement)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Effective voice</strong></td>
<td>• Employers encourage open communication regarding autism</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Employees can safely express views in a range of ways</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Employees have access to a staff representative or independent advocate</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Employer responds positively when raising autism-related matters</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Opportunity</strong></td>
<td>• Employees offered reasonable adjustment during recruitment and selection</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Access to training and development opportunities</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Access to point of contact, mentor or job coach</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Available promotion and progression opportunities</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Security</strong></td>
<td>• Paid a wage reflecting experiences, skills and qualifications</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Employment is secure and low risk of losing job</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Effective reasonable adjustments enable employees to do their best at work</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Reasonable adjustments reviewed on regular basis</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Employment rights understood and respected by employer</td>
<td>2.94</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fulfilment</strong></td>
<td>• Job allows use of skills, knowledge and experience</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Employees allowed opportunities to work autonomously, solve problems and make a difference</td>
<td>1.91</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Reasonable adjustments made to allow employees to train, develop and learn skills for career development</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Respect</strong></td>
<td>• Employees feel understood as an autistic person</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Confident of receiving support regarding bullying and harassment</td>
<td>2.74</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Employer supports well-being, health, and safety</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Meaningful training on inclusion and diversity translating in policy and practice</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Colleagues have good understanding of needs of autistic workers</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2 A mean of 1 indicates very strong agreement regarding the experience of each aspect; a mean of 5 indicates very strong disagreement with that aspect.
Figure 1 (below) reveals the average rating of each dimension of the Fair Work Framework, as experienced by autistic employees. The scale is based on the mean of respondents’ scores across five points of a Likert scale. In Figure 1, a score of 1 (closer to outside of the chart) indicates very high ratings regarding experience of accessing each dimension; a score of 5 (closer to centre of the chart) indicates very low ratings.

In general, the aggregated mean of experiences of every aspect of fair work sits mostly between two and three, indicating fairly weak or mixed experiences of fair work for the autistic workforce. Of the five dimensions of fair work, Fulfilment is rated as having the highest level of access, and Effective voice is rated the lowest, closely followed by Respect and Opportunity.

**Figure 1: Average mean rating of dimensions of Fair Work Framework (employees)**

Key:

- 1 = v. high rating
- 5 = v. low rating

The following diagrams (Figures 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6) focus on the aspects of each dimension of fair work – between three and five aspects per dimension of the Fair Work Framework. They reveal how experiences vary between employees and employers/managers, identifying which aspects of fair work are rated highest and lowest by each group.

The figures also highlight a substantial gap between how the two groups rate each of the five dimensions – and therefore how positively each group sees access to fair work for the autistic workforce. Overall, managers/employers who oversee fair work tend to rate aspects of practice more positively (lower number, closer to edge of graph) than the employees who directly experience each aspect (higher number, closer to centre of each graph).
Figure 2: Aspects of ‘Effective voice’, mean rating (employer versus employee)

Key:
1 = v. high rating
5 = v. low rating

My employer responds positively when I raise autism-related matters, e.g., in response to my disclosure, requests for reasonable adjustments and/or during performance reviews and discussions.

My employer encourages open workplace communication regarding autism.

I can meaningfully and safely express my views at work in a range of formal and informal ways.

I have access to a staff representative or independent advocate should I have any concerns at work.
**Figure 3: Aspects of ‘Opportunity’, mean rating (employer versus employee)**

Key:
1 = v. high rating  
5 = v. low rating

- **There are promotion and progression opportunities available to me**
- **I have been given or can access a consistent point of contact, mentor or job coach**
- **I was offered reasonable adjustments during the recruitment and selection processes**
- **I have access to meaningful training and development opportunities**

![Figure 3: Aspects of ‘Opportunity’, mean rating (employer versus employee)](image1)

**Figure 4: Aspects of ‘Security’, mean rating (employer versus employee)**

Key:
1 = v. high rating  
5 = v. low rating

- **The employment rights of autistic employees are understood and respected by my employer**
- **My reasonable adjustments are reviewed on a regular basis, or as often as appropriate, with my line manager and/or HR professional**
- **I feel my employment is secure and there is a low risk of losing my job**
- **I am paid a wage that reflects my experiences, skills and qualifications**

![Figure 4: Aspects of ‘Security’, mean rating (employer versus employee)](image2)
Figure 5: Aspects of ‘Fulfilment’, mean rating (employer versus employee)

Key:
1 = v. high rating
5 = v. low rating

Reasonable adjustments are offered that enable me to train, learn, and develop skills useful for career advancement.

My job allows me to make use of my skills, knowledge and experience.

I am provided with opportunities to work autonomously, solve problems and make a difference.

Figure 6: Aspects of ‘Respect’, mean rating (employer versus employee)

Key:
1 = v. high rating
5 = v. low rating

My colleagues have a good understanding of my needs as an autistic person at work.

I feel understood as an autistic person where I am employed.

My employer provides meaningful training on inclusion that is translated into policy and day-to-day practice.

I feel confident I will receive support if I experience bullying and/or harassment.

My employer is supportive of my well-being, health and safety.

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6. Dimensions of Fair Work by Gender – Key Quantitative Findings

The findings in this section are from the same source as those in Section 5 above, but here, experiences of fair work described by autistic women and men are compared.\(^3\)

In Figure 7, the findings reveal broadly similar experiences of fair work for both men and women, but some differences are also apparent. For women, experiences of fair work are ranked from highest to lowest in the following order: Fulfilment, Security, Opportunity, Effective voice, Respect. For men, the order is slightly different, from highest to lowest: Fulfilment, Security, Respect, Effective voice, Opportunity. Overall, compared to men, women report a marginally better experience of each dimension of fair work, as indicated in the overall mean for each.

**Figure 7: Average mean\(^4\) rating of dimensions of Fair Work Framework, by gender (employee)**

Table 4 (overleaf) explores the mean rating of each of the 21 aspects of fair work, but this time separated out for just female employees, and just male employees. For both men and women, the table gives a mean rating for each aspect (on a Likert scale, as before), and an employee ranking from most to least agreement. For women and men, the three highest ranked aspects are highlighted in green, and the three lowest ranked aspects are highlighted in orange.

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\(^3\) Survey participants who preferred not to identify their gender, or who identified as non-binary, are not included in the analysis in this section due to the small sample size.

\(^4\) A mean of 1 indicates very strong agreement regarding experience of each dimension; a mean of 5 indicates very strong disagreement.
Table 4 highlights the areas where women have had most positive experiences of accessing fair work – including around autonomy and problem solving, the use of skills and experience, and job security – but also areas of particular concern, such as accessing adjustments during recruitment processes and beyond, and interactions with colleagues.

Considering the same aspects of fair work for men, a slightly different picture emerges. Table 4 confirms that the most positively experienced aspects for men are also autonomy, solving problems and making a difference. However, the least positively experienced aspect for men is being ‘understood as an autistic person’. It seems that, for autistic men in particular, lack of understanding of autism at work is a substantial barrier to accessing fair work.

When the findings are combined (see Table 3 in the previous section), these rankings shine a light on the detailed aspects of fair work that are most and least accessed.
**Table 4: Ranking of aspects of dimensions of fair work (for women and men)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension of fair work</th>
<th>Aspect of dimension</th>
<th>Mean for women</th>
<th>Employee ranking (most to least agreement) for women</th>
<th>Mean for men</th>
<th>Employee ranking (most to least agreement) for men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Effective voice</td>
<td>• Employers encourage open communication regarding autism</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Employees can safely express views in a range of ways</td>
<td>2.66</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Employees have access to a staff representative or independent advocate</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Employer responds positively when raising autism-related matters</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity</td>
<td>• Employees offered reasonable adjustment during recruitment and selection</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Access to training and development opportunities</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Access to point of contact, mentor or job coach</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Available promotion and progression opportunities</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security</td>
<td>• Paid a wage reflecting experiences, skills and qualifications</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.52</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Employment is secure and low risk of losing job</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.41</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Effective reasonable adjustments enable employees to do their best at work</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Reasonable adjustments reviewed on regular basis</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Employment rights understood and respected by employer</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fulfilment</td>
<td>• Job allows use of skills, knowledge and experience</td>
<td>2.02</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Employees allowed opportunities to work autonomously, solve problems and make a difference</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Reasonable adjustments made to allow employees to train, develop and learn skills for career development</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect</td>
<td>• Employees feel understood as an autistic person</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Confident of receiving support regarding bullying and harassment</td>
<td>2.61</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Employer supports well-being, health, and safety</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Meaningful training on inclusion and diversity translating in policy and practice</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Colleagues have good understanding of needs of autistic workers</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The final quantitative findings reveal where there are important, statistically significant variances in accessing fair work between men and women. (In this study, statistical significance is a 10 per cent or greater difference between the responses of women and men.)

Table 5 highlights the five aspects of fair work where there are greatest differences between the experiences of women and men. In four out of the five instances, it is women who report comparatively better experiences than men. Each aspect highlights the importance of recognizing and acting upon intersectionality in formulating improved access to fair work for the autistic workforce.

**Table 5: Statistically different aspects of dimensions of fair work (women and men)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension of fair work</th>
<th>Aspect of dimension</th>
<th>Mean for women</th>
<th>Mean for men</th>
<th>Statistical significance?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Effective voice</td>
<td>Employer responds positively when raising autism-related matters</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity</td>
<td>Access to training and development opportunities</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fulfilment</td>
<td>Job allows use of skills, knowledge and experience</td>
<td>2.02</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security</td>
<td>Employer supports well-being, health, and safety</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect</td>
<td>Colleagues have good understanding of needs of autistic workers</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
7. Fair Work Barriers and Facilitators – Key Qualitative Findings

The study identified common barriers and facilitators affecting the experiences of autistic employees for each of the five dimensions of the Fair Work Framework. The findings in Section 5 and Section 6 identified and quantified barriers and facilitators to fair work, drawn from the employee and employer/manager surveys. This section explores the barriers and facilitators in more depth, focusing on examples identified from the qualitative findings (open survey questions and interviews, see Section 3). The findings in this section are categorised by dimension of the Fair Work Framework, and analysis applies a lens of the social model of disability (see Section 3).

Common themes among the barriers include: communication with management and the wider organisation; insufficient or ineffective work structure; employees’ inability to rely on reasonable adjustments during recruitment and day-to-day work; and misunderstanding autistic behaviour and the needs of autistic individuals.

These barriers often relate to every-day working practice:

I don’t do well in team meetings, which is something that happens a lot in my job, we do like a weekly team meeting and the entirety of the staff… 12–15 people in each meeting. I don’t often get to put anything across on a team meeting, unless I am like prepared and with a script. (Annabel)

I’m quite frustrated in my current job because I don’t have the opportunity to really use my skills as I’m doing things that are very easy and straightforward but I can do a lot more. (Sam)

Other barriers run deeper and relate to broader attitudes and work culture:

Autism doesnae mean stupid. For me, that’s the thing that always comes up; it’s almost like they look at you and they kind of judge it based on not even the merit or the idea, or the merit of who said it, but it’s almost like the default position is, ‘well, he’s autistic so that cannae make any sense’ whether the idea’s a good idea or a bad idea. (Oliver)

I have no idea if I’ve ever worked with anyone else that’s diagnosed autistic. But then, at the same time… I don’t tell anyone, so they also wouldn’t necessarily know either. I would say it’s definitely not something that’s talked about… I don’t think I’ve ever had any kind of real conversations with anyone about it. (Adam)

Conversely, key facilitators to fair work include: open and frequent communication; clear and regular feedback from immediate line managers; flexible structures to allow for reasonable adjustments and individual support; and proactive policies and training designed with the input of autistic individuals.

My manager at the time was also very friendly and very open with me… when we moved office… [they were] making sure that where I was sitting was right for me, that I could not be too distracted by things visually… But, probably more importantly [they] also made sure that the work I was given… wasn’t interruptive work, it was clear tasks that I could get on with and work on. [They] regularly checked that I was doing fine with that. (Alistair)

We have regular supervision, we have written and verbal ways of communicating, and I’ll often, if I’m putting something to staff, I’ll say, ‘you can talk to me now, you can think about it and come back later, you don’t need to make a decision just now.
You can email me if you’d rather write it down,’ because certain things are just easier to say in different ways for everyone, whether you’re autistic or not. (Alice).

The qualitative data underline that the experiences of autistic individuals differ from one person to the next. What may be a facilitator in some circumstances or for some people may be a barrier for others.

Something that’s happened recently is they introduced a hybrid working protocol, they’re working on that… it’s kind of helpful. It’s going into detail about giving people time to adjust to an open working space. Just an open working space. There’s no [allocation] of our desks… now, it’s all hotdesking. But, that is… I suppose something that could be worked out if I asked for it. they could probably allocate me a desk. (Peter)

We commit everything to writing and that’s it. But that doesn’t guarantee that somebody’s read it, understood it, agrees with it, has questioned any issues they might have about it and I think we’re quite slow to kind of react to that… If I get an email, I’ll speak to my team about it… I repeatedly get copied into the email three levels down, where that email’s just been forwarded on, ‘please see the attached’, ‘please see the attached’, and I don’t think that’s… suitable… because there’s too much information and the message is it’s not that important. (James)

Meaningful support for autistic workers needs to come from both a personal, individual level – such as through relationships with managers and colleagues – and a structural, organisational level. As one participant observed:

There needs to be… better structured training. I don’t like e-learning. It’s useful for some things. It’s useful for computer programmes, the timecards… Do your e-learning, download your guide; save them. But, as a manager, you need to understand people and you’re never going to really understand people without being in a room with them. (Oliver)

These findings provide principles for, and examples of, practical changes employers can make to minimise or prevent problems with accessing fair work for autistic employees.

Table 6 summarises the organisational barriers identified in the qualitative findings.
Table 6: Organisational barriers to fair work for the autistic workforce

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension to Fair Work Framework</th>
<th>Organisational barrier</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Effective voice                 | • Lack of trust in employment relationships  
• One-way, inflexible and short-notice communications  
• Absence of, or ineffective, independent staff representation  
• Poor communication on disclosure and reasonable adjustments  
• Bureaucratic decision-making, e.g., delayed or outsourced procurement processes, delays or over-ruling of line manager decisions and recommendations |
| Opportunity                     | • Inflexible requirements for employee flexibility (e.g., shifts, hours, work site)  
• Lack of structure to job, details of job, accurate and up-to-date job description, hidden dimensions to jobs  
• Exclusionary delivery of training  
• Rigid organisational structures and hierarchies  
• Discriminatory recruitment and selection policy and procedures  
• Inflexible working environments  
• Equality and inclusion practices reactionary, legal minimum, compliance-orientated, partial or not embedded into wider organisational strategy  
• Conflicting attitudes and priorities of layers of management obligations/responsibilities of line managers and HR professionals; inconsistent practices across units in large organisations |
| Security                        | • Numerous problems with reasonable adjustments  
• Discriminatory assessment of performance  
• Lack of understanding of autism; information on autism which is dated, stereotyped or medical-model-orientated  
• Changes to work location, hours or key aspects of role  
• Unplanned or poorly planned transition to new line manager |
| Fulfilment                      | • Micro-management and/or low or no levels of job autonomy  
• One-size-fits-all teamworking practices  
• Poorly planned and organised meetings  
• Minimal or no role models, especially of autistic women in key roles  
• Employees not enabled to use or grow relevant skills |
| Respect                         | • Misunderstanding or intolerance of autistic behaviour  
• Lack of awareness training  
• ‘Lip service’ treatment of equalities and inclusion  
• Stigma related to current or past employment  
• Exclusionary sub-cultures  
• Lack of formal policy and practice on autism or neurodiversity, especially in smaller organisations  
• Lack of clear and consistent parameters around difference and individualism; conflicting policies and practice  
• Lack of (or poor) systems designed to capture and to share appropriately information regarding autistic employees  
• Policy and practice lacking recognition of intersectionality |
Table 7 summarises the facilitators identified in the study, categorised by dimension of the Fair Work Framework, with reference to the social model of disability. While the study was able to identify specific examples of good practice, overall, most of the autistic employee participants had experienced at least some of the substantial barriers to fair work noted in Table 6.

**Table 7: Organisational facilitators of fair work for the autistic workforce**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension to Fair Work Framework</th>
<th>Organisational facilitator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Effective voice**              | • Regular, open, honest and unambiguous discussions with line manager and wider team  
                                 | • Small teams to allow focus on individuals, clearer roles, accessible, structured and manageable meetings  
                                 | • Access and support from a trade union representative or autism ally  
                                 | • Autism or wider neurodiversity staff forum/network (not disability)  
                                 | • Access to progressive autism civil society organisation or consultants  
                                 | • Access to health professionals  
                                 | • Clear, asynchronous communications (e.g., email, allowing scope to process information at an opportune time and respond rather than relying on sharing information verbally in the moment)  |
| **Opportunity**                  | • Reform of processes for talent management and employee resourcing, recruitment and selection methods, induction, and succession planning  
                                 | • Regular access to a good, trained and supportive line manager – who keeps records of meetings, follows up with summary emails, checks in periodically, gives ongoing feedback to employees, and builds trust  |
| **Security**                     | • Development of policy and practice on reasonable adjustments  
                                 | • Having a dedicated individual or team for support with adjustments  
                                 | • Making autism or neurodiversity part of a sustainable and responsible human resource management strategy  |
| **Fulfilment**                   | • Promotion of a range of autistic role models, accounting for roles and intersecting identities  
                                 | • Prioritising individual and adjustable workspaces  
                                 | • Use of job design to allow to play to strengths and minimise requirements for adjustments  
                                 | • Unquestioned time off for medical and health-related appointments; support from a staff representative or external consultant  |
| **Respect**                      | • Development of autism or neurodiversity strategy (not disability) with associated policy and practice  
                                 | • Strategy co-designed with autistic or neurodivergent workforce, allowing for marginal and intersecting identities |
8. Case Studies – Key Qualitative Findings

This final findings section contains examples of lived experience of both good and poor practice related to fair work for the autistic workforce. These thirteen examples are drawn from the interviews. As case studies, they help to tease out what access to fair work could look like for the autistic workforce, reducing the barriers and, therefore, the stress, exhaustion – and, ultimately, the employment gap – for autistic people.

Case 1: Jean, Secondary School Teacher (employee)

Jean is an autistic secondary school teacher who is now on a permanent contract. During her training period Jean was often moved from school to school with little notice, which she found unsettling. It was also during her training period that Jean realised she was autistic but because she did not know her colleagues well, she felt she couldn’t be open about her neurodivergence. This caused Jean extra challenges as it meant she did not feel she could ask for adjustments at work.

Now that Jean does have a permanent job, where she is open with her colleagues about being autistic, Jean feels a sense of security at work. This sense of security was also a double-edged sword as Jean is afraid of moving onto a new job for either career progression or to reduce her considerable daily commute. Jean has found line managers to be supportive but not initiative-taking in terms of putting adjustments in place. Jean has now given up on securing adjustments believing that the job’s not going to change.

As a secondary teacher, Jean finds herself in a challenging situation. Firstly, Jean notes how the schools she has worked in have put in place a range of adjustments for autistic and disabled students, but no such adjustments exist for staff. For Jean, being autistic at work is silenced, to the extent she doesn’t know if there are other neurodivergent or disabled staff at the school. There is an equalities group, but this is focused on supporting LGBTQI colleagues, and Jean doesn’t find her needs are discussed here.

Despite the silencing and lack of effective voice, Jean does find the strict structure of the day at school immensely helpful as an autistic teacher. However, the teaching spaces themselves are not autism friendly for example, the spaces are often noisy which triggers Jean’s hypersensitivity to sound. Jean would like to wear noise cancelling headphones, but this is not possible while teaching.

When asked to reflect on the Fair Work Framework and how this could be expanded to include autistic people’s needs at work, Jean would like the framework to include the ability to be her full autistic self at work:

‘being able to be fully present as a professional in my own authentic self and not having to pretend to be someone else so that I can do my job.’

Case 1 demonstrates how expectations of flexibility (i.e., job mobility) and prioritisation of reasonable adjustments for students over staff, result in formidable disabling barriers for Jean. The over-arching issue, however, is Jean’s lack of voice in the workplace. There is a lack of mechanisms for Jean to have meaningful opportunities to challenge decisions or to help shape policies and practices designed to mitigate against barriers to fair work.

Further, as noted in the final paragraph, Jean feels she has to mask her autism every day at work. In this instance, being enabled to be her authentic self in work is an intrinsic part of fair work.
Case 2: Phil, Gardener (employee)

Phil is an autistic self-employed gardener working to help private households to manage their gardens on a home-by-home basis. Although Phil does not have a line manager, he is supported by a workplace counsellor provided by an autism-led civil society organisation.

Although Phil is not a trained horticulturalist, he has learned about caring for plants and maintaining gardens through his own research and learning on the job. Formal courses and training are overwhelming for Phil as he struggles to learn facts about plants, and he had similar challenges at school being in formal learning environments. Phil prefers to learn as he works through exploring how things work, for example, different kinds of lawn mowers. This self-paced and directed learning helps Phil to manage his anxiety around change at work and learning new skills.

The introduction of technology into the workplace has helped Phil. He is able to learn about plants by using his phone and also appreciates being sent instructions via email where there is less ambiguity about what the other person wants. Phil also appreciates being able to organise his own working day so he can manage his workload in ways that work best for him, for example, if a customer gives him a key to the garden shed so he can mow lawns and weed gardens to fit his schedule.

Phil previously found formal employment arranged via the Job Centre to be particularly challenging due to set working hours and social dynamics in the workplace that he didn't understand. Consequently, Phil prefers to work alone and without a strict 9-5 workday.

For Phil, a fair work job would have predictable working conditions, where caring for others is central to workplace relations and a workplace which does not tolerate banter or jokes at others’ expense. Importantly for Phil, dress codes are a significant barrier at work, and Fair Work would include being able to dress in comfortable clothes without restrictions such as a uniform.

In the second case we see how Phil has had bad past experiences as an employee, and has greatly benefited from the autonomy and flexibility that self-employment allows him. The support he has received has helped him to identify his needs and assert them, a form of indirect representation.

Compared to Case 1, in this case Phil is facilitated, eventually, to work in a manner allowing him to be his autistic self. Fair work in this instance is about drawing on employee voice and representation in making important decisions about how fair work is organised to meet individual needs.
Case 3: Evie, Library Assistant (employee)

Evie is a library assistant who is currently managing a return to working in the library after remote and then hybrid working during the pandemic. The lockdowns affected Evie’s mental health negatively as she felt poorly understood and disliked by her colleagues.

Seeking out mental health support led to Evie undertaking counselling, which ultimately resulted in an informal autism diagnosis. Evie did eventually share her autism diagnosis with a trusted colleague who said they had suspected for some time that Evie is autistic. Despite this, Evie is reluctant to share her diagnosis more widely as she is relatively new to her job and is unsure of how her new colleagues will react. Consequently, Evie is also reluctant to ask for workplace adjustments as she feels picked on at work and doesn’t want to make everything about her. Evie has some awareness of the Fair Work Framework, but also feels that there are many policies which frequently change, and she struggles to keep up.

Despite Evie being on a permanent contract, she does not feel she has job security due to staff shortages which require staff to be moved around to different sites where she doesn’t know people. This uncertainty causes Evie distress, although managers do make some effort not to place Evie in libraries where she expresses discomfort. This makes Evie feel guilty as she knows her managers are trying to accommodate her and is worried that she does not appreciate these efforts enough. Evie knows library managers are over-worked and are trying to balance multiple priorities during a time of cuts to funding and staff numbers.

Even though Evie does face challenges at work, she also finds meaning in her work, particularly when working with children and supporting their literacy development. Sadly, these literacy groups move around libraries in Scotland and this disruption and uncertainty prevented Evie from continuing this enjoyable work. Evie requested that she be allowed to stay on one site, but a senior manager centrally refused this request with no explanation.

The return to working in libraries has caused Evie and her other colleagues to reflect on the inaccessibility of their workspaces, for example, poor kitchen facilities, noise and lack of quiet spaces. However, Evie notes that when a disabled colleague did ask for an adjustment to their work, they were immediately pushed into capability procedures and declared unfit for work, rather than an adjustment being put in place [in this case requesting a repair to a broken lift].

Evie would like the Fair Work Framework to reflect the specific needs of autistic people: ‘I would like to say something like, where we’re listened to and it’s a two-way process... If I ask for something to be done, and they say no, I would like an explanation as to why.’

In the third case study, some of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic can be observed, plus problems concerning workforce planning for a financially stretched public service. A further complicating matter is the (often gendered) reality of attaining an autism diagnosis later in life. The consequences for Evie appear to be high, not least in terms of mental health and impact on wider well-being. Missing in this instance is access to effective voice.

Evie enjoys her job and, in all likelihood, has a relatively high level of conventional job security. However, as for many autistic employees, her sense of security is also mediated by the stability of her place of work and work role.

Furthermore, full access to fair work is prevented by Evie’s first-hand experiences of failure to provide adjustments, reinforced by secondary accounts of what may happen if she attempts to challenge a decision or push for disability-related adjustments.
Case 4: Jamie, HR Director (manager)

Jamie is a Director of Human Resources for a large multinational organisation with its HQ in Scotland. Jamie manages a team of around 50 people. Jamie is aware of the Fair Work Framework and builds this into policies within his organisation, although reflects that this can be challenging in a multinational context where there are different national legislative frameworks.

Through his work, Jamie has noticed that existing autistic employees are more likely to be able to access adjustments at work because they have an established relationship, and they are a known asset to the employer. In contrast a new applicant does not have that leverage to be able to request adjustments.

In his capacity as HR director, Jamie recognises that recruitment and selection processes can be unintentionally discriminatory against neurodivergent people, including autistic applicants. Jamie has spent time talking to autistic applicants to understand their experiences and challenges when applying for jobs in his organisation. One aspect which Jamie has found can be helpful for autistic candidates is for the interview questions to be sent in advance to all candidates, but also has reservations regarding whether this could advantage some candidates. Jamie also reflects on interviewing for senior positions in organisations where the interview panels may consist of 6 or 7 people and how this may be intimidating or off-putting for autistic people.

Jamie believes that a fair workplace allows everyone to be themselves at work (as much as they want to be), have fun, fulfil their potential while building a sense of community and shared purpose. Importantly, Jamie feels that a fair workplace also includes accountability for when managers do not enact fair work practices. Key, says Jamie, is to listen to the individual and to create a working culture where the individual can speak up about what they need. Jamie outlines the many ways staff can be heard at his place of work, including individual and collective forms of representation. For Jamie, diversity in all its forms, should be celebrated, moving away from medicalising language of disorder or diagnosis.

In the fourth case, we consider issues related to fair work from the perspective of a senior and experienced HR professional. While running a multinational organisation sets a broad context to fair work, where he is charged with overseeing the entire HR function, from Jamie’s perspective, it is in day-to-day, frontline work activities that fair work challenges most clearly present and can be addressed. Examples include the recruitment and selection process, as well as line management and arranging reasonable adjustments. While the wider infrastructure is in place, too much onus is still placed on employees, whether as individuals or collectively, to push for access to reasonable adjustments and fair work.
Case 5: Callum, Health and Safety Manager (employee)

Callum is a senior manager in a higher education institute managing a team of technical staff, which has experienced considerable insecurity due to successive rounds of voluntary severance, which he has found upsetting. Callum was diagnosed as autistic later in life and is also a father to three autistic sons.

Callum wasn’t aware of the Fair Work Framework, but he reflects that although there is support in school for autistic children, this drops off when an autistic person enters the workplace. As a senior member of staff, Callum feels he can be open about his workplace needs, for example, control of lighting and sound. He is trying to ensure he weaves neurodiversity inclusion into his work managing and supporting other colleagues. However, Callum also describes himself as ‘high disguising’ as he is able to hide his autistic traits at work when he feels it is required.

Callum has felt limited in his career, despite his success, due to the expectations placed on him and others to engage in formalised tasks which are not inclusive for autistic people. One example Callum identifies is giving presentations at work where Callum struggles to maintain eye contact with audience members and tends to speak at a very fast pace. Callum reflects that promotion and progression criteria should be analysed to ensure they do not perpetuate neurotypical working patterns and expectations.

As a manager, Callum is also aware of the limitation of traditional recruitment and selection methods for new staff, particularly interviews. For Callum, his interview experiences have focused on his technical skills where he feels confident talking at length about his understanding. However, Callum reflects that the soft skills aspect of interviews can be particularly challenging for autistic people.

When asked to reflect on how the Fair Work Framework could be adapted to ensure it reflects the needs of autistic people, Callum draws a comparison to the use of male bodied crash test dummies in car safety testing, arguing that this meant the impact of crashes on female bodied people has been ignored. Similarly, Callum argues that what constitutes fair work is based around the needs of neurotypical people, with neurodivergent people’s needs excluded.

Case 5 highlights a common reality for the autistic workforce, i.e., how the Equality Act 2010 means something quite different in educational contexts compared to employment-related contexts, linking back to Case 1. In educational contexts, education providers must anticipate the needs of autistic students, but in employment-related contexts, employers need only react to such needs. As such, workplaces tend to be orientated towards neurotypical norms, values, behaviour and expectations, except where neurodivergent employees have a degree of autonomy in shaping their working environments. Here, it would be helpful to embed a higher degree of employee autonomy in wider HR practice, as well as to train the wider workforce to understand and appreciate neurodivergence.
Case 6: Alistair, Software Developer (employee)

Alistair is a software developer who works in one of four small teams employed by an IT company. He believes he and all colleagues benefit from a culture of respect where he is employed. Where Alistair works all colleagues, including himself and other employees he believes are autistic, are encouraged to speak in an open, honest and blunt manner. He believes, as a result, autistic employees are totally accepted in how they come across.

Having been employed by the IT company for some time, he is yet to see any ‘negative talk’ about autistic employees, and in personal terms, it has been a ‘positive’ experience for him.

Case 6 provides critical insights into what access to fair work for the autistic workforce can look like. Importantly, accessing fair work in this instance does not include reasonable adjustments; instead, the culture of the work organisation is by nature inclusive to autistic working people and the wider notion of fair work. In this instance, Alistair can be his autistic self at work, so there is no, or minimal, need for masking, thus far less chance of facing exhaustion during and after the working day.

Case 7: Shona, Regional Director (manager)

Shona is a regional director of an organisation that specialises in supporting IT organisations recruit autistic employees. Shona’s organisation not only advises IT organisations, but also as an employer itself, adheres to what they believe to be good practice in making sure autistic employees are given maximum opportunity to succeed in new jobs.

This best practice begins with putting in place adjustments through the entire recruitment and selection stages of employment. Best practice starts at the recruitment stage where recruiters are encouraged to reduce the job description down to about three to four key points, as it is often the case that autistic candidates deselect themselves if they see a list of 20 bullet points and they cannot do all 20.

At the selection stage, good practice includes sending prospective candidates photographs of the reception area, details of who will be on the interview panel, including their job titles and why they are on the panel.

Further adjustments include eliminating likely sensory problems, such as avoiding having the interview near a cafeteria or staff kitchen, making sure the light can be adjusted, requesting interviewers do not wear bold or brightly coloured clothes, such as psychedelic designs. Interview questions are sent out in advance to candidates and care is taken to ask interview questions one at a time, allowing candidates to process and make sense of the questions.

Case 7, based on a manager’s account, represents a holistic practical example of how to facilitate access to the opportunity dimension of fair work. In this instance the focus is on the process of identifying key job characteristics for a staff vacancy, through to filling that vacancy via the selection interview. The whole process is considered through the lens of a prospective autistic job applicant. Significantly, such a process is likely to be appreciated by all job applicants, whether neurodivergent or neurotypical, effectively setting out how a key and common aspect of HR policy and practice can be transformed to generate access to fair work for all.
Case 8: Douglas, Administrative Assistant (employee)

Douglas works for NHS Scotland in a general administrative capacity. Recently his employer has taken to using ‘employee passports’, sometimes more generally referred to as ‘disability passports’, or a document completed by an employee based on detailing their health and what adjustments should be put in place to assist them.

He believes the passport provides a layer of job security, as it is the basis of monthly conversations with his line manager and is meant to be formally reviewed on an annual basis. The passport contains details of what reasonable adjustments he requires, explaining in his case autism and what that means for Douglas in his job role.

Importantly, having a simple and accessible document based on autism and his job role, as Douglas points out, means ‘you don’t have to keep explaining yourself’. The document, as such, lowers the prospect of stigma, as well as smoothing the transition to being managed by a different line manager should this be required, both critical aspects of employee retention and engagement.

With Case 8, we see a further example of how fair work can be more generally accessed beyond the recruitment and selection stage. In this instance, Douglas has his reasonable adjustments noted in a single document, which can be updated and is accessible to current and any future managers. Importantly, an employee passport helps de-stigmatise the process of accessing fair work. The practice is also likely to make line-managing an autistic employee more effective, consistent, smoother and less time-consuming for both managers and employees.

Case 9: Oliver, Retail Assistant (employee)

Oliver is a retail assistant and is employed by a large high street chain retailer. Oliver’s work is quite a specialised form of retail work, so it requires regular training sessions.

In previous jobs training was quite stressful as it was usually announced at short notice, with training expected to be done outside regular shift patterns. Where Oliver currently works the approach is quite different, but different in the same way for all staff, and not as an individual reasonable adjustment. For example, when training is required, all staff are given a monthly allowance to train and time off to do the training. All training details are announced a month or more in advance with options of when to train often available.

The key issue is that Oliver believes the training is more fulfilling, and therefore more likely to be incorporated into daily activities, when he has time to prepare to do something different to his regular day-to-day duties.

Case 9 first demonstrates not only how policy related to training can vary from one employer to the next, but how in one instance training policy can be disabling, but not in another. Also the differences are situated in broad HR policy that applies to all staff, rather than being provided as reasonable adjustments. The case highlights a further example of how good, inclusive general HR policy and practice represents an effective way to facilitate access to fair work for all.
Case 10: Iona, Legal Support (employee)

Iona works for the Scottish Government, providing legal support in one of her employer’s many departments. After a recent autism diagnosis she actively sought information and advice on how to get adjustments put in place. She found the process to attain adjustments where she works is based on respect for individuals. Iona found the process a ‘helpful’ and ‘positive’ experience. For instance, she could self-refer to the Workplace Adjustments Team, and even speak to someone in that team who has experience of neurodiversity.

A key outcome of this referral was a recommendation of mind-mapping software. Added to this, Iona believed the respect is extended by the fact her line manager is open to discussing autism and what that means at work. Further, Iona’s line manager is keen to encourage the wider team to be more ‘neurodiverse aware’ and understand ‘small things’ can make a big difference. Indeed, Iona believes, in a career spanning around thirty years, her current employer is the most ‘autism-friendly’ she has experienced. She sums such a culture up as, ‘no one bats an eyelid if you do something a little bit out of the ordinary’.

In Case 10 we see a clear-cut example of how employers, often via HR functions, can increase access to fair work for the autistic workforce. In this example the prospects for accessing fair work are raised due to Iona being supported by an internal equality, diversity and inclusion specialist. Such good practice is further enhanced by the people skills of her line manager.

While internal specialist support may not be available in smaller businesses, there remains the potential for civil society organisations to be involved, provided the employer is open to recognising and meaningfully engaging with wider stakeholders to the employment relationship.

Case 11: Eilidh, Trainee Actuary Consultant (employee)

Eilidh is a trainee actuary consultant who collaborates with a different manager depending on which client she is working for. Eilidh finds work stressful, particularly when it comes to attending big meetings. Wearing headphones in the office for long periods gives rise to colleagues and managers viewing the staff concerned as unapproachable. The dress code in the office is also quite strict and staff often engage in ‘chit-chat’, but Eilidh finds both to be unwelcome distractions that undermine a job she enjoys.

What makes an important difference to Eilidh’s working life is, meetings permitting, hybrid working, including an opportunity to ‘work from home’ on a regular basis. Key to why Eilidh appreciates hybrid working is how it allows her greater autonomy in how she does her work. For instance, Eilidh can start earlier and finish earlier than if she was in the office. More importantly, this approach allows Eilidh to have more control over her work and working day.

Hybrid working in this sense is less to do with working from home from time to time, and more about balancing out the stresses associated with working in the office and achieving a form of self-directed adjustments to working practices.

In Case 11, we see a ‘happy accident’ resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic – the rise and (to an extent) normalisation of hybrid working – and how hybrid working in the right circumstances represents a reasonable adjustment in everything but name for many disabled working people. It is evident Eilidh’s employer has some way to go in terms of allowing greater access to fair work, but their tolerance and appreciation of staff having some say in how, when and where they work is an encouraging sign, with potential for further improvements.
Case 12: Steven, Hire-Car Maintenance (employee)

Steven works for a busy car hire company. He is employed behind the scenes in making sure the fleet of cars is properly maintained and matches customer demand. Even though Steven is largely ‘hands off’ in terms of the immediate demands and customer-facing parts of the business, he is expected to attend a range of team meetings, meetings he struggles to get the most out of.

Unsure of how his manager would respond, Steven approached his line manager to see if he would be willing to provide some extra support in the one area of his job he struggles with. Steven’s manager agreed to his request to follow-up after meetings and to provide summary points, as well as provide an opportunity to ask questions on anything arising from meetings.

Steven believes his manager has good people skills, but also lets his staff make small but important adjustments to their day-to-day jobs. For example, to pick shifts that help keep a steady and predictable routine, and to wear ear and eye protection at times when it is unnecessary from a standard health and safety perspective.

In Case 12, there is a line manager, with a range of soft and people skills, making all the difference in terms of maximising access to fair work for Steven. Such practice obviously requires some input from the employee side, i.e., having the confidence to approach their line manager to ask for individualised reasonable adjustments. It calls into question the extent to which fair work can be best accessed in similar situations where the employee lacks confidence or has felt stigmatised in previous experiences. This suggests that employee representation or individual support may be needed to make such practice more widely available and successful.

Case 13: Annabel, Charity Worker (employee)

Annabel works part-time for a small charity. The charity is largely government funded and provides mental health services for children. Annabel is autistic and also has a health condition that constitutes a disability under the Equality Act (2010). When combined, Annabel believes they constitute a ‘double whammy’, as she has to contend with physical health issues, requiring a specific diet, at the same time as wrestling with how her ‘mind works’.

What helps Annabel remain engaged and focused on her jobs is flexible working, part of which involves part-time employment. A further key dimension to flexible working, or a form of adjustment, is being allowed to do certain tasks before lunch (largely administration and phone calls), and other tasks, such as working directly and having contact with children, in the afternoon.

Importantly, the working day is divided up by a three-hour break, effectively a form of split shifts. The extended break allows Annabel to eat at a pace she feels comfortable with, and to rest and recoup energy, allowing her to work effectively in the afternoon. By breaking up working days, Annabel feels work is both manageable and successful.

The final case, Case 13, reflects a situation where different protected characteristics intersect, i.e., autism and a physical health condition, set against the backdrop of a feminised occupation and sector. It is important to note that the positive outcome was by no means guaranteed. Arrangements enabling access to fair work could have been undermined by a manager, colleagues or even the client base. Importantly, fairly generic flexible working practices have converted a role from being exclusionary to inclusionary.
9. Findings Conclusions

The study findings reflect widespread inconsistency in approaches to managing the autistic workforce’s access to fair work. Pockets of good practice commonly co-exist alongside poor or indifferent practice. Both line managers and those shaping organisational or department-level policy, practices and communications all have an important role to play in making fair work accessible to autistic employees.

Current status of fair work for the autistic workforce

- The lived experience of being autistic at work is, at best, mixed. Individual autistic employees do not have a common experience of work.
- Employers are widely aware of autism, but initiatives are inconsistent and examples of systemic good practice are rare.
- Employers fare well on fulfilment and aspects of security, but less so regarding effective voice, opportunity and respect.
- Employer and HR practice appears to have come a long way in recent times in terms of awareness of autism and recognition of the value of diversity, but there is still much to be done to make work environments genuinely inclusive.
- Managers rate their ability to manage autism as consistently and significantly higher than autistic working people experience such situations.

Lived experience of autistic people at work

- Autistic working people more readily identify with neurodivergence than ‘disability’, although from an Equality Act perspective, disability discrimination is widely experienced.
- Being autistic or neurodivergent at work is not well understood by key and immediate stakeholders to fair work, such as managers and colleagues.
- Most autistic employees find it impossible to be their autistic selves at work, leading to daily ‘disguising’ or ‘masking’, which often results in exhaustion and distress, with implications for wellbeing and mental health.
- Autistic men and women experience work broadly the same, but with important differences.

Empowerment of autistic employees

- Access to an effective voice ranks highly as a barrier to fair work, even in workplaces where trade unions are represented.
- Most autistic employees are unaware of their employer’s policies and practices relating to autism and neurodiversity.
- Autistic employees can greatly benefit from a single, reliable and trustworthy point of contact, typically a supportive line manager or mentor.
Scope for improvements

- Employers could introduce neurodiversity or autism-specific policies and strategies. However, in many cases, reform of policies and practices to make them more inclusive is likely to deliver important and sustainable positive outcomes for all employees.
- The burden of achieving access to fair work falls disproportionately on autistic employees, with trade unions, civil society organisations and health professionals playing at best, a marginal role.
- Access to reasonable adjustments is problematic and a key current barrier to attaining fair work for autistic employees.
- Extending employee autonomy (e.g., around flexible and hybrid working) and enhancing their ability to make best use of their skill-set could help autistic employees to adopt work patterns that allow them to thrive and to grow fulfilling roles – with reduced need for formal reasonable adjustments.
10. Recommendations to Fair Work Framework Stakeholders

The overarching, policy-level recommendation is to **adapt the Fair Work Framework itself to encompass inclusion as a key dimension**. Figure 8 below features the five existing dimensions of the framework, with inclusion added as a proposed sixth dimension. The figure goes into more detail, incorporating the 21 aspects of fair work from the standpoint of autistic employees.

A requirement of workplace inclusion fits with the social model of disability and is central to making fair work accessible to all, particularly for minority and disadvantaged groups. Inclusion involves aligning the needs and priorities of multiple stakeholders, as well as challenging unhelpful assumptions and work practices. It is also important to consider gender and other intersecting characteristics that may have a substantial, practical effect on access to fair work, such as the differences between the experiences of autistic women and men highlighted in this study.

**Figure 8: An autism-inclusive, intersectional Fair Work Framework**

The framework depicted in Figure 8 provides a multiple stakeholder approach, providing examples of both employer and employee focused facilitators of fair work. Figure 9 (below) maps out the key stakeholders and their respective areas of interaction and influence. The figure illustrates the balance that must be struck between enabling employee-focused (e.g., third-sector-provided individual employment support or mentoring) and employer-focused facilitators (e.g., organisational communication norms and policies).

Where employee-focused facilitators of fair work are lacking or weak, employers may need to redress the balance by proactively supporting the development of effective and inclusive internal staff representation networks and channels. They may also reach out to external stakeholders who can provide valuable support to employers or to individual employees directly.
In addition to the highlighted key recommendations presented above, the study findings generate a range of specific recommendations to the four main stakeholders of fair work in Scotland, namely the Scottish Government; employers, HR and occupational health professionals; trade unions and other forms of staff representation; and civil society organisations. The recommendations for each stakeholder group are summarised below.

**Recommendations for the Scottish Government**

- More widely disseminate the Fair Work Framework.
- **Adapt the Fair Work Framework to explicitly incorporate inclusion.**
- Consider ways to enforce/incentivise access to fair work for all.
- Provide support for small to medium sized enterprises and micro-organisations to enact the Fair Work Framework.
- Coordinate and strategically fund initiatives by civil society organisations, education, trade unions and employers to leverage expertise and share good practice.
- Upskill health services to provide informed employment focused support for autistic people.
- Commission and conduct research evidencing the impact of the Fair Work Framework and of measures taken by employers in Scotland.
- Work with the UK Government where possible to strengthen equalities legislation, with specific, strengthened protections for autistic employees.

**Recommendations for employers, HR and occupational health professionals**

- Recognise the diversity of experiences of autistic people and support managers to move away from stereotypes of how autism may present in the workplace.
- Work closely with organisations who have lived-experience-based expertise of autism in work contexts to help improve the skills of key staff, increase understanding in the wider staff-base, and develop autism-inclusive HR policies and communication norms, including in relation to: recruitment, on-boarding, staff management, appraisals and development and progression pathways.
• Undertake regular reviews of how policies are perceived and adopted by different staff groups, including autistic staff.
• Consider how information is communicated throughout the organisation. Make it clear, provide context and make use of different formats so that everyone’s needs are met (e.g., verbal announcement followed-up by a concise written summary). Build in the opportunity for staff to process important information, to seek clarifications, and for managers to check understanding.
• Proactively collaborate with autistic employees to develop tailored adjustments which are reviewed regularly, adjusted as required, and recorded – with information passed on when managers change.
• Undertake assessments of changes to working practices, the organisation, physical work environments and work structures, to understand how such changes may affect autistic employees; consider which changes are necessary and identify strategies to mitigate any negative impacts.
• Proactively engage with trade unions and staff associations to ensure they operate effectively and inclusively and provide ‘effective voice’ to autistic as well as other staff.
• Collect data on disability status, neurodivergence and autism specifically. Monitor appointments, access to training and development, progression and staff turnover to identify any areas where autistic staff appear to be disproportionately negatively impacted. Address these with input from those with lived experience.
• In enacting all of the above, seek to strategically move towards creating a more universally inclusive work environment, with less reliance on individual employees identifying and securing individual accommodations.

Recommendations for trade unions, staff associations and networks

• Raise organisers’ understanding of autism and how men and women may experience work and autism differently.
• Improve the skills of staff association organisers in understanding the needs of autistic members, and work in collaboration with employers to improve the working lives of autistic people.
• Proactively engage in dialogue with employers and HR professionals to ensure the needs of autistic employees are fairly represented.

Recommendations for civil society organisations

• Ensure any autism or neurodiversity training provided to employers is up-to-date, strengths-focused, and grounded in lived experience of autism in the workplace (ideally led by trainers with lived experience).
• Monitor the impact of provided training and support on both employers’ policy and practice and on their autistic employees.
• As employers, mirror fair work and inclusive practices.
11. Final Reflections

A lot of autistic people, particularly women… spend a huge part of our lives not knowing that we’re autistic, because we don’t relate to the stereotypes that we had, so we think that can’t be us. We can’t really expect everybody else to know that, who’s never even questioned it yet. There are shifts but there’s definitely a bit of a mountain to climb. (Alice)

Focusing on inclusion as a core component of fair work brings the social model of disability to the forefront, and the social model of disability puts greater onus on making work environments and practices inclusive as a starting point. As a result, less of the burden is placed upon individual employees to empower themselves and push for individual adaptations, of which – as illustrated in the quote above – they may not even be aware.

Specialists with expertise in creating inclusive workplaces can provide valuable support to employers and employees. However, the most effective measures are likely to be those shaped by lived experience.

Inclusion is not simply about enforcing the rights of one marginalised group. At its best, inclusion is concerned with creating a safe space where group boundaries are broken down and differences can be celebrated for their strengths, rather than feared for the challenges they present. Inclusive work environments are respectful places where every employee can be enabled to thrive and grow their skills.

As captured in the quotation below, developing understanding of what works best for autistic employees is a two-way process that requires effort and understanding on both sides.

That kind of implies a… willingness for people to understand, move towards each other, doesn’t it, and… make an effort to understand each other… I’ve made quite a big effort to form some sort of model in my head, a rough idea, of how a neurotypical person acts as they do and why I’m seeing what I’m seeing. It certainly has made my life a bit easier, I think… I mean, that’s kind of an act of respect as well, isn’t it?
(Peter, autistic employee)
## Appendix: Interview Participant Details

### Table A1: Details of employee interview participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name/pseudonym</th>
<th>Position/job</th>
<th>Autism status</th>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Sam</td>
<td>Building Assessor</td>
<td>Diagnosed</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>45–54</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Andy</td>
<td>Statistician</td>
<td>Diagnosed</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>55–64</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. James</td>
<td>Police Officer</td>
<td>Self-diagnosed</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>45–54</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Phil</td>
<td>Gardener</td>
<td>Diagnosed</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>45–54</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Oliver</td>
<td>Retail Assistant</td>
<td>Diagnosed</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>35–44</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Alistair</td>
<td>Software Developer</td>
<td>Diagnosed</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>45–54</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Douglas</td>
<td>Administrative Assistant</td>
<td>Diagnosed</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>55–64</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Duncan</td>
<td>Support Employee</td>
<td>Diagnosed</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>45–54</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Lachlan</td>
<td>Sous Chef</td>
<td>Diagnosed</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>35–44</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Adam</td>
<td>Police Inspector</td>
<td>Diagnosed</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>35–44</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Peter</td>
<td>Communications Officer</td>
<td>Diagnosed</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>45–54</td>
<td>Male</td>
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<tr>
<td>12. Callum</td>
<td>Health and Safety</td>
<td>Diagnosed</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>45–54</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Iona</td>
<td>Legal Support</td>
<td>Diagnosed</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>45–54</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Jean</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Self-diagnosed</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>26–34</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Isla</td>
<td>Library Assistant</td>
<td>Diagnosed</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>45–54</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Evie</td>
<td>Library Assistant</td>
<td>Self-diagnosed</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>45–54</td>
<td>Female</td>
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<tr>
<td>17. Eilidh</td>
<td>Trainee Actuary Consultant</td>
<td>Diagnosed</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>26–34</td>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>18. Ishbel</td>
<td>Police Administration</td>
<td>Diagnosed</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>26–34</td>
<td>Female</td>
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<tr>
<td>19. Annabel</td>
<td>Charity Worker</td>
<td>Diagnosed</td>
<td>Third</td>
<td>26–34</td>
<td>Non-binary</td>
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<td>20. Steven</td>
<td>Hire-Car Maintenance</td>
<td>Diagnosed</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>26–34</td>
<td>Cisgender man</td>
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<td>21. Christopher</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Diagnosed</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>45–54</td>
<td>Preferred not to say</td>
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### Table A2: Details of employer interview participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name/pseudonym</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Autism status</th>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>22. Jamie</td>
<td>HR Director</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>55–64</td>
<td>Male</td>
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<tr>
<td>23. Jack</td>
<td>NHS Administration Manager</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>55–64</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. Shona</td>
<td>Regional Director</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Third</td>
<td>Preferred not to say</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. Charlie</td>
<td>Chief Delivery Officer</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Third</td>
<td>35–44</td>
<td>Non-binary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. Alice</td>
<td>CEO</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Third</td>
<td>45–54</td>
<td>Genderqueer</td>
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</table>