Australia's Attitudes & Behaviours towards Autism and *Experiences of Autistic People and their Families*

Autism and Employment

Research Report for Amaze

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Research Background

In July 2015, Amaze released its Strategic Directions to 2040, a 25-year plan with a social impact goal: Amaze aims for a society that respects the dignity of every person on the autism spectrum and offers them real opportunities to participate and contribute.

Within this strategy Amaze seeks to achieve three key outcomes:

- Community understanding of autism in Victoria increases over time;
- Attitudes and behaviours towards autistic people by the Victorian community (government, private and social sectors) improves over time;
- Opportunities for meaningful participation and valued contribution increase for autistic people.

Against these outcomes, Amaze determined success indicators and outputs to measure progress, including conducting the *Community Attitudes and Behaviours Survey* to establish baseline data of awareness and understanding of the key facts about autism, plus undertake a companion piece of research, the Experiences of Autistic People and their Families Survey.

This report outlines the research findings from both surveys in relation to employment.

Study 1: *Community Attitudes & Behaviours towards Autism*

The *Community Attitudes and Behaviours towards Autism* survey was conducted to identify community attitudes and behaviours relating to autism.

One of the key outcomes of this research is to better understand the attitudes and behaviours of the community and establish a baseline from which we are able to track changes over time to measure progress against Amaze's strategic outcomes.

To our knowledge, this is the first study of its kind to examine the attitudes and behaviours towards autism in Australia.

Key findings

- 75% of Australians believe autistic people struggle to gain employment
- 70% of Australians believe employers should make adjustments for autistic employees
- 21% of people would be more likely to shop at a supermarket with a proactive policy of employing autistic people
- 1 in 5 Australians would be very/concerned if an autistic person was appointed as their boss
- 24% of Australians would expect to receive training about autism if one of their colleagues was autistic

What jobs can autistic people do?

The jobs that respondents were most likely to agree that autistic people can do were artist/musician (87.7%), supported employment (86.9%), stacking shelves in a supermarket (79.5%) and computer programmer (76.2%). The only occupation that more than one-third of respondents did not believe an autistic person could do was a doctor.

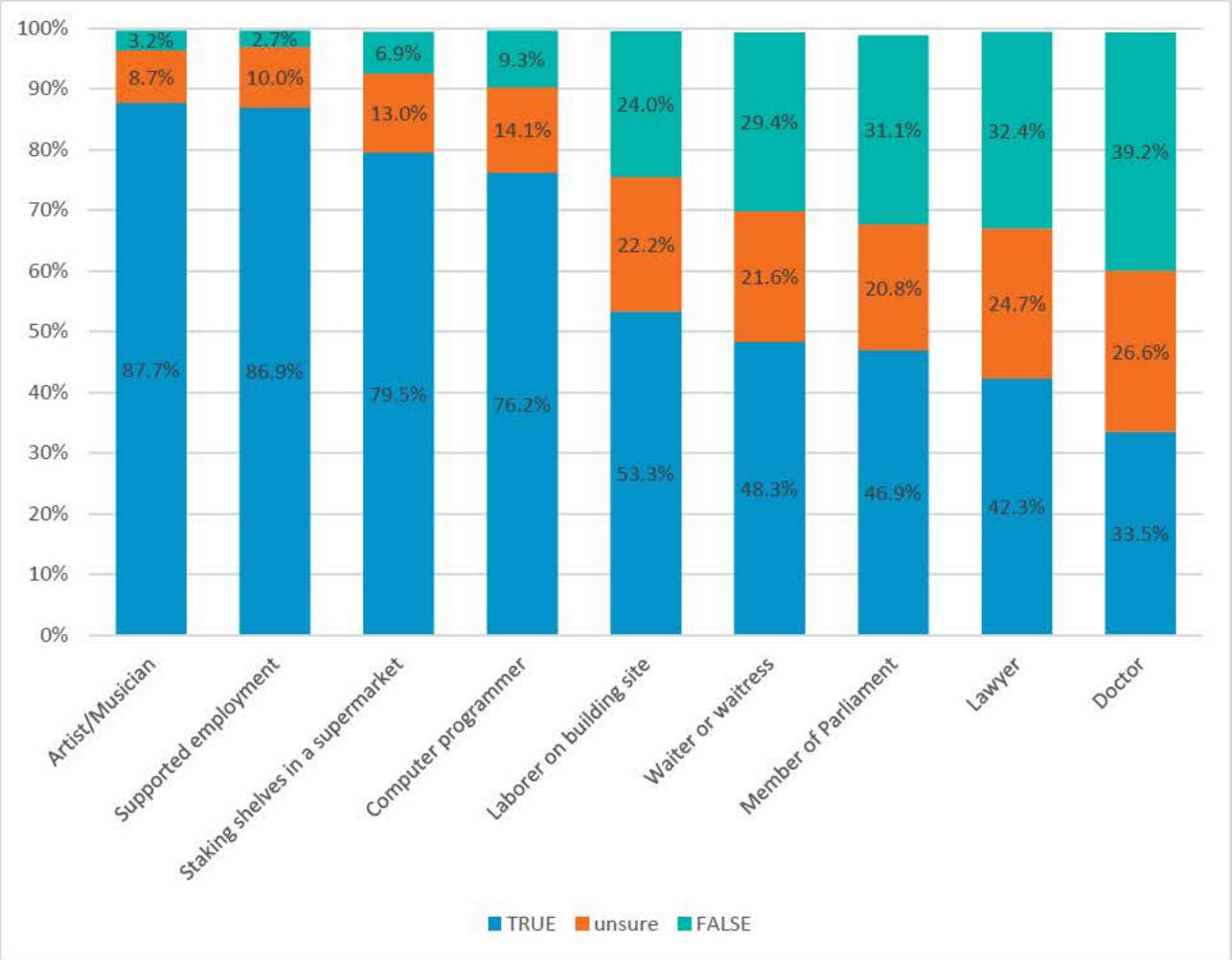

Figure 9. What jobs can autistic people do?

There was a clear trend by respondent age, with older respondents less likely to agree that an autistic person could hold a professional position, such as a doctor ($p < 0.001$), lawyer ($p < 0.001$), or member of Parliament ($p < 0.001$); or other skilled or semi-skilled position, such as computer programmer ($p = 0.01$), waiter or waitress ($p = 0.004$), or labourer ($p = 0.03$). There was no age-related difference in belief that an autistic person could be employed as an artist/musician, stacking shelves in a supermarket, or in supported employment.

Those with a lower level of educational attainment were less likely to believe that an autistic person could be employed as a computer programmer ($p = 0.006$) or lawyer ($p = 0.03$).

Do they think employers should make adjustments for autistic people?

Nearly three-quarters of the respondents ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ that employers (70.3%) should make adjustments for autistic people; with only a small proportion (6.6% and 5.7% respectively) disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with this statement. Less than one-quarter of respondents were ‘unsure’ or ‘neither agree nor disagree’ for the work policy questions (Figure 10).

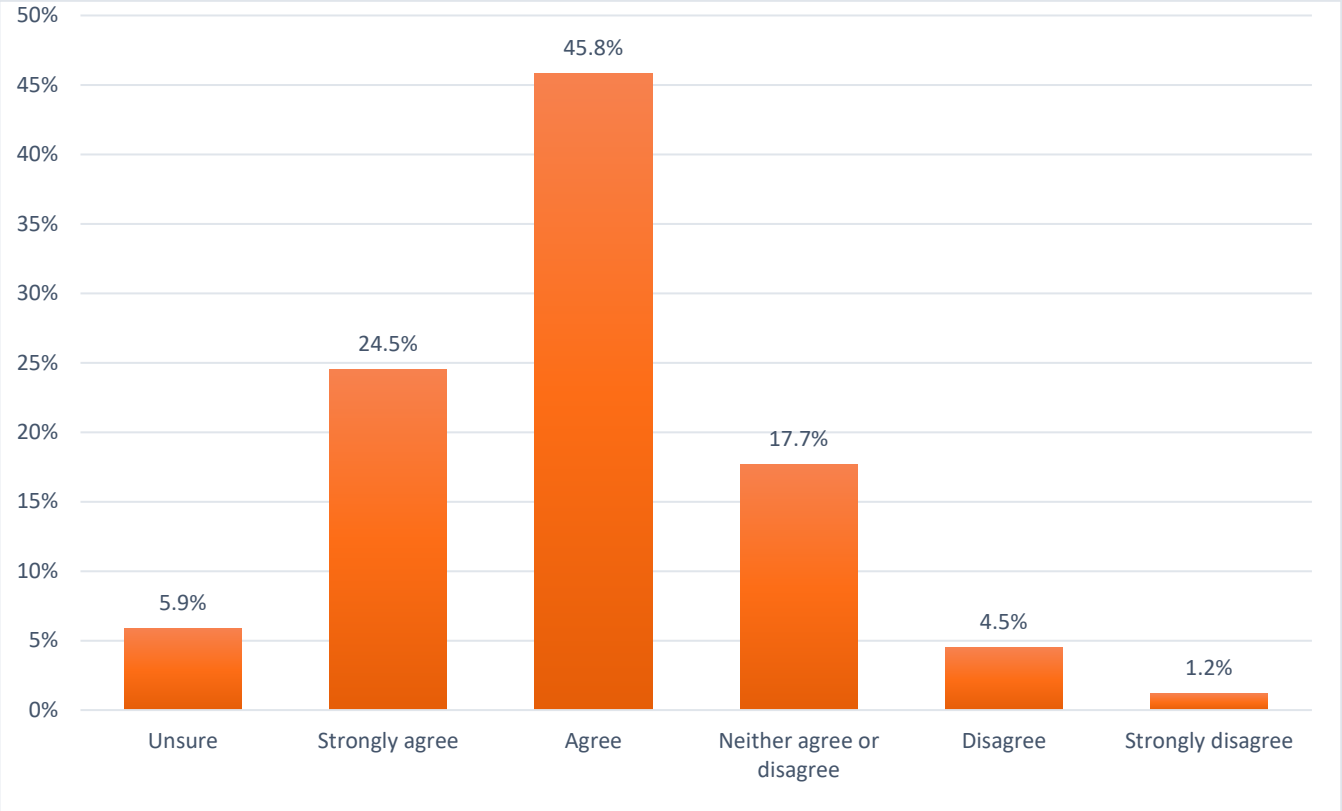

Figure 10. Should employers make adjustments for autistic people?

Working with autistic people

Respondents reported they would be concerned or very concerned if an autistic person was appointed as their boss (20.1%). Interestingly, respondents were less likely to be concerned or very concerned if an autistic adult became a colleague (10.3%) (Figure 11).

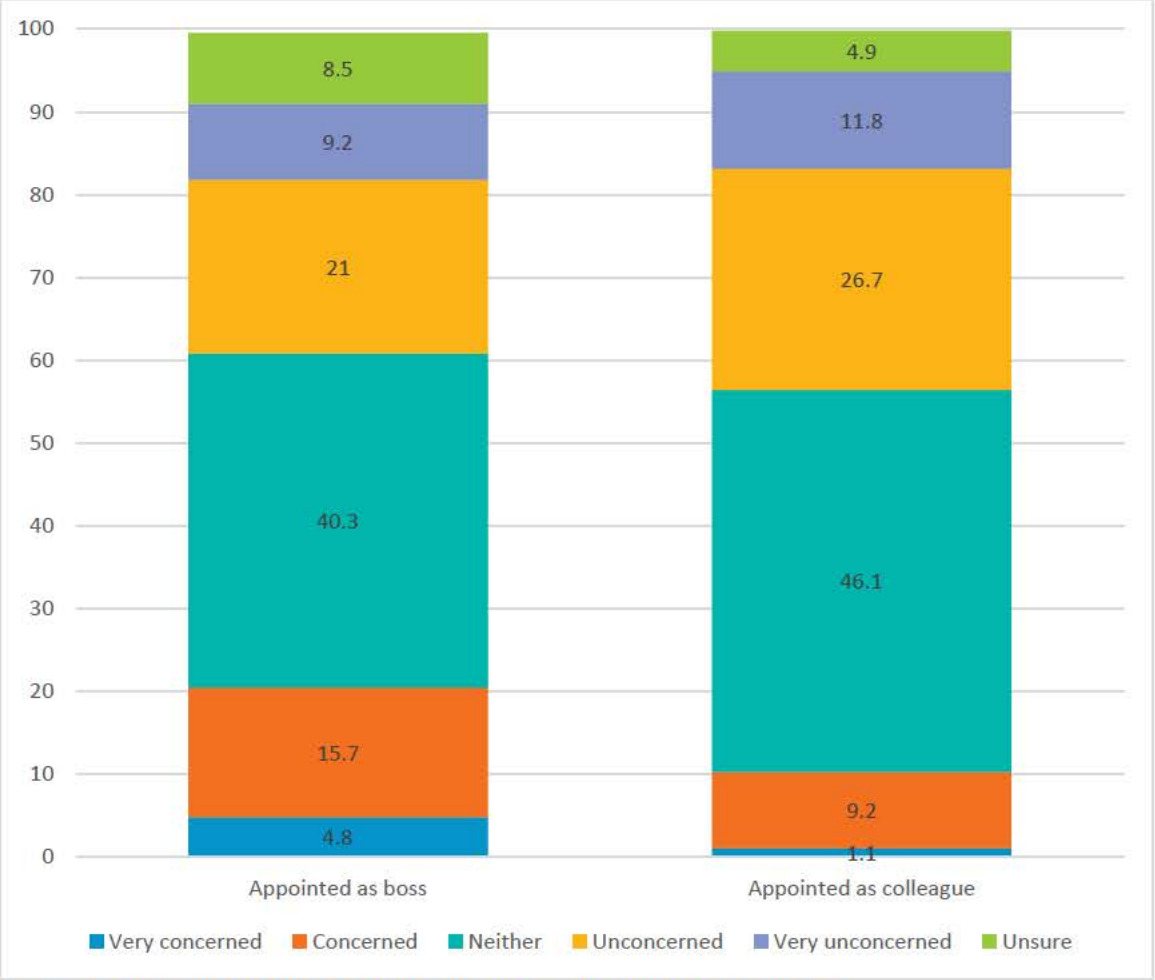

Figure 11. How would they feel about an autistic adult entering their lives?

The data suggest that people more comfortable with distal than proximal relationships.

When asked what their reaction would be to a colleague disclosing that they were autistic, the most frequent responses were: ask how I can help (54.7%, n = 1327), ask them about autism (53.5%, n=1296), try to find out more (48.1%, n=1167), and be proud of them (42.3%, n=1025). Of concern, 8.2% (n=198) said they would feel worry, 7.7% (n=186) disbelief, and 2.6% (n=64) that they would raise a concern with their manager. An important finding for employers is that one quarter (24.6%, n=597) would expect to receive training about autism.

Study 2: *Experiences of Autistic People and their Families*

The *Experiences* survey seeks to better understand the experiences and challenges faced by autistic people, their family members and carers. The survey aimed to collect data from approximately 1,000 autistic people and/or family members/carers of an autistic person. Participants were to be recruited from subscribers to Amaze's information and communication publications.

The collected data will be used to help build understanding of the needs of autistic people, their families and carers. Results will be used to develop educational and support materials, public reports, media communications, advice to government and academic publications on the lived experience of people on the autism spectrum and their family members/carers. The results of the research will not be disseminated directly to participants.

The responses made by autistic people have been presented in italic text and break out boxes to distinguish between their experiences and those of their families/carers.

Key findings

- 45% of employed autistic people have been in their current roles for five years or more
- More than half of unemployed autistic people who had previously held a paid job have been out of employment for three or more years
- Of those employed less than full-time, more than half (53.9%) would like to be working more hours than they currently do
- 45% of autistic people or their family members report that their skills are higher than those required to perform their current job
- 20% of autistic people or their family members report that they/their family member have lost a job due to their autism

Employment status

Of the 287 respondents who were asked questions about employment (57 autistic adults and 230 parents/carers of autistic adults), slightly more than one-third (38.0%, n=109) reported that they/their autistic family member/person they care for currently has a paid job.

The proportion of autistic people who are currently employed (38.0%) increased with age (20.8% aged 18-24, 34.0% aged 25-34, 59.4% aged 35-44, and 76.9% aged 45-64; $p < 0.001$).

Of the 177 not currently employed, 57.3% would like to be working in a paid job (20.8% were unsure). More than half (53.9%, n=96) who are not currently employed reported that they had never held a paid job (full-time, part-time, self-employed, or casual). Of the 81 who had previously had a paid job, 54.3% had been out of employment for three or more years (see Figure 12).

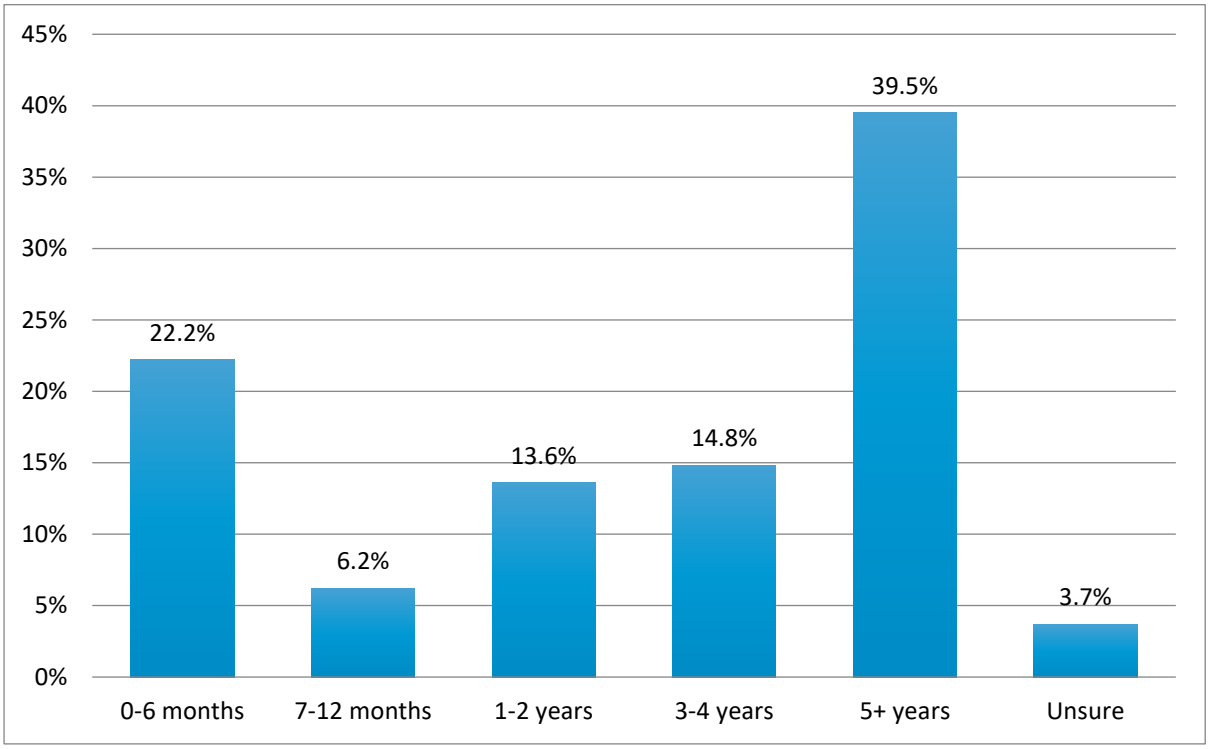

Figure 12: How long ago was their last paid job?

Of the 109 who were currently employed, approximately half (52.3%) were employed full-time, 24.8% part-time, and 22.9% casually; and of the 52 employed less than full-time, more than half (53.9%) would like to be working more hours than they currently do.

There was evidence of stability in employment among those who are employed, with 45.9% (n=50) having been in their current job for five years or more and a further 39.5% between one and four years (see Figure 13).

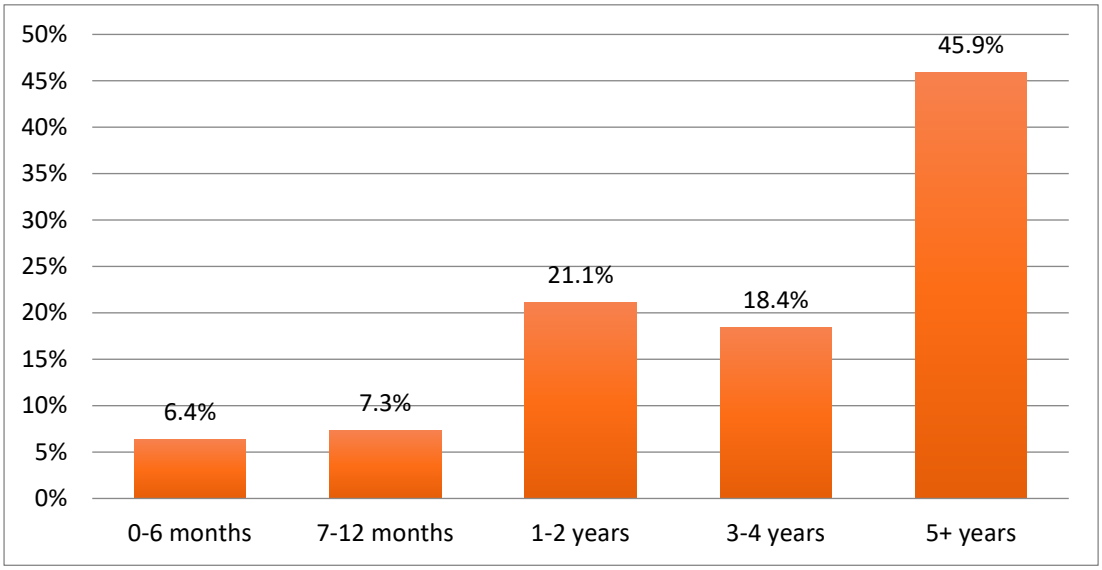

Figure 13: Duration of employment in current job

The survey findings suggest that even among those who are employed, there is a substantial level of under-employment, with 45.2% reporting that their skills are higher or much higher than those required to perform their current job (see Figure 14).

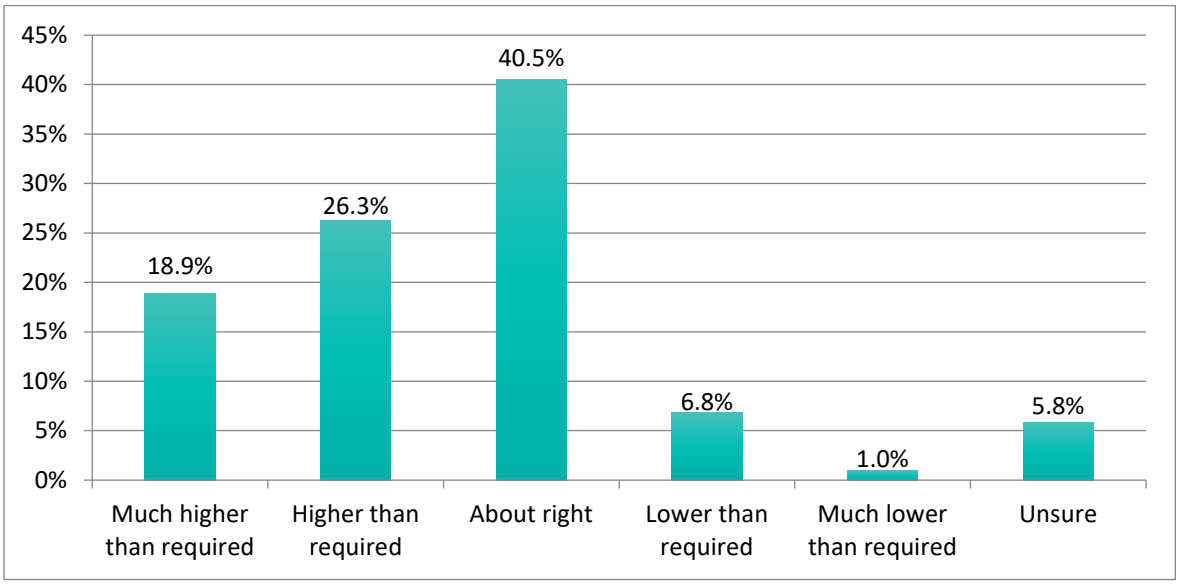

Figure 14: How do their skills compare to those required to perform their current job?

Barriers to employment

The main reasons respondents identified for not having a job were the lack of support available to find a job (34.8%), lack of support available to help them in a job (32.6%), being unable to attend interviews due to their autism/anxiety (30.9%) and lack of understanding of autism from potential employers (29.2%). Only 12.9% reported that they do not have a job because they are not interested in working (see Figure 15).

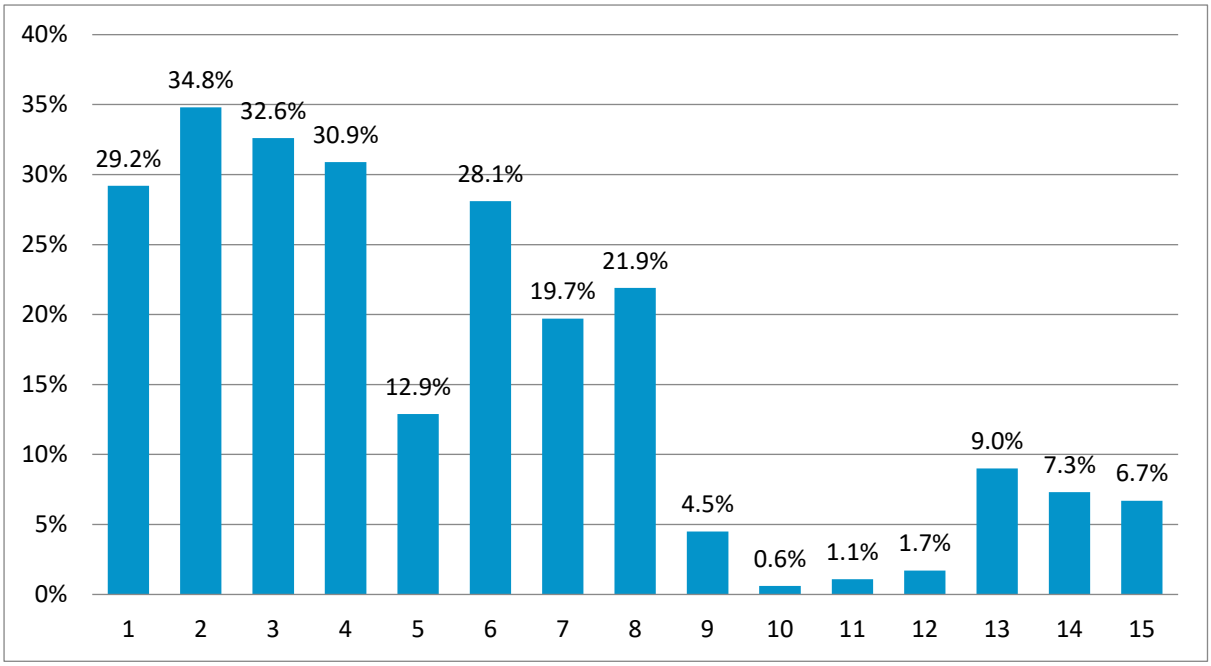

Figure 15: Main reasons for not having a paid job

1. Lack of understanding of autism from potential employers
2. Lack of support available to find a job
3. Lack of support available to help me/them get to and support me/them in a job
4. Unable to attend interviews due to my / their autism/anxiety
5. I am / they are not interested in working
6. Can't find the right job
7. My / their job applications have not been successful
8. Illness / poor health prevents me/them from seeking employment
9. Other
10. None
11. Unsure
12. Prefer not to say
13. Unable to work due to the severity of autism / intellectual disability
14. Currently studying
15. Parenting / caring respons bilities

Disclosure in the workplace

Slightly more than one-quarter (27.9%; 53) reported that they/the person they care for had told their current employer that they are autistic. Of those, 51.0% had told their employer during the selection process; almost one-quarter (22.6%) disclosed to their employer in the course of their employment because they had experienced a problem (see Figure 16).

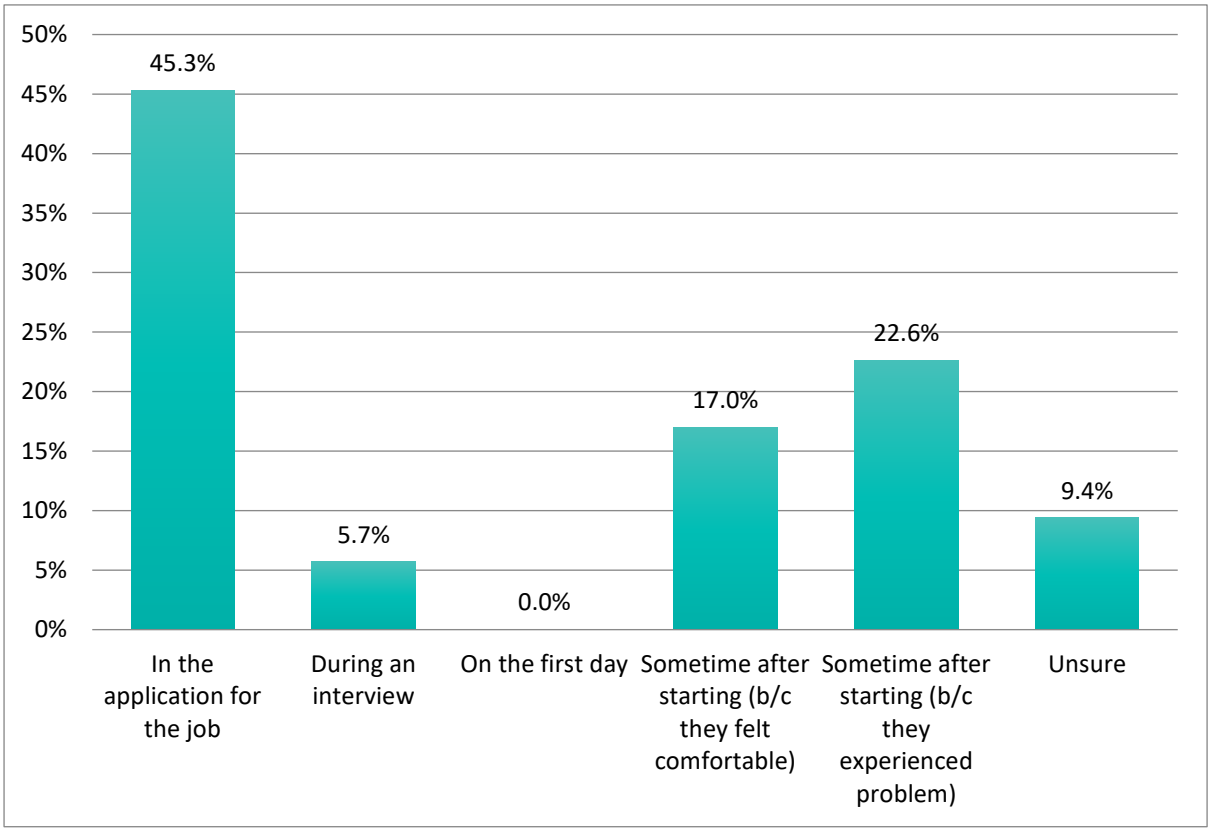

Figure 16: When did they tell their employer?

Adjustments in the workplace

Respondents who reported that they/the person they care for is currently employed were asked whether the employer had made each of ten specific adjustments (see Figure 17).

The most commonly reported adjustment, although this was only the case for 32% of respondents, was to provide a set work routine and avoid changes. Just under a quarter reported that the employer had identified a person in the organisation to support them if required (24.5%) or provided information and/or training to others in the workplace on how to support them at work (22.6%).

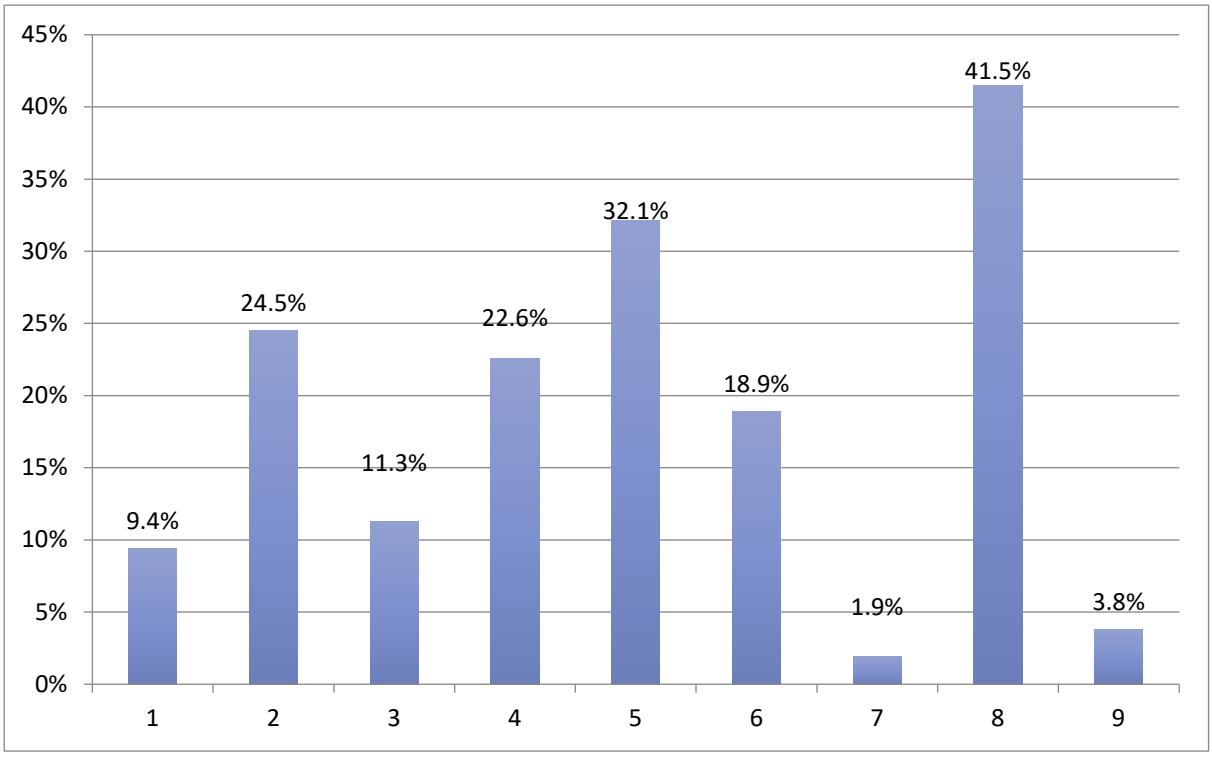

Figure 17: Adjustments made by employers

1. Adjusted lighting and/or sound levels and/or other sensory (smells, textures)
2. Identified a person in the organisation to support you/them, if required
3. Provided a quiet room/area
4. Provided information and/or training to others in the workplace on how to support you/them at work
5. Provided a set work routine and avoided changes
6. Allowed me/them to work flexible hours
7. Other
8. None
9. Unsure

Responses from autistic people

Approximately one-third (35%, n = 20) of the 57 respondents who identified as autistic and responded in relation to their own experiences reported that they currently have a paid job.

Of the 20 who are currently employed, eight are working full-time, six part-time and six in a casual position; and of the 12 who are working less than full-time six would like to be working more hours.

Eight of these 20 respondents have been in their current job for more than five years, seven for between one and four years, and five for 12 months or less.
Those who are employed identified very few adjustments made by their employers; three noted that their employer provided information and/or training to others in the workplace on how to support them; two that the employer had identified a person in the organisation to support them, two that the employer had provided a set work routine and avoided changes, one that they had adjusted lighting and/or other sensory items, and one that they had provided a quiet area.

Of the 37 who are not currently employed, 20 (54%) would like to have a paid job, six (16%) would not, and 11 (30%) are not sure.

The main reasons identified by those responding on behalf of themselves for not having a job were: lack of understanding of autism from potential employers (38%); being unable to attend interviews due to their autism/anxiety (38%); poor health preventing them from seeking employment (35%); and lack of support available to find a job (35%).

Methodology

Community Attitudes and Behaviours Survey

Sample

The sample consisted of adults aged 18 years and older recruited through a mixed-mode approach, including both online and telephone surveys conducted via the Social Research Centre's Life in Australia panel.

The Life in Australia panel was established in November 2016 by the Social Research Centre and is Australia's first probability-based online survey panel that are generalisable to the Australian adult population and that sampling errors and confidence intervals can be accurately calculated. Life in Australia Panel members were randomly recruited via their landline or mobile phone and provided their contact details so that they can take part in surveys on a regular basis.

A dual-frame RDD sample design was employed to undertake recruitment of the Life in Australia Panel, with a 30:70 split between the landline RDD sample frame and mobile phone RDD sample frame. For the landline sample, an alternating next/last birthday method was used to randomly select respondents from households where two or more in-scope persons were present. The phone answerer was the selected respondent from the mobile sample. Only one member per household was invited to join the Life in Australia panel.
Members of the panel are Australian residents aged 18 years or more and all active members of the panel (n = 3,204) were invited to take part in the survey via email, SMS and telephone, with reminders over a 2-3 week period. Of these, 75.7% (n = 2,424) participated in the survey. The majority of participants completed the online survey via email (76.7%), followed by via the telephone (13.1%) and SMS (8.6%).

The demographic characteristics of the respondents are reported in Table 1. The sample is consistent with the Australian population by gender; SEIFA quintile; state of residence; capital city vs other; and Australian vs overseas-born. The sample was more highly educated than the underlying population (40% with bachelor or higher degree compared to 23% of the population); and, while the overall age distribution was not significantly different, there was a greater proportion of people aged 55 and over in the sample than in the underlying population.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics

		N (%)	Australia	p-value
Gender	Male	1125 (46.4%)	49.8	0.79
	Female	1289 (53.2%)	50.2	
	Other	4 (0.16%)		
	Missing	6 (0.24%)		
Age	18-24	177 (7.3%)	12.3	0.34
	25-34	306 (12.6%)	19.1	
	35-44	328 (13.5%)	17.5	
	45-54	408 (16.8%)	16.9	
	55-64	534 (22.0%)	14.8	
	65-74	462 (19.1%)	10.9	

	75+	202 (8.3%)	8.4	
	missing	7 (0.3%)		
Highest educational qualification	Bachelor or higher	695 (39.8%)	23	0.03
	Trade/certificate/diploma	831 (34.3%)	31.1	
	Year 12 or equivalent	275 (11.3%)	18.3	
	Year 11 or less	353 (14.6%)	25.1	
Household structure	Person living alone	430 (17.7%)		
	Couple only	786 (32.4%)		
	Couple with kids	779 (32.1%)		
	Single parent with kids	148 (6.1%)		
	Others	260 (10.7%)		
	Missing	21 (0.9%)		
Country of birth	Australia	1749 (72.1%)	72	1.0
	Other	659 (27.2%)	28	
	Missing	16 (0.7%)		
Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas	Quartile 1 – Most disadvantage	302 (12.5%)	16	0.95
	Quartile 2	421 (17.4%)	18	
	Quartile 3	475 (19.6%)	20	
	Quartile 4	535 (22.1%)	22	
	Quartile 5 – Least disadvantage	668 (27.5%)	24	
	Missing	23 (0.9%)		
Region	Capital city	1610 (66.4%)	67	1.0
	Rest of the state	792 (32.7%)	33	
	missing	22 (0.9%)		
State	NSW	701 (28.9%)	32.0	0.99
	VIC	606 (25%)	25.2	
	QLD	480 (19.8%)	20.1	
	SA	221 (9.1%)	7.1	
	WA	275 (11.3%)	10.9	
	TAS	65 (2.7%)	2.2	
	NT	18 (0.7%)	1.0	
	ACT	58 (2.4%)	1.6	

Analysis

Descriptive statistics have been used to summarize survey data. The summary statistics are reported as frequencies and percentages for all categorical variables. To examine the relationship between two variables measured at the nominal or ordinal level of measurement, bivariate tables (or contingency tables) were prepared and this data is presented graphically using simple and multiple bar diagrams. To test the association between variables (such as age group) chi-square tests were performed for all categorical data. Statistical significance was set at a p-value of <0.05. All analyses were performed in Statistical software R (R Core Team 2017) version 3.4.0

There were no significant differences by age, gender, education level or state of residence for the majority of the questions; where such differences were identified they are explicitly stated in the results.[1]

[1] As there were only 18 respondents from the Northern Territory, these were excluded from the analyses by state of residence.

Experiences of Autistic People and their Families Method

Data collection for the *Experiences* survey was conducted by the Survey Research Centre (SRC). The sampling frame for the *Experiences* survey was persons aged 18 years and over who are autistic and/or are a family member/carer of an autistic person, and who subscribe to the Amaze mailing list. Respondents were recruited to participate in the online survey via email invitation, and two subsequent reminder emails. Data were collected between 3 July and 21 July 2017.

Invitations to complete the online survey were sent to 14,334 subscribers. A small proportion of the sample was found to be unusable due to the email address no longer existing or being incorrect (bounces - 1.36%) or because the email was no longer in use / the named respondent was not known (email refusals - 0.5%). A very small number of respondents chose to opt out of participating in the study.

Of those subscribers sent an invitation 1,353 completed the survey with an average duration of 14.9 minutes. A further 109 respondents attempted to undertake the study but were terminated due to not meeting the selection criteria outlined above. The final participation rate was 9.43% (of all sample members approached). Table 1 provides an overview of survey statistics.

Table 1 Survey Statistics

	Total
Invited to complete survey	14,334
Total interviews achieved	1,353
Failed screener	109
Bounced email	196
Email refusal (e.g. person not known, email no longer in use)	73
Opt outs	3
Participation rate (%)	9.43

As it was expected that participants may fit more than one selection criteria, i.e. they identified as autistic and/or a family member and/or a carer to an autistic person, a selection process was undertaken to randomise the selected reference for response.

Sample

Due to the very small number of respondents from outside of Victoria, the analyses were conducted on those living within the state (n= 1297). The demographic characteristics of the respondents are reported in Table 2.
Slightly more than two-thirds (68.4%) identified as a family member of an autistic person, 49.4% as a carer of an autistic person, and 75 as an autistic person. Due to the randomization process described above, 57 autistic people completed the survey in relation to themselves and the remainder answered in relation to the autistic person they care for. Three-quarters of parents/carers (73.7%) provide care for one person, 18.2% for two people, 5.2% for three people, and 2.1% for between four and six people. For the majority of these respondents (81.4%) the oldest person they provide care for is under the age of 18 years (including 19.8%

whose oldest child was under the age of six years and 49.9% whose oldest child was under the aged 6-12 years).

Table 2: Demographic characteristics

Sample Characteristics		N (%)
Sample size		1297
Gender	Male	130 (10.0)
	Female	1161 (89.5)
	Other	2 (0.15)
	Missing	4 (0.3)
Age	18-24	19 (1.5)
	25-34	151 (11.6)
	35-44	603 (46.5)
	45-54	365 (28.1)
	55-64	108 (8.3)
	65-74	38 (2.9)
	75+	6 (0.5)
	missing	7 (0.5)
Highest educational qualification	Masters or higher	331 (25.5)
	Bachelor	373 (28.8)
	Diploma	187 (14.4)
	Certificate	252 (19.4)
	Other	39 (3.0)
	missing	115 (8.9)
Household structure	Person living alone	16 (1.2)
	Couple only	43 (3.3)
	Couple with child(ren)	973 (75.0)
	Single parent with child(ren)	207 (16.0)
	Others	49 (3.8)
	Missing	9 (0.7)
Country of birth	Australia	1025 (79.0)
	Other	254 (19.6)
	Missing	18 (1.4)

Analysis

Descriptive statistics have been used to summarize survey data. The summary statistics are reported as frequencies and percentages for all categorical variables. To examine the relationship between two variables measured at the nominal or ordinal level of measurement, bivariate tables (or contingency tables) were prepared and this data is presented graphically using simple and multiple bar diagrams. To test the association between variables (such as age group) chi-square tests were performed for all categorical data. Statistical significance was set at a p-value of <0.05; and differences are only reported in the text where they were statistically significant. All analyses were performed in Statistical software R (R Core Team 2017) version 3.4.0