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A Pilot Evaluation of a Web-Based Intervention Aiming to Improve Employer Confidence in Hiring Autistic People

Autism

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Marianne Day¹, Chantelle Wood¹, Elizabeth Corker^{1,2},
Nick Pearson³, Kelly Scargill¹, and Megan Freeth¹

Abstract

Autistic people are underrepresented in the workforce. Reasons for this include insufficient employer knowledge about autism and poor suitability of employment environments and practices. This pre-registered single-arm pre-post pilot trial aimed to assess the acceptability and usability of a set of co-developed web-based resources aimed at employers, the Autism Work Access Resource for Employers (AWARE) toolkit. We designed the resources to improve employer confidence and knowledge in relation to employing Autistic people and to give them a set of practical materials to enhance the inclusivity of their hiring processes. We asked 20 employers who were currently responsible for managing recruitment activities/processes in their organisations to engage with the AWARE toolkit for 1-hr over a 2-week period. Results indicated that employers found the toolkit to be highly acceptable, and rated usability as 'excellent'. Preliminary indicators of efficacy showed that employers experienced less worry about hiring Autistic people and gained greater knowledge of workplace adjustments by using the toolkit. This study demonstrates the promise of quick-reference resources as part of the solution towards improving access to high-quality employment opportunities for Autistic people.

Lay Abstract

Autistic people are often underrepresented in employment. In the United Kingdom, only around 3 in 10 Autistic people are currently employed. Barriers to employment include a lack of knowledge among employers about autism, and a lack of understanding about workplace adjustments. Traditional hiring practices, such as job interviews, can also be less accessible for Autistic people. To address these barriers to employment for Autistic people, the researchers have developed a web-based intervention called the AWARE (Autism Work Access Resource for Employers) toolkit. These resources were designed to improve employer knowledge about autism and reasonable adjustments, and to provide resources which can be used in the workplace. The resources include information, links to resources and guidance, checklists and templates which can be downloaded, and videos of employers and Autistic employees talking about their employment experiences. This pilot trial recorded data from 20 employers who were responsible for hiring processes in their organisation. These employers interacted with the web resources and then provided feedback. This showed that it was practical to use the toolkit, that employers liked the resources and that employers reported higher knowledge and lower worry after using the resources. The study shows that providing quick, practical and easy-to-use resources could be an effective way of improving employment opportunities for Autistic people by improving employer knowledge and confidence to provide more inclusive working environments.

¹The University of Sheffield, UK

²Rotherham Doncaster and South Humber NHS Foundation Trust, UK

³Sheffield Occupational Health Advisory Service, UK

Corresponding Author:

Marianne Day, School of Psychology, The University of Sheffield, ICOS Building, 219 Portobello, Sheffield S1 4DP, UK.

Email: Marianne.r.day@sheffield.ac.uk

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autism, employment, hiring, workplace adjustments, co-production, digital intervention

Introduction

Autistic people represent a significant and growing proportion of the available workforce (Ezerins et al., 2024), yet they are underrepresented in the workplace (Bölte et al., 2025). Only around three in 10 working-age Autistic people are presently in employment in the United Kingdom (Department for Work and Pensions, 2025). Autistic employees are often underemployed compared to their skill level and qualifications and are more likely to be on insecure contracts than non-Autistic employees (Davies et al., 2024; Smethurst et al., 2025). Employment can improve the health and wellbeing of Autistic people (Black et al., 2019; Harkry, 2017), and while employment may not be a goal for all, many Autistic people do want to be in work, as long as workplaces can meet their needs (Thorpe et al., 2024).

Traditional recruitment processes can present a significant barrier to employment for Autistic people (Wen et al., 2024). Vague and unclear job descriptions can lead Autistic applicants to believe a role is not a good fit for their skills even though they might be highly qualified (Davies et al., 2023) and job descriptions often focus on social skills rather than job-specific skills (A. J. Griffiths et al., 2023). Interviews may also present challenges for Autistic people, such as having to process and answer open-ended or abstract questions, maintaining eye contact, understanding subtle social cues, managing anxiety, and managing unfamiliar environments (Davies et al., 2023; A. J. Griffiths et al., 2023).

Employers' lack of knowledge and stereotyped beliefs about autism are also significant barriers to employment opportunities (Davies et al., 2023; Wen et al., 2023). Where employers believe that Autistic people lack the skills to work in their organisation, this results in bias when judging candidates. For example, a recent simulated hiring study demonstrated selection bias against Autistic job candidates, such that employers were more likely to hire non-Autistic candidates and rated them more positively than Autistic candidates regardless of qualifications and experience (Flower et al., 2021).

Employers also often lack knowledge around making reasonable workplace adjustments, their legal requirements around employing Autistic people, and how to communicate effectively (Buckley et al., 2020; Bury et al., 2025), which is likely to influence their hiring decisions. Employers often believe that adjustments will be costly in terms of time, support and money and that this outweighs the benefits of hiring Autistic people (Wen et al., 2023).

However, reasonable adjustments can be simple and inexpensive, including modifying noise and light levels and office layouts, offering flexible working hours, and

providing clear, direct and explicit communication (e.g., written meeting summaries, direct and explicit work instructions) (Thorpe et al., 2024).

Research on employers' perspectives of hiring barriers, conducted in the United Kingdom and Australia, identifies a lack of autism knowledge, stereotyped beliefs about Autistic people, concerns about implementing workplace adjustments, and a lack of organisational strategies and resources for making and monitoring adjustments as the key barriers (Day et al., 2025; Wen et al., 2023). Day et al. (2025) found that while motivation to hire Autistic people was generally high among hiring managers, these barriers were hindering changes in actual hiring practices. Both studies concluded that educating employers and providing them with relevant resources and strategies is crucial for improving employment practices.

Importantly, a recent scoping review on autism and neurodiversity in the workplace, exploring employer roles, interventions and supports, concluded that very few interventions specifically address employer knowledge and workplace adjustments, including to the hiring process (Wen et al., 2024). This review found that neurodiversity was not consistently integrated into programmes to promote inclusivity in workplaces. Employers expressed interest in supporting Autistic candidates but wanted practical guidance, tailored resources and tools (e.g., guidelines, strategies and resources) to enable this. They felt overwhelmed by the perceived time and effort required to gain the knowledge they believed necessary. Employers have also reported needing quick-reference tools or 'just-in-time' learning materials (Petty et al., 2023).

In response to this need for employer support, we designed resources to address identified barriers (e.g., lack of knowledge about autism or how to implement hiring adjustments) in a format that would address the need for quick, accessible, and implementable resources (i.e., a web-based quick-reference tool). We co-produced the Autism Work Access Resource for Employers (AWARE) toolkit with steering groups of Autistic people and employers, using the Capability, Opportunity, Motivation – Behaviour (COM-B) (Michie et al., 2013) and Theoretical Domains Framework (TDF) models of behaviour (Cane et al., 2012) to translate identified barriers into targets for intervention (e.g., education to address knowledge barriers). This toolkit provides information about autism in the workplace, addresses negative stereotypes and provides checklists and templates which can be used in the workplace to provide adjustments. This is aligned with recommendations from the recent Buckland review of Autism employment (Buckland, 2024), to highlight the benefits of

employing Autistic people, signpost to employer support, and share best practice. While the aim of the toolkit was to improve intentions and motivations around hiring Autistic people, we also included resources relevant to supporting Autistic people in the workplace, to improve employer confidence in hiring Autistic candidates. We evaluated the AWARE toolkit in a pre-post pilot trial with a group of employers who were responsible for the hiring processes in their organisations to evaluate the acceptability and usability of the resources and provide preliminary data on changes to employer intentions and motivations around hiring Autistic people.

Method

Content of the Intervention

We designed the AWARE toolkit to address the hiring barriers identified in a previous employer survey (Day et al., 2025). A full list of the targeted behaviours (mapped to the COM-B and TDF models) and how they are addressed in the AWARE toolkit is shown in Table 1. Hiring barriers were mapped onto the COM-B and TDF models of behaviour change. These factors included knowledge about Autism and workplace adjustments (Psychological Capability), resources for making and monitoring adjustments (Physical Opportunity), beliefs about productivity and costs related to employing Autistic employees (Automatic/Reflective Motivation), and intentions/willingness around hiring Autistic employees (Reflective/Automatic Motivation). The AWARE toolkit therefore focused on the provision of information and resources/guidance to address knowledge factors and addressed misconceptions about costs and negative beliefs about communication skills/productivity via information and videos of Autistic employees. We also provided downloadable resources for employers to implement (e.g., checklists of hiring adjustments). A full list of the targeted behaviours (mapped to the COM-B and TDF models) and how they are addressed in the AWARE toolkit is shown in Table 1.

The toolkit consisted of four webpages: (a) Homepage (information about autism in the workplace); (b) Resources and Guidance (information about reasonable adjustments for the hiring process with a 4-min video, links to further training resources for autism awareness (five examples) and to neuroaffirmative workplace adjustments (10 examples); (c) Downloadable resources (checklists/templates for workplace and hiring adjustments) (six examples); (d) Employment experiences (five videos of Autistic employee/employer discussion of reasonable adjustments and workplace experiences) (five videos: total time 19 min). We also provided a feedback form to provide comments and suggestions about the content of the site. Readers can find a document showing the content of the web resources with illustrative examples in Table 5 in our OSF registration: https://osf.io/8uvj5/overview?view_only

y=2a5c3d502c0a42c38439c973deb3cc80. We hosted the toolkit on our existing study group website.

Participatory Methods

Autistic Steering Group. We recruited a steering group of six Autistic adults spanning a range of demographic characteristics (age, gender, ethnicity) from an existing study group database of Autistic adults. This group participated in three 2-hr workshops between March and September 2024 to develop the intervention materials. These workshops included presentations by the research team and discussion activities (Workshop 1: employment barriers and intervention targets, stakeholder recruitment plans; Workshop 2: intervention content planning; Workshop 3: feedback on drafted intervention materials). Steering group members discussed their own employment experiences and suggested appropriate content. They also gave feedback on the acceptability of the web resources and on content that we developed with the stakeholder group. We incorporated comments and suggestions from the steering group into the design of the toolkit after each workshop. For example, the group highlighted the importance of addressing problems in the workplace as well as highlighting the benefits of employing Autistic people. They also suggested that videos of Autistic people talking about their employment experiences would address stereotypes about communication skills and the suitability of certain job types/roles (e.g., customer-facing, managerial) as well as provide information.

Employer Steering Group. We recruited a group of 7 employers with responsibilities for hiring processes in their organisations to take part in a stakeholder steering group. This group oversaw the development of the web resources from an employer's perspective. We recruited the group via social media posts from the research team and through local Chambers of Commerce and Federations of Small Business. The group comprised six women and one man from a range of industries (e.g., IT, Education & training, Community Interest Groups). The group participated in two 2-hr workshops between May and July 2024 (Workshop 1: Identifying and addressing hiring barriers and intervention targets; Workshop 2: feedback on drafted intervention resources), where the research team delivered presentations followed by discussion activities. We asked stakeholders for insights about content that addressed perceived support needs. We incorporated these insights into the first draft of the materials, which the stakeholders then evaluated at the second workshop. We made final edits following these suggestions before running the pilot trial. The employer steering group emphasised the need for resources which they could download and implement, so we included checklists and templates in the toolkit. They also stressed that it would be important to convey 'authentic' employment experiences, not just positive experiences, so the videos describe positive and negative workplace experiences,

Table 1. Mapping of Targeted Behavioural Factors to Intervention Elements.

Behaviour factors	COM-B/TDF domain	Intervention element
Knowledge about autism	Psychological Capability/Knowledge	Home page: Information about autism with links to further information
Knowledge about employment law in relation to autism	Psychological Capability/Knowledge	Resources and Guidance: Information about employment law in relation to the Equality Act and making reasonable adjustments
Knowledge of reasonable adjustments in the hiring process and workplace	Psychological Capability/Knowledge	Resources & Guidance: Information and video about reasonable adjustments and how to implement Downloadable resources: checklists for making adjustments to the hiring process/workplace and for onboarding/on-going support Videos: discussion with employees and employers about experiences of reasonable adjustments in the workplace
Personal strategies for monitoring adjustments to hiring practises	Psychological Capability/Skills/ Behavioural Regulation	Downloadable resources: checklists for monitoring adjustments
Considering whether an applicant could be autistic	Psychological Capability/Skills/ Behavioural Regulation	Home page: Awareness of autism and the employment gap for autistic people Downloadable resources: checklist for making adjustments to the hiring process
Perceived alignment of own hiring practises with hiring autistic people	Psychological Capability/Optimism/ Behavioural Regulation	Homepage: information about autism and reasonable adjustments. Resources & Guidance: guidance for how to make reasonable adjustments and further training Downloadable resources: checklists for making and monitoring reasonable adjustments
Organisational systems and strategies for hiring adjustments	Physical Opportunity/Social influences/ Environmental Context & Resources	Resources & Guidance: Links to resources for hiring and workplace adjustments Downloadable resources: checklists for making hiring and workplace adjustments
Organisational systems and strategies for monitoring hiring adjustments	Physical Opportunity/Social influences/ Environmental Context & Resources	Downloadable resources: checklists for monitoring hiring and workplace adjustments
Perceived alignment of organisational hiring processes with hiring autistic people	Physical Opportunity/Social influences/ Environmental Context & Resources	Resources & Guidance: Links to resources on hiring and workplace adjustments Downloadable resources: checklists for making hiring and workplace adjustments
Beliefs about costs and time resources needed to hire autistic people	Reflective Motivation/Beliefs about consequences	Resources & Guidance: Information about reasonable adjustments and how to implement them Downloadable resources: checklists for making adjustments to the hiring process/workplace and for onboarding/on-going support Videos: discussion with employees and employers about experiences and costs/benefits of reasonable adjustments in the workplace
Beliefs about communication and workplace relationships	Reflective Motivation/Beliefs about consequences	Homepage: information about autism and the employment gap for autistic people. Information about the benefits of hiring autistic people Videos: discussions with employees and employers about workplace experiences
Beliefs about productivity, inflexible working skills and/or unsuitable jobs/roles	Reflective Motivation/Beliefs about consequences	Homepage: information about autism and the benefits of hiring autistic people Videos: discussions with employees and employers about workplace experiences in a variety of roles (e.g., managerial, teaching assistant)
Beliefs about the benefits of hiring autistic people	Reflective Motivation/Beliefs about consequences/Optimism	Home page: Information about the benefits of hiring autistic people Videos: discussion with employees and employers about the benefits of hiring autistic people
Organisational inclusivity/diversity ethos	Social Opportunity/Social influences/ Environmental Context & Resources	Downloadable resources: Autism Promise template and checklists for making and monitoring reasonable adjustments to create more inclusive workplaces
Feeling positive and willing in relation to hiring autistic people	Reflective/Automatic motivation/ Emotion/Intentions	Home page: information about autism and the benefits of hiring autistic people Resources & Guidance: information and resources to increase confidence around hiring autistic people Downloadable resources: checklists and templates to implement in the workplace Videos: discussions with employers and employees to address misconceptions around making reasonable adjustments and emphasise the benefits of hiring autistic people
Willingness to make adjustments to the hiring process	Reflective motivation/Intentions	Home page: information about reasonable adjustments to the hiring process, the benefits of hiring autistic people and the employment gap Resources & Guidance: information and video about how to implement reasonable adjustments Downloadable resources: checklists which can be implemented to make hiring processes more inclusive Videos: discussions with employers and employees about how to make adjustments and the benefits of inclusive hiring practises

and how stakeholders can address problems. We paid stakeholders from both groups £75 (via a shopping voucher) for each workshop. Both groups had the chance to comment on the content suggested by the other group, which did not lead to any areas of conflict.

Study Design

We pre-registered this study on the Open Science Framework (OSF): https://osf.io/8uvj5/overview?view_only=2a5c3d502c0a42c38439c973deb3cc80 as a single-arm pilot trial with a pre-post design. Participants provided questionnaire data before and after engaging with the toolkit, which measured whether knowledge and motivations changed following the intervention. We asked participants to interact with the toolkit for around an hour over 2 weeks and to provide data on the acceptability and usability of the toolkit following this interaction.

Participants

Participants were professionals whose present job role included managing recruitment activities/processes in their organisation (e.g., HR professionals, business managers, team leaders) who resided in the United Kingdom. Following guidelines for designing and evaluating feasibility pilot studies (NCCIH, 2025; Teresi et al., 2022), we chose the target sample size of 20 to be feasible and within the budgetary constraints of the project. We recruited participants via social media posts, which the team, Chambers of Commerce, Federations of Small Businesses and HR social networking groups disseminated. Interested parties completed an Expression of Interest Form, which collected data on demographics (age, gender, ethnicity), business/organisation (industry type, size of business, location), and job role (job position, recruitment role). A total of 23 individuals completed the Expression of Interest form; 1 was not invited as they were not in a suitable job role (non-hiring professional), 22 were invited, and 20 completed the pre-intervention behaviour questions. Of the 20 participants we recruited, 18 went on to evaluate the toolkit and complete a follow-up post-intervention questionnaire. Two people did not complete the study due to other work and time pressures. Table 2 shows the demographic and professional data for the 20 professionals who were recruited to the study. The sample comprised 12 women, seven men and one non-binary person. Participants had a mean age of 41.84 years ($SD = 6.15$). White or White British individuals represented 80% of the samples, Black or Black British 10%, and Asian or Asian British ethnicities 5%, while one person (5%) did not specify their ethnic group. Participants came from a variety of industries: Health (30%), IT/Tech (20%), Community Interest Groups (20%), Local Authority (10%), Recruitment Agencies (10%), and Education/Training (10%), and from a variety of organisation size:

Micro: 1–10 employees (20%), Small: 11–49 employees (15%), Medium: 50–249 employees (10%) and Large: 250+ employees (55%). We paid participants £50 via a shopping voucher for completing the study.

Measures

Full details of all measures are available using the OSF project link (https://osf.io/8uvj5/overview?view_only=2a5c3d502c0a42c38439c973deb3cc80).

Acceptability. We modified 12 questions based on Sekhon et al.'s (2022) Theoretical Framework of Acceptability (TFA) to assess the acceptability of the toolkit and the acceptability of utilising these resources in the participant's organisation. The TFA evaluates seven components of intervention acceptability; we asked questions about each component: how users feel about it (affective attitude) (four items), how much effort it takes to use it (the perceived burden) (two items), how fair it is to use (ethical considerations) (one item), how well participants understand the intervention (coherence) (one item), resources/costs (one item), its perceived effectiveness (one item), and their confidence in using it (self-efficacy) (two items). Participants provided responses on a 5-point Likert-type scale, with most scored in a positive direction. For example, 'How acceptable was the website and its resources to you?' ('Completely unacceptable' to 'Completely acceptable'). Items on perceived effort and resources were scored in a negative direction (e.g., 'How much effort did it take to engage with the website and its resources?' 'No effort at all' to 'Huge effort'). The complete list of TFA questions can be found in our OSF registration: https://osf.io/8uvj5/overview?view_only=2a5c3d502c0a42c38439c973deb3cc80. TFA items were not scaled or combined into component mean scores but were analysed separately.

Usability. We used the System Usability Scale (SUS) (Brooke, 1996) to measure the usability of the web resources. This is a 10-item scale where participants give responses on a 5-point Likert-type scale ('strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'). For example, 'I think I would like to use the system frequently'. Evidence shows that the SUS is a reliable (coefficient alpha=0.91) and valid measure (Bangor et al., 2009). In this scale, we substituted the word 'system' with 'the website and its resources' for clarity. We calculated the total score for the SUS scale to measure usability using the appropriate scoring conventions (Brooke, 1996).

COM-B Factors Related to Hiring Behaviour. The pre-intervention questionnaire included 28 factors that Day et al. (2025) demonstrated may influence intentions to hire Autistic people. These factors were based on the COM-B model (Michie et al., 2013). Participants gave responses on

Table 2. Participants in the Pilot Trial (N = 20).

Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Industry sector	Organisation size	Job role
43	Female	White/White British	Recruitment	Micro	Founder/Director
46	Female	White/White British	Local Authority	Large	Employment & health coordinator
46	Male	White/White British	IT	Micro	Hiring director
47	Female	White/White British	IT	Micro	Operations director
46	Male	White/White British	IT	Micro	Managing director
52	Female	White/White British	Local Authority	Large	Workforce planning manager
NR	Non-binary	White/White British	Education/Training	Large	HR systems coordinator
34	Female	White/White British	Education/Training	Medium	Director of people & culture
36	Female	White/White British	Community Interest Group	Small	HR manager
43	Female	White/White British	Education/Training	Large	Talent acquisition manager
46	Male	White/White British	Community Interest Group	Small	Finance director
37	Male	White/White British	Community Interest Group	Medium	Director of people & operations
29	Female	White/White British	Health Services	Large	Employability lead
45	Male	NR	Health Services	Large	Senior/hiring manager
41	Male	White/White British	Health Services	Large	Catering manager
48	Male	Black/Black British	Health Services	Large	Catering manager
31	Female	White/White British	IT	Large	Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programme manager
46	Female	Black/Black British	Health Services	Large	Waste manager
*40	Female	Asian/Asian British	Health Services	Large	Lead
*39	Female	White/White British	Community Interest Group	Small	Director

Note. Asterisked participants completed the pre-intervention measures but did not complete the intervention or post-intervention measures. All other participants completed the intervention and evaluation (N = 18). NR = No Response: Participant responded, 'Prefer not to say'.

a 5-point Likert-type scale (*Strongly disagree* to *Strongly agree*) with higher scores reflecting lower perceived barriers related to these factors. Statements covered Psychological Capability (e.g., 'I know how to make the hiring process more accessible for Autistic people') (10 items), Reflective Motivation (e.g., 'I intend to hire Autistic people in the future') (12 items), Automatic Motivation (e.g., 'I feel positive about hiring Autistic people to work in my organisation') (two items), Physical Opportunity (e.g., 'Our work environment and tasks can be easily adapted for Autistic people') (four items). We did not include statements about Physical Capability as we did not deem them relevant to hiring behaviour. We did not include Social Opportunity statements (reflecting organisational ethos and norms) because they were not identified as key factors influencing hiring in the previous employer study (Day et al., 2025).

The post-intervention questionnaire included 24 of the same statements as the pre-intervention questionnaire to measure changes in Capability, Opportunity and Motivation following the intervention. We omitted four questions on organisational processes (e.g., 'My organisation has processes for making adjustments for Autistic people during the hiring process: e.g., to job adverts, interview processes

etc.') from the post-intervention questionnaire as we would not expect these behaviours to change immediately after engaging with the web resources. The full list of pre- and post-questionnaire items can be found in our OSF registration: https://osf.io/8uvj5/overview?view_only=2a5c3d502c0a42c38439c973deb3cc80.

Website Evaluation. The evaluation questionnaire included 28 questions about the resources we included in the toolkit (e.g., templates and checklists, videos, resources and guidance). For example, we asked how useful participants found each resource and requested suggestions for additional or improved content. We included both open and closed questions to gather more nuanced information about what was and was not useful, in addition to the usability and acceptability measures (e.g., How useful did you find the template for making hiring adjustments? 5-point scale: *Not useful at all* to *Very Useful*). Open questions allowed participants to give feedback on usefulness (e.g., 'Which parts of the web resources did you find most useful or interesting?') and suggestions for improvements (e.g., 'Is there anything else you would like to see included in the web resources?').

Procedure

We conducted data collection from November 2024 to February 2025. We sent participants a link via email to complete a pre-intervention questionnaire, which was hosted on Qualtrics XM (Qualtrics, 2025). We then sent participants a link to the toolkit and a unique study number to enter on questionnaires. We asked participants to spend around 1-hr engaging with the web resources at any time over a 2-week period. We also gave participants a link to the post-intervention questionnaire, which included the items assessing COM-B factors that may influence hiring behaviour, TFA and SUS scales, and evaluative feedback questions. We instructed participants to complete this questionnaire after engaging with the toolkit and gave them the option of providing feedback via the Qualtrics questionnaire or in an online meeting with the researcher (MRD). Most participants chose to complete the online evaluation ($n = 17$), with one choosing to give verbal feedback via the same set of measures.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis. We evaluated the acceptability of the toolkit by calculating means and standard deviations for the TFA items, and percentages of respondents giving positive evaluations. For usability, we calculated total scores on the SUS and compared them to benchmarks for the scale: ‘excellent’ ($SUS \geq 85.5$), ‘good’ ($71.4 \leq SUS < 85.5$), ‘ok’ ($50.9 \leq SUS < 71.4$), ‘poor’ ($35.7 \leq SUS < 50.9$) or ‘awful’ ($SUS < 35.7$) (Brooke, 1996). Due to an outlier, we used the median score as a better indicator of the sample average for SUS. We calculated means and standard deviations for the COM-B factors at pre- and post-intervention. We also calculated mean differences and an effect size for the difference (Cohen’s d) between the two timepoints for each item included in the post-intervention questionnaire. There was no missing data as we formatted the questionnaires to force responses. As a pilot trial with a small sample, we pre-registered our intention not to include inferential tests in this trial. We only calculated changes in scores on the COM-B factors and TFA and SUS scales for those who completed the post-intervention measures.

Qualitative Analysis. We analysed responses to the evaluation questionnaire using simple content coding (Drisko & Maschi, 2016). For questions about the usefulness of different features of the website (e.g., specific checklists/templates, information provided in the toolkit), we counted percentages of participants who reported them to be useful. For questions asking about what participants liked or disliked, or suggestions for improvements, we coded and reported as counts. MRD initially coded the data, and then the whole research team agreed on the final codes.

Results

Feasibility

We recruited a full cohort of participants to this study over a relatively short recruitment period (3 months). Of the 20 participants we recruited, 18 engaged with the web resources for at least 1 hr over a 2-week period and completed the post-intervention questionnaires. The high rate of retention and levels of engagement with the toolkit and evaluation indicate good feasibility.

Acceptability

Table 3 shows mean acceptability scores and percentage positive responses for each TFA domain (Sekhon et al., 2022). Most participants thought the toolkit was acceptable (94.4%) and that it would be acceptable to use in their workplaces (88.89%). Scores on the other TFA domains showed good acceptability (between 83% and 100% positive responses), indicating that most participants liked the resources, found them to be fair, and thought they would improve organisational hiring practices. All participants felt confident in using the resources, thought they would not interfere with other work priorities, and reported that engaging with them only required a little effort.

Usability

The median score on the System Usability Scale (Brooke, 1996) was 86.25 (interquartile range [IQR] = 80–90), which placed the toolkit in the ‘excellent’ category. There was one outlier score of 55, which indicated below-average usability. When we inspected the qualitative responses for this participant, we found that their concerns were mostly around website design (formatting/layout).

Website Evaluation

Readers can access the qualitative data and coding in our OSF registration: https://osf.io/8uvj5/overview?view_only=2a5c3d502c0a42c38439c973deb3cc80. These data showed that all participants found the toolkit to be useful (very useful: 67%, useful: 33%). Participants selected a variety of content as most useful/interesting, including the videos ($N=8$), signposting to resources and guidance ($N=8$) and the downloadable resources ($N=10$). The majority of participants rated specific toolkit content as useful: (a) information provided on the home page (83%–100%), (b) signposted resources (100%), (c) downloadable resources (94%), (d) checklist/template content (100%), and (e) videos of employment experiences (94%). Participants suggested improvements to the web-based design (e.g., formatting, layout, functionality) ($N=5$), and

Table 3. Scores on the Theoretical Framework of Acceptability Items (Sekhon et al., 2022).

Item	Response	Count (percentage of sample)	Per cent positive evaluations	Mean (SD)
How acceptable was the website and its resources to you?	Completely acceptable	11 (61.11%)	94.44%	4.50 (0.79)
	Acceptable	6 (33.33%)		
	No opinion	0		
	Unacceptable	1 (5.56%)		
	Completely Unacceptable	0		
Do you like or dislike the website and its resources?	Strongly Like	8 (44.44%)	88.89%	4.28 (0.83)
	Like	8 (44.44%)		
	No opinion	1 (5.56%)		
	Dislike	1 (5.56%)		
	Strongly dislike	0		
How much effort did it take to engage with the website and its resources?	Huge effort	0		1.44 (0.51)
	A lot of effort	0		
	No opinion	0		
	A little effort	8 (44.44%)		
	No effort at all	10 (55.56%)		
How confident did you feel about engaging with the website and its resources?	Very confident	10 (55.56%)	100%	4.56 (0.51)
	Confident	8 (44.44%)		
	No opinion	0		
	Unconfident	0		
	Very unconfident	0		
How acceptable would it be to use the website and its resources to improve hiring of autistic people in your organisation?	Completely acceptable	8 (44.44%)	88.89%	4.22 (1.00)
	Acceptable	8 (44.44%)		
	No opinion	1 (5.56%)		
	Unacceptable	1 (5.56%)		
	Completely unacceptable	0		
Would you like or dislike using the website and its resources to improve hiring of autistic people in your organisation?	Strongly Like	8 (44.44%)	94.44%	4.28 (0.96)
	Like	9 (50%)		
	No opinion	0		
	Dislike	0		
	Strongly dislike	1 (5.56%)		

(continued)

Table 3. (continued)

Item	Response	Count (percentage of sample)	Per cent positive evaluations	Mean (SD)
It is clear to me how using this website and its resources would help improve hiring of autistic people in my organisation.	Strongly agree	8 (44.44%)	83.33%	4.17 (0.99)
	Agree	7 (38.89%)		
	No opinion	1 (5.56%)		
	Disagree	2 (11.11%)		
	Strongly disagree	0		
How much effort would it take to use the website and its resources to improve hiring of autistic people in your organisation?	Huge effort	0		1.89 (0.47)
	A lot of effort	0		
	No opinion	1 (5.56%)		
	A little effort	14 (77.78%)		
	No effort at all	3 (16.67%)		
How fair would it be to use the website and its resources to improve hiring of autistic people in your organisation?	Very fair	9 (50%)	88.89%	4.39 (0.70)
	Fair	7 (38.89%)		
	No opinion	2 (11.11%)		
	Unfair	0		
	Very unfair	0		
How confident would you feel about using the website and its resources to improve hiring of autistic people in your organisation?	Very confident	7 (38.89%)	100%	4.39 (0.50)
	Confident	11 (61.11%)		
	No opinion	0		
	Unconfident	0		
	Very unconfident	0		
Using the website and its resources to improve hiring of autistic people would interfere with my other priorities in my organisation.	Strongly agree	0	100%	1.89 (0.32)
	Agree	0		
	No opinion	0		
	Disagree	16 (88.89%)		
	Strongly disagree	2 (11.11%)		
The website and its resources would improve hiring of autistic people in my organisation.	Strongly agree	9 (50%)	88.89%	4.33 (0.84)
	Agree	7 (38.89%)		
	No opinion	1 (5.56%)		
	Disagree	1 (5.56%)		
	Strongly disagree	0		

Note. Scores on the Theoretical Framework of Acceptability items for the 18 participants who completed the study. Mean scores were calculated on responses converted to numbers (e.g., *Strongly agree* = 5, *Strongly disagree* = 1).

to the content of the toolkit ($N=12$). For example, they requested additional videos to cover a wider range of ages, industries, and situations ($N=10$), and to have more employer perspectives within the resources, particularly in relation to legal guidance and how to troubleshoot specific workplace issues ($N=3$).

Preliminary Indicators of Efficacy

To analyse whether COM-B factors related to hiring Autistic people had changed after the intervention, we compared scores on the pre- and post-intervention questionnaires using mean change and an estimate of effect size (Cohen's d). Table 4 shows the mean change for each factor. There were positive changes in 83% of the items, which included factors from all domains of the COM-B framework, with the largest improvements in knowledge-related factors. For Psychological Capability, 7/8 items showed improvements, with large effect sizes for two items ('I know how to make the hiring process more accessible for Autistic people', 'I am aware of strategies that would help me monitor how well I adjust hiring processes') and medium effect sizes for five others (e.g., 'I know enough about autism to hire Autistic people'). For Physical Opportunity, 2/2 items showed improvement, one with a medium effect size ('Our work environment and tasks can be easily adapted for Autistic people') and one with a small effect size ('Our current hiring processes could be improved to enable Autistic people to perform well'). For Reflective Motivation, 9/12 items showed improvement, with medium effects for three items ('I am willing to hire Autistic people', 'I intend to hire Autistic people in the future', 'Hiring Autistic people is important to me') and small effect sizes for the other six items (e.g., 'Autistic people have the necessary work skills to be good workers in our organisation'. For Automatic Motivation items, 2/2 items showed improvement with small-to-medium effects ('I feel positive about hiring Autistic people to work in my organisation', 'I feel worried about hiring Autistic people to work in my organisation').

Discussion

This study piloted a novel, web-based intervention, the AWARE toolkit. The toolkit targets issues that employers previously highlighted as barriers to hiring Autistic people, such as a lack of knowledge around making workplace adjustments, and a lack of support and information on legal requirements where employers often lack confidence (Espelöer et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2024). We co-designed the intervention with Autistic people and employers, and this pilot trial assessed its usability, acceptability and feasibility, and provided some preliminary indicators of efficacy. The pilot trial demonstrated that it is possible to recruit a sample of employers who are willing to engage with resources designed to support Autistic employees in the workplace.

Participants rated the AWARE toolkit as highly acceptable. They found it both useful and fair and thought that it would not interfere with their existing work responsibilities. The co-production methodology likely produced these high levels of acceptability as we involved employers in prioritising, designing and evaluating the content of the toolkit. This approach ensured that it was relevant and addressed their practical needs. The toolkit achieved a rating of 'excellent' using the System Usability Scale, which validates the user-friendly design and web-based format. Qualitative feedback suggested participants found all aspects of the toolkit useful and rated the ability to download resources as the most useful feature. This is in line with research by Petty et al. (2023) and the suggestions of our stakeholder steering group that employers need quick and timely resources that they can implement in the workplace. Feedback from this study suggested that linking to appropriate resources and guidelines helped participants, although these would need to be kept up to date. Participants also rated the videos of employer and employee experience as useful and suggested improvements included expanding the variety and scope of these to tailor to specific work situations and industries.

This study provides support for the recommendations in the Buckland Review (Buckland, 2024) to highlight the positive benefits of employing Autistic people, signpost to employer support, and share pilots of best practice. Quick-reference tools such as the AWARE toolkit could also act as an important gateway to more comprehensive resources for integrating inclusive hiring and management practices into workplaces, such as Autistica's Neurodiversity Employers Index™.

Using factors from the COM-B model, the findings provide some preliminary evidence that the toolkit could reduce key employment barriers. The most significant improvements were in Psychological Capability items with large effect sizes for changes in knowledge of accessible hiring practices and strategies for monitoring adjustments. There were also medium effect sizes for changes in knowledge about adjustments to the workplace and general understanding of autism. This suggests that the web resources have been successful in increasing employer knowledge, particularly around workplace adjustments. This is not surprising, as we included adjustments to workplaces and the hiring process in all the sections of the toolkit and included information, links to resources, and videos of employers and employees talking about adjustments. We included these features to address specific knowledge barriers identified in previous research, and the findings suggest that the toolkit could be successful in reducing these (Day et al., 2025; Wen et al., 2024).

While these improvements relate to perceived knowledge rather than actual knowledge, self-assessed capability functions as an effective measure of confidence and self-efficacy, which is a stronger predictor of behaviour change than objective measures of knowledge (Sitzmann et al.,

Table 4. Pre- and Post-intervention Mean Scores for the Behavioural Items.

Item	Pre-intervention score (mean, SD)	Post-intervention score (mean, SD)	Mean difference	Effect size (Cohen's <i>d</i>)
Psychological Capability				
I know enough about autism to hire autistic people.	3.94 (1.00)	4.50 (0.62)	0.56	0.67
I know about relevant employment law in relation to employing autistic people.	3.83 (1.20)	4.33 (1.14)	0.50	0.43
I know how to make the hiring process more accessible for autistic people.	3.56 (0.98)	4.61 (0.61)	1.05	1.29
I know how to make adjustments to the working environment for autistic people.	3.83 (1.04)	4.56 (0.78)	0.73	0.79
During the hiring process, I consider whether the applicant could be autistic.	3.78 (0.88)	Not measured		
In future, I will consider whether the applicant could be autistic during the hiring process.	4.50 (0.79)	4.56 (0.70)	0.06	0.08
I would need to change my current hiring practises to be able to hire autistic people.	3.17 (1.04)	3.83 (0.79)	0.66	0.71
I would need to change the way I work to make adjustments to the working environment for autistic people.	3.89 (0.83)	3.44 (1.29)	-0.45	0.41
I use strategies to monitor how well I adjust hiring practises (e.g., job adverts, interview processes, etc.) for autistic people.	3.44 (1.20)	Not measured		
I am aware of strategies that would help me monitor how well I adjust hiring practises (e.g., job adverts, interview processes, etc.) for autistic people.	3.72 (1.02)	4.78 (0.43)	1.06	1.35
Physical Opportunity				
Our current hiring processes could be improved to enable autistic people to perform well.	4.28 (1.07)	4.50 (0.79)	0.22	0.23
My organisation has systems and strategies to monitor whether adjustments to hiring processes (e.g., to job adverts, interview processes, etc.) are being made for autistic people.	3.22 (1.11)	Not measured		
My organisation has processes for making adjustments for autistic people during the hiring process (e.g., to job adverts, interview processes, etc.).	3.67 (1.08)	Not measured		
Our work environment and tasks can be easily adapted for autistic people.	3.78 (1.00)	4.39 (1.04)	0.61	0.60
Reflective Motivation				
I am willing to hire autistic people.	4.89 (0.32)	5.00 (0.00)	0.11	0.49
I intend to hire autistic people in the future.	4.67 (0.49)	4.89 (0.32)	0.22	0.69
I will hire autistic people in the future.	4.78 (0.43)	4.78 (0.55)	0.00	0.00
Hiring autistic people is important to me.	4.56 (0.62)	4.83 (0.38)	0.27	0.53
I am willing to adjust the work environment (e.g., office space, lighting, etc.) or tasks (activities, processes, etc.) in my organisation to help autistic employees work effectively.	4.72 (0.57)	4.83 (0.38)	0.11	0.23
I am willing to adjust the hiring processes in my organisation to help autistic applicants perform well.	4.78 (0.55)	4.89 (0.47)	0.11	0.22
Making adjustments to the hiring process to help autistic applicants perform well will help me to hire the best person for the job.	4.89 (0.32)	4.89 (0.32)	0.00	0.00
Hiring autistic people would decrease my organisation's performance.	1.39 (0.70)	1.39 (0.85)	0.00	0.00
Autistic people have the necessary work skills to be good workers in our organisation.	4.72 (0.57)	4.83 (0.51)	0.11	0.20
Autistic people do not have the communication skills to work effectively in our organisation.	1.67 (1.08)	1.61 (1.04)	-0.06	0.06
Supporting autistic employees in the organisation would cost my organisation too much money.	1.67 (0.97)	1.44 (0.70)	-0.23	0.27
Supporting autistic employees in the organisation would take my organisation too much time.	1.56 (0.70)	1.50 (0.92)	-0.06	0.07
Automatic Motivation				
I feel positive about hiring autistic people to work in my organisation.	4.78 (0.55)	4.94 (0.24)	0.16	0.38
I feel worried about hiring autistic people to work in my organisation.	2.39 (1.46)	1.72 (1.02)	-0.67	0.53

Note. Effect size for the mean difference is measured using Cohen's *d* (small effect: $d=0.2$, medium effect: $d=0.5$, large effect: $d=0.8$). Asterisked items are negatively worded, meaning improvements are shown by decreasing scores, rather than increasing scores.

2010). It is possible that introducing new information and resources could highlight gaps in employer knowledge about autism and workplace adjustments (Kruger & Dunning, 1999; Rozenblit & Keil, 2002). Employers might initially overestimate their existing levels of knowledge and practice around inclusivity. In professional training contexts, exposing learners to the actual complexities of a task can lead to lowered confidence, lower motivation and greater worry about their capabilities (Cartwright & Atwood, 2014). The toolkit does seem to prompt employers to recognise a mismatch between their existing work behaviour and what is required for inclusive practice. However, there was no evidence that this led to a drop in confidence or motivation. Instead, participants recognised a greater need to adapt their practices to be inclusive while also believing these changes were more achievable and worrying less about hiring Autistic people. Perhaps because the toolkit also provides practical tools to resolve gaps in knowledge and resources (e.g., templates, checklists, an 'Autism Promise'), this recalibration did not lead to greater worry, safely bridging the gap between positive intentions and the resources needed to make actual workplace modifications (Day et al., 2025; Petty et al., 2023).

Reflective Motivation items showed smaller but still noticeable improvements. There were medium-sized changes in intentions to hire Autistic people (e.g., 'I intend to hire Autistic people in the future', 'Hiring Autistic people is important to me'). However, it is important to note that intentions to employ Autistic people were relatively high at baseline, particularly in comparison to Day et al. (2025), who recruited a larger and more general population sample of hirers. This suggests that employers who were already motivated to hire Autistic people self-selected to evaluate the intervention, and as such, may have attenuated effects of the intervention due to ceiling effects (Judd & Kenny, 1981). We do not know whether the intervention would improve outcomes in a less motivated sample.

There were also only small improvements in beliefs about hiring Autistic people following the intervention (e.g., small reductions in 'Supporting Autistic employees in the organisation would cost my organisation too much money', 'Autistic people do not have the communication skills to work effectively in our organisation'). As with intentions, these items may be demonstrating a 'ceiling' effect where there is little room for improvement. However, it is also likely that an information-based intervention is not enough on its own to change these beliefs. The importance of actual experience and familiarity with Autistic people (whether as employees, colleagues, friends or family) on employer attitudes has been identified in previous studies (Day et al., 2025; Petty et al., 2023). It may be that having experiences with Autistic people in the workplace is necessary to change some of the negative beliefs and stereotypes about employing Autistic people.

A 1-hr interaction was pragmatically chosen to reflect real-world time constraints. However, it remains uncertain

as to whether this brief engagement is sufficient to foster sustained behavioural change. Meta-analytic evidence on diversity initiatives suggests that short, information-based interventions can successfully improve immediate knowledge, but long-term behaviour and knowledge often decrease over time unless supported by systemic integration or ongoing reinforcement (Bezrukova et al., 2016; Ford et al., 2018). Future work should move beyond a one-off training model to explore how employers could embed the toolkit's resources directly into workplace routines and human resource processes to lead to lasting organisational change (Kauffeld et al., 2025).

Strengths and Limitations

A key strength of the current study is that the toolkit and pilot trial design were co-developed with employers and Autistic people, which ensured that it was acceptable, relevant, and useful to both groups. It also specifically targeted employment barriers and behavioural factors identified in previous research. However, the single-arm pre-post design and small, self-selecting sample of 20 employers prevent us from drawing definitive conclusions about the intervention's efficacy or generalising these findings to a broader population of employers. It is likely that participants were already motivated to employ Autistic people, and it is possible that other employers would not engage to the same degree with the web resources or would not find them useful. This highlights the importance of a wider recruitment strategy for a larger trial. The employers in the study came from a range of industries. However, there were no representatives from several large sectors (e.g., manufacturing, hospitality). It is possible that some sectors may have more, or different, barriers to hiring Autistic people and may be more affected by prevailing stereotypes (e.g., that Autistic people are not suited to 'noisy' work floors or customer-facing roles) (Day et al., 2025). There were also a larger number of women recruited to the study (both to the employer steering group and as participants in the pilot). Prior to running a large trial, it would be important to consider how to recruit less motivated participants and particularly how male employers could be more effectively engaged. Difficulties recruiting men into research studies have been reported in employment and health research (Borg et al., 2024; J. Griffiths et al., 2025) and suggestions for increasing engagement include using professional networking, using employment-specific social media (e.g., LinkedIn), and highlighting tangible benefits from participation. Another limitation of the current work is that there was no follow-up with employers to examine whether and how these initial indicators of behaviour change are sustained or implemented in the workplace. In their feedback, some employers indicated that they had begun to make adjustments from the toolkit and had shared the resources with others. However, this was not evaluated over time or with objective employment outcomes. We

also did not measure whether participants had personal experience of hiring Autistic people or whether they had close contacts who were Autistic, which may have impacted their hiring behaviours. It would be important to include this in a larger trial, as personal experiences could moderate effects.

Future Directions

While the AWARE toolkit is not intended to be a comprehensive solution to improving employment outcomes for Autistic people, this type of intervention clearly shows promise as a first step, or gateway, to supporting employers. The AWARE toolkit offers potential for scalability, especially in time-pressured or resource-constrained organisations. A large, longitudinal study with objective employment outcomes and a more diverse sample of employers would allow researchers to explore the impact of the intervention on employment rates and retention of Autistic employees. Such a study could also determine the relative effectiveness of different parts of the intervention and the cost-effectiveness of the toolkit as a whole. The findings here suggest that employers found all existing content to be useful, and they have provided suggestions for improved design and additional content (e.g., industry-specific content, employer troubleshooting guidance) which could be incorporated into future development of the toolkit.

It will also be important to consider whether adaptations are required to meet the needs of different industries. Additional resources may also be needed to ensure the ongoing support of Autistic employees in the workplace (e.g., strategies to align roles with skills and monitor ongoing support needs). In addition, it will be important to consider how the AWARE toolkit could be implemented in practice. The Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research (CFIR) (Damschroder et al., 2009) could inform this future work by systematically assessing factors that influence the adoption of the AWARE toolkit. For example, ‘Inner Setting’ and ‘Characteristics of Individuals’ domains could explore how internal organisational culture or leadership attitudes may affect uptake.

Conclusion

The current study demonstrates proof-of-concept for a quick-reference, web-based resource that employers can feasibly engage with. Overall, employers found the AWARE toolkit to be acceptable and usable. The toolkit’s concise, practical nature likely contributed to its usability, and it may function well as a gateway resource for employers who are seeking to enhance their processes and practices.

ORCID iDs

Marianne Day  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2962-3124>

Chantelle Wood  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6451-7859>

Elizabeth Corker  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2055-7493>

Megan Freeth  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0534-9095>

Author Contributions

Marianne Day: Formal analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Writing original draft; Writing – review & editing.

Chantelle Wood: Conceptualisation; Funding acquisition; Methodology; Writing – review & editing.

Elizabeth Corker: Conceptualisation; Funding acquisition; Methodology; Writing – review & editing.

Nick Pearson: Conceptualisation; Funding acquisition; Methodology; Writing – review & editing.

Kelly Scargill: Conceptualisation; Funding acquisition; Methodology; Writing – review & editing.

Megan Freeth: Conceptualisation; Funding acquisition; Methodology; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing.

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Data Availability Statement

The anonymised data that support the findings of this study are openly available in the Open Science Framework (OSF). The data and preregistered project can be found at https://osf.io/8uvj5/overview?view_only=2a5c3d502c0a42c38439c973deb3cc80.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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