

Adapting job interview questions for autistic candidates

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Background

Despite possessing valuable skill sets, 85% of autistic people are not in full time work, and 46% of the autistic adults who are employed are over-educated or exceed the skill level needed for the roles they are in. Once in work, however, employers often report that their autistic employees make a valuable contribution to the workplace with their positive personal attributes, skills, and abilities. A major barrier to obtaining employment is the initial interview process, which requires social presentation and impression management skills that autistic people often find challenging.

Typically, employment interviews rely upon open-ended, indirect questions such as, “Tell me a bit about yourself”. Difficulties understanding others’ intentions and in inferring what information the employer is looking for in an answer can be particularly difficult for an autistic person. For example, being asked to describe a challenge one has experienced in the workplace may not be construed as requiring an answer about how the candidate overcomes adversity or how they proactively address issues that arise. Thus, they may provide a literal response about a time they’ve encountered a difficulty that does not necessarily present themselves in a favourable way. A further issue is that recalling relevant specific instances from one’s past is often necessary in job interviews in order to highlight relevant skills and experience, yet autistic people often experience difficulties in recalling specific memories of their past experiences, especially at speed.

Unless adaptations are made to support memory recall and promote greater understanding of what is required in response to questions, autistic candidates can be limited in their ability to recall appropriate examples and in emphasising their best attributes and most relevant experience. However, employers can make positive adaptations to the interview process, particularly to the questions, which could provide better support for autistic candidates.

The study

The aim of the current study was to examine how autistic and non-autistic adults compared on standard (unmodified) job interview questions, and then use these findings to develop and evaluate supportive adaptations to questions.

Twenty-five autistic and 25 non-autistic adults came to the University of Bath to take part in two mock job interviews:

- In **Phase 1**, interviewees completed the first interview, with unadapted questions. Employment experts (unaware of participants' autism diagnoses) rated all interviewees' performance and provided feedback about how interviewees could improve, and how questions could be adapted to facilitate this. Interviewees also provided feedback about the interview process, from their perspective.
- In **Phase 2**, we used the findings from Phase 1 to develop and test adaptations to questions in a second interview, which was carried out around six months later. One of key adaptations was to make the desired response more explicit; for example, by requesting more specific information and details, and supporting the interviewee to structure their answer clearly with effective use of examples. Interviewees were also provided with print-outs of the adapted questions in Phase 2, which were visible throughout the interview to further support their comprehension of questions.

Examples of unadapted (Phase 1) and adapted (Phase 2) interview questions are shown in the table below.

Phase 1 (unadapted) questions	Phase 2 (adapted) questions
Tell me a little bit about yourself	I'm going to ask you to give me a short introduction to yourself: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are your best personal characteristics? • What are your educational qualifications? • What work experience do you have?
What are some of your strengths?	I'm going to ask about your strengths: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you consider to be your main strengths (things that you are good at)? • How have you used these strengths at work?
What experience do you have of managing high workloads?	Think of an example of when you've had lots of tasks to complete in a limited amount of time. Please tell me: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was the situation? • What management strategies did you use? • Were these strategies effective?
Tell me about a time you've disagreed with a colleague – how did/would you handle it?	Think of a time you've disagree with a colleague. Please tell me: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was the disagreement about? • What <i>you</i> did to resolve it?
Are you good at problem solving?	Think of an example of a time you've solved a problem at work. Please tell me: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First of all, what the problem was • What did you do to resolve that problem? • What was the final result?

The results

In Phase 1, when standard (unadapted) job interview questions were used, employment professionals provided lower ratings of autistic interviewees, both in terms of the quality of their answers and their overall impressions of them, compared to non-autistic participants.

Following adaptations to the questions in Phase 2, there was a significant improvement in employers' ratings of both autistic and non-autistic interviewees' answer quality, and their overall impressions of them. Crucially, this improvement was greater for autistic candidates, such that in Phase 2 there was less of a difference in employers' ratings of autistic and non-autistic candidates.

Implications for practice

Standard employment interviews often contain questions that have little explicit structure, particularly those regarding goals, aspirations, self-descriptions and self-evaluations. Such questions are often too ambiguous and difficult to interpret for autistic candidates, and therefore limit their ability to formulate a response that conveys their best attributes and most relevant experience.

However, findings show that relatively simple adaptations to questions improve the job interview performance of autistic adults, while also improving the quality of non-autistic interviewees' responses. One of the most salient adaptations to interview questions was the explicit and structured request for specific details, examples, and certain types of information, reducing the need for the interviewee to infer this implicitly.

It may also be critical that adaptations were made not only to the questions themselves but also to the way they were asked. Specifically, in Phase 2, the interviewer asked each part of the question in turn, requiring a response from the interviewee before moving to the next part of the question. This added more structure to the question-answer process and enabled autistic interviewees' to better demonstrate their personal skills and attributes. Interviewees were also provided with a print out of the questions, which helped them to structure their responses, stay focussed on the question in hand, and to understand where the interview was heading so they could avoid answering future questions too early.

Although it was not possible to incorporate this as an adaptation in the current study, feedback from interviewees indicated that, where possible, interviewers should also give the opportunity for interviewees to prepare in advance, for example by receiving the questions *before* the interview.