



Employ Different Thinking

Successful Employment of Neurodivergent Individuals

A case study of Specialisterne Denmark

Master Thesis

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Anna Bang-Ebbestrup

1508932398

Student ID: 93449

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Supervisor: Charles T. Tackney

Copenhagen Business School

Department of Management, Society

and Communication

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Abstract

Corporations and employers are dealing with continuous change, and some of those changes relate to changes in societal interests. As a result, corporations in large numbers are now addressing diversity and inclusion through strategic agendas, however, even between social categories (e.g. gender, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, disability), some categories are represented more than others in employment statistics. Individuals with invisible disabilities such as autism, ADHD, Tourette's, depression, and OCD are often met with prejudices and stereotypical perceptions of their occupational strengths and abilities. In response to the historical stigmatization of those individuals, a new wave of activism has seen the light of day: Neurodiversity.

This paper examines successful employment of neurodivergent individuals (the autistic community in particular) as they are more likely to remain unemployed. As literature from a Danish context is close to non-existing, the objective of this paper is to investigate the Danish conditions and predictors by using the socio-economic company, Specialisterne Denmark, as an example of how to constructively contribute to more inclusive corporate practices. Furthermore, as the neurodivergent voice is often left out of the discussion, feedback from Specialisterne's consultants is also included.

My findings are summarized in a visualization, which follows the principles of the criterion-predictor model. Eight predictors were identified based on data from Specialisterne Denmark, their consultants, and academic journals. Five contextual factors were further added to explain the complex relationship that is successful employment of autistic individuals. The visualization can function as a roadmap if contextual factors allow for it, and the identified predictors are in place.

Keywords: neurodiversity; autism; employment; diversity; inclusion.

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1. Introduction

As society changes its stance on a variety of political topics, organizations are expected to do the same. External stakeholders no longer distinguish between societal responsibility and corporate - the corporate world needs to actively engage with the political discourse such as CSR and sustainability. For those reasons diversity and inclusion have become two important areas of focus for both organizations and society. Literature on management has noted how organizations tend to hire according to the social categories that are considered the norm in that specific region (Mensi-Klarbach & Risberg, 2019). From a European or North American perspective, the ‘working’ norm is Caucasian, male, middle-aged and able-bodied. While some social categories are being discussed and represented vigorously these days, other voices are left out of the debate.

One of those is the voice of disabled people. The disability social category is broad, and can be further divided into categories, therefore, the focus of this paper is on neurodiversity and its members. Neurodiversity can be further dissected into smaller neuro minorities, hence it is necessary to specify the intended target group, which in this case is the autism community. The purpose of this thesis is to explore factors contributing to successful employment of autistic people from a Danish context by examining the socio-economic organization, Specialisterne, which specializes in hiring and developing neurodivergent talent. Therefore, the research question is:

What are the factors to successful employment of neurodivergent individuals in Denmark? And how does the socio-economic organization, Specialisterne, contribute to those?

The aim of this paper is to provide a ‘recipe’ or a roadmap to successful employment and retainment. To achieve genuine diversity, it is necessary to examine the dynamics and underlying barriers contributing to the lack of representation. Literature on the subject already exists, but they all target various aspects of employment and autism. To my knowledge, no existing literature combines previous studies, the insights of autistic people who are successfully employed and retained, with the experiences and strategies of initiatives promoting just that (for example Specialisterne Denmark).

1.1 Scope of Research and delimitations

To answer my research question in most accuracy, I have to define the scope of my research. Employment of autistic people is a big discussion with multiple layers, and it is highly dependent on the national and cultural context. Even though Specialisterne operates in many countries outside of Denmark, what I aim to examine is the Danish branch, and as a result the discussion from a Danish perspective. This study might look relatively different if the focus was Specialisterne on a global level or just from a different national context. Therefore, I am only answering and exploring questions pertaining to autism and employment in Denmark.

Specialisterne Denmark has several departments that all serve different functions while addressing different stakeholders. I will mainly focus on the business department of Specialisterne also known as Specialisterne Solutions. Specialisterne Solutions is responsible for the consultancy services, however, other departments will be brought into the discussion, as they offer insight on a more holistic, general picture of what is needed in successful employment of autistic and neurodivergent people in Denmark.

2. Company profile of Specialisterne

2.1 Specialisterne vision and mission

Even though my focus is on Specialisterne Denmark and their Solutions department, it is worth mentioning Specialisterne Foundation, which is a non-profit foundation with Thorkil Sonne as founder and chairman of the board. Thorkil Sonne is also the founder of Specialisterne Denmark, and his personal experiences with an autistic son was the driving force behind Specialisterne. Specialisterne Foundation has a global mission, which is to create 1 million jobs. According to their website, they have already generated 10.000 jobs globally (Specialisterne Foundation, n.d.). Specialisterne currently has branches in 13 countries: Austria, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Mexico, Northern Ireland, Spain and the US (Specialisterne Foundation, n.d.). Despite national differences in structure and strategy, all branches are based on the same principle, which is called the ‘Dandelion

principle'. The principle can be summed up quickly with their own words: "A dandelion is only a weed in an environment where it is not welcomed" (Specialisterne Foundation, n.d.).

Specialisterne Denmark has two websites, where Solution has its own (SpecialisterneSolutions.dk), and the target audience is primarily companies. The other website (dk.Specialisterne.com) covers the other departments, and the content targets different groups of people such as schools, parents, and neurodivergent individuals. Specialisterne Solutions' mission can be summed up with the slogan 'Employ Different Thinking' (Specialisterne, n.d.). On Specialisterne Solutions' website under the job seeking section, it is written that:

"At Specialisterne, we build the bridges connecting talents with the need for qualified manpower. We believe that everybody has the right to contribute to the community and that a rich society must look outwards and embrace all types of diversity" (Specialisterne, n.d.).

The overarching vision is to create 1000 new jobs for people with autism by 2025. Specialisterne Solutions has created 270 jobs between 2004 and 2018 (Specialisterne, 2018, slide 3). Even though Specialisterne are working on reaching 1000 jobs, the CCO expressed that the vision is not necessarily a palpable goal now:

"It's like a beacon, it works as a vision and a vision is something you can't reach, but we have strategic notes that specify what we need to do" - CCO

Nonetheless, to reach their vision, it is necessary for Specialisterne to identify and cultivate unexploited talent, and this is the strategic notes the CCO refers to. Specialisterne are considered trailblazers in terms of neurodivergent employment, but according to Specialisterne, the talent weighs heavier than the diagnosis:

"People who come to us do not need to have a diagnosis on paper, but they may have social difficulties, not as socially engaged [...] The diagnosis is not as interesting, but the competencies

are [...] We look for people who are unemployed, newly graduated, and experience difficulties finding jobs on their own” - Project leader

In the next section I will go further into detail with the specific services offered by Specialisterne Solutions.

2.2 Specialisterne Solutions

Specialisterne Solutions offers three services to clients: Consultancy, recruitment, and management programs. There is an additional fourth service, which is a combination of consultancy and recruitment called consultant on-boarding, but it is included under the consultancy services on the website.

2.2.1 IT consultancy

Consultancy is, as the term indicates, a regular service that offers the possibility for companies to get qualified, professional help to solve tasks within areas relating to the STEM industries (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics). The tasks vary in scope and time, and some require outplacement while others can be done from Specialisterne’s office. The consultants are chosen in-house, meaning they are already employed at Specialisterne or in Specialisterne’s talent database, which means they are not currently working with Specialisterne, but their competences may come in handy if the right client or project presents itself. In that sense, Specialisterne’s consultancy services are almost identical to other companies specializing in STEM consultancy except from the fact that their consultants are predominantly neurodivergent.

2.2.2 Recruitment

Recruitment is a program, or process, where the client wishes to hire talent specifically within the neurodivergent spectrum. Specialisterne assists with finding, assessing, and on-boarding the talent for the specific client. Specialisterne may choose an in-house candidate, scout for talent outside or look at their talent database. Included in the recruitment process are also awareness sessions, which are

mandatory. Specialisterne offers an additional service, the “on-boarding machine”, which combines consulting with recruitment. The CCO explained the need for this option:

“In the past, our consultants stayed with us, but I introduced the "on-boarding" machine, which means they can get employed, because otherwise we will never reach that goal” - CCO

The goal that is referred to as ‘1000 jobs in 2025’. The consultancy on-boarding service therefore serves to generate more recruitments and employment outside of Specialisterne. The clients start off working with Specialisterne’s consultant to see if it is the right fit for them, and if the task is solved in a satisfactory manner, they tend to hire the consultant in the end.

2.2.3 Management program

Lastly, Specialisterne offers a management program, where the target group is managers from the client organization. The program is tailored to the specific client, and the aim is to support and educate managers on topics relating to neurodiversity. The management program includes awareness sessions, coaching sessions, activities to formulate guidelines, and workshops about leadership strategies. The purpose of the program is to equip managers with the right tools and give them the needed confidence to manage neurodivergent employees. The management program can be purchased separate from the other services.

2.2.4 Awareness sessions and Academy

Even though it is not a service that can be purchased or omitted, awareness sessions are included in the various services, and is a vital part of how Specialisterne works with and educates clients. The awareness sessions typically include the specific department or team that either receives an outplaced consultant or onboards a new neurodivergent employee. The sessions include in-depth knowledge about autism and the term neurodiversity, but also concrete tools and strategies as well as questions for reflection.

Furthermore, the sessions include group work where work-related situations from Specialisterne’s experience are presented as cases.

Specialisterne Academy was first introduced in 2020 and will hereafter be referred to as the Academy. The program is not a service that can be bought by companies. Rather it is a program that neurodivergent people can apply for and become a part of. The program fee is paid by the local government of the applicant. This means Specialisterne deals with a variety of local governments and job centers, and the number is steadily growing. When the local government pays for the program, and the applicant is deemed appropriate after a screening process conducted by Specialisterne, the candidates will get the opportunity to develop and strengthen competences within four areas: Data, Developer, Tester, and DevOps. During the 12 weeks, each candidate will be evaluated on a technical, professional, and personal level. Along the program it may become apparent that a candidate does not possess the required competences within the needed areas, or perhaps their strengths lie in different areas. In that case, they will not get offered a position as consultant at Specialisterne in the first place but will be added to Specialisterne’s talent database in case a relevant position or task presents itself later.

2.3 Additional Specialisterne departments

In comparison to other Specialisterne hubs all over the world, Specialisterne Denmark has a completely unique ecosystem. Besides Solutions, Specialisterne Denmark consists of:

Department	Target group and/or stakeholders	Purpose
Specialisterne STU ¹	Neurodivergent children and youth	Providing an educational environment that makes it possible for young neurodivergent students to finish an education and get a chance at internships

¹ Særligt Tilrettelagt Ungdomsuddannelse. Literal translation is Specially Designed Youth Education.

Specialistklubben	Neurodivergent adults	Creating a community that encourages social activity and friendships in a safe environment
Specialisterne Psychoeducation	Neurodivergent adults and/or their families	Providing strategies and tools for neurodivergent adults and their families to better cope with and manage their diagnoses
Specialisterne Business & Innovation	External stakeholders, e.g., schools	For example, working with a younger target group, aiming for a better educational framework

Despite the different stakeholders and purposes, all departments gather weekly for morning meetings where the CEO delivers information and notices relevant to all departments, hereafter followed by a short presentation by a specific employee or department. Each week is a different topic depending on the presenting department. The presentations help create a knowledge spill-over in the sense that the different departments become aware of the challenges and opportunities other departments may face. The departments also work together on different projects or initiatives. For instance, during a workshop on how to improve the candidate screening sessions, employees from Solutions, Business & Innovation, and Psychoeducation attended (Observation I, March 8, 2022). The various employees have experience with different aspects of the screening session, and it is therefore necessary to involve all perspectives. This is just one example from the ecosystem that is Specialisterne Denmark.

2.4 Local governments

One aspect of the Specialisterne Denmark which is remarkably different from the other country hubs is the connection to local governments and municipalities. Quite often it is the local case worker that introduces Specialisterne to the candidates, and thereby motivates them to apply for the Academy. However, in certain cases it is the potential candidate who must sell the idea of the Academy to the case worker and convince them why it is worth the resources. The process varies greatly depending on the specific municipality or even case worker. From the moment Specialisterne receives an inquiry, it can

either take 1 day or up to 5 months. Unfortunately, the norm is that it usually takes 2-3 months (Specialisterne employee, e-mail correspondence, May 6th, 2022). Even though Specialisterne Solutions has no relation to local governments, they still rely on other departments to generate interest and support from external factors such as the local governments. Other departments are in constant contact with educational institutions, a-kasser², job centers and local governments, as these are the external stakeholders who tend to provide Specialisterne with potential candidates.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research philosophy

The overarching research philosophy for this paper is insight-based critical realism (Lonergan 1992). The philosophy argues that the researcher must be attentive, intelligent, reasonable, and responsible. To answer my research question, I have to acknowledge that a certain level of insight is needed; insight that can only be provided by the relevant stakeholders. Therefore, my philosophy and understanding of this topic relies on not only facts and numbers as well as previous research on the topic, but also the perspectives and narratives provided by the very people this thesis is dedicated to. In the words of Lonergan: “there is a drive to know, to understand, to see why, to discover the reason, to find the cause, to explain” (1992, p 4). The research philosophy of insight-based critical realism also follows the Nordic Nine by Copenhagen Business School in terms of knowledge, values, and action.

As a result, I have sought to gather insights and perspectives that help to explain why employment among autistic people is troubled, and what smaller parts contribute to the issue. These smaller parts were discovered by applying an approach similar to rootcause analysis. As I found existing literature inadequate and often superficial, I zoomed in and added another layer to the discussion. My objective is to provide a deeper exploration, or a roadmap, of this very complex issue that is successful employment of autistic people. To do so I have followed the principles of the criterion-predictor model, which is “the

² Unemployment insurance

appropriate means to empirically assess the emergence of ontologically more complex phenomena [...]” (Tackney, 2021, p 7).

3.2 Data collection

Much of the data collected for this thesis is primary data. As explained earlier, the literature and research available is still dominated by a lack of further exploration of the smaller aspects that contribute to the difficulties and nuances found in employment relations of autistic people. The literature from a Danish context is even more scarce, and I therefore had to collect my own data through various sources and formats.

3.2.1 Primary data

The primary data can be divided into two categories. The two important sources of data have been observations as a result of my employment, and the semi-structured interviews with consultants currently working at Specialisterne.

Observations

Due to my employment, it has been almost impossible to avoid making observations throughout my daily work. I was employed at Specialisterne as a student assistant in the period of November 2021 to May 2022. My observations started the moment I began working with Specialisterne, as my daily tasks involved writing, translating, organizing, and preparing materials used to communicate with clients. I have therefore had access to an abundance of powerpoints, and gradually gathered an understanding of their corporate identity as I had to converse with other departments as well. Besides daily observations, I have also attended two workshop meetings on March 8th, 2022, and March 21st, 2022.

Semi-structured interviews

As research on employment and autism from a Danish context is relatively limited, I found it imperative to include my own data based on interviews conducted with consultants from Specialisterne. I conducted interviews with Specialisterne consultants and relevant employees. As I do not believe that literature and statistics from other countries can explain the Danish context, I had to collect data from Denmark.

As the interview subjects are on the autism spectrum, much consideration went into the preparation of the questions as well as the execution of the interviews. Firstly, as I am neurotypical I must acknowledge potential blind spots regarding phrasing of questions, as well as what data I have interest in collecting. I may phrase questions in an inconsiderate way, which reflects a medical model stance, even if it is not my intention. Therefore, to eliminate as many blind spots as possible, I asked a co-worker with autism to give feedback on my questionnaire aimed at the consultants. Secondly, as I wish to represent the autistic community in the most constructive way, it is important for me to know how to talk about them. Therefore, I asked the interview subjects about preferred terminology. The answer to that question may vary, however, how I write this paper and what terminology I use depends on the answers from the interviews.

I had to consult with my co-workers (project leader and CCO) to determine which consultants would be appropriate to interview. This is due to the potential risk of either causing unnecessary anxiety or confusion to the individual. Specialisterne's consultants vary in many aspects, meaning some are more welcoming of conversations, whereas others may not have an interest. Also, several consultants were scheduled to start consulting projects in other companies around the time of conducting the interviews, which meant I had to carefully schedule the interviews to avoid causing any turmoil with their onboarding process. The consultants were verbally informed of my intentions of conducting interviews, and afterwards were sent a formal consent form regarding collection of their data. They also received the questions ahead of time to avoid any discomfort. They were also informed that they could return the document, stating which questions they did not wish to answer ahead of the actual interview. This was done to avoid any type of uncomfortable, awkward situation, where the participant felt obliged to answer despite feeling unwilling to. Furthermore, one interview was conducted in written form as the person did

not feel comfortable meeting up with me as we did not know one another. To better understand the respondents' insights, I have included a schema that shows the background of the respondents.

Pseudonym	Date of interview (2022)	Background
Abel	February 28th	Academy; Consultant
Bastian	March 9th	Academy; Consultant
Christian	March 9th	Academy; Consultant
David	March 10th	Academy; Consultant
Elias	March 10th	Academy; Consultant
Filip	March 15th	Academy; Consultant
Gabriel	March 16th	Academy; Consultant
Hannibal	March 17th	Consultant
Isak	Reply received March 29th	Recruited
Jonathan	April 19th	Consultant
Kristina	April 25th	Consultant

3.2.2 Secondary data

The secondary data was collected from academic journals, articles and debates concerning the topic of autism and employment. From Specialisterne I used their website as well as presentations and materials produced and written by Specialisterne.

Academic journals and publications

It is important to establish a basic understanding of the topic, therefore I searched for literature including keywords “autism”, “neurodiversity” and “employment”. When picking the appropriate literature, I chose to focus on titles containing words such as “success”, “factors”, “influence”, “guide”, “challenges”,

“strategies”, “activities”, “experience”, “predictors” and “outcome”. The overall intention was to include literature that had more focus on the topic from a corporate perspective, rather than a medical focus. The literature was global, and therefore not specific to a Danish context, as Danish literature was difficult to find.

The theoretical contributions on diversity, inclusion and change management were chosen according to their relevance. The literature was chosen after having gathered substantial data in the form of observations from my daily work. In other words, my work and exposure to Specialisterne and their materials, inspired the choice of literature because it naturally sparked an association to the literature. It is unclear to me how aware Specialisterne are of these dynamics and theories; rather I believe they operate based on experience. Therefore, I wanted to select appropriate literature that would explore their work from an academic perspective.

Website

Specialisterne operates with two different websites. I am only concerned with the website relating to their business operations (SpecialisterneSolutions.dk). I have included parts of the content on the website as I believe it contributes to understanding how Specialisterne sell their mission and strategy to external stakeholders. I have particularly looked at their services and how they communicate those, which includes particular words or terminology. I have also gathered data relating to former clients from their customer case section. This is the main source of data pertaining to feedback on Specialisterne’s work seen from a corporate perspective. It is worth noting that Specialisterne also publishes so-called ‘insights’ written by a neurodivergent employee. The ‘insights’ are educational pieces that everybody can access. Much of the content in the ‘insights’ are included in the presentations and materials I will include in my analysis, and I will therefore not go into details with the ‘insights’.

Presentations and materials prepared by Specialisterne

As a result of my employment, I had great access to powerpoint presentations and other documents. Specialisterne are aware of my use of their materials. The powerpoints serve different purposes,

depending on who the client is and what service they are looking for. The powerpoints also change depending on where in the process Specialisterne are with their client. As there are countless versions of the different powerpoints, I have chosen specific powerpoints that contain slides of particular interest. The slides represent the various services, and the content helps to demonstrate how Specialisterne communicates their beliefs and values. All slides included are in use and are up to date meaning they were retrieved or used in 2022.

3.2.3 Ethical considerations

Much consideration went into the ethical aspects of conducting research for this paper. To begin with, I have had extensive talks with an autistic employee at Specialisterne's in order to better understand what potential, but unintentional, harm that could come from my thesis project. It was important to me to know what could be considered offensive or insensitive, which is why I allowed the employee to review my questions. She provided me with some insightful feedback, and I revised some of my questions. A part of my research involves asking about other neuro-related diagnoses (ADHD, Tourette's, anxiety etc.). I consulted the same employee, as I believed it could be insensitive or too private. As explained in the data collection section, my interview subjects received a consent form that they signed, and they received the questions in advance. Throughout the process I have remained transparent with my interview subjects as to what the questions are used for, and why I had an interest in interviewing them. I believed transparency between me and my autistic coworkers was the only way to maintain authenticity.

Despite all interview subjects being anonymous, Specialisterne could potentially still figure out what consultants had been interviewed as there was a limited pool of potential interview subjects. Therefore, I have anonymized customers and projects, as it would reveal the identity of that particular consultant. However, due to the limited selection of interview subjects, it is not possible to maintain 100% anonymity. Furthermore, the interview subjects know of each other. They will not be informed of the real identity behind other pseudonyms but their own, however, as they are aware of who participated in my interviews, it cannot be said that my interview subjects remain 100% anonymous. This, I have informed my interview subjects of.

3.2.2 Data analysis

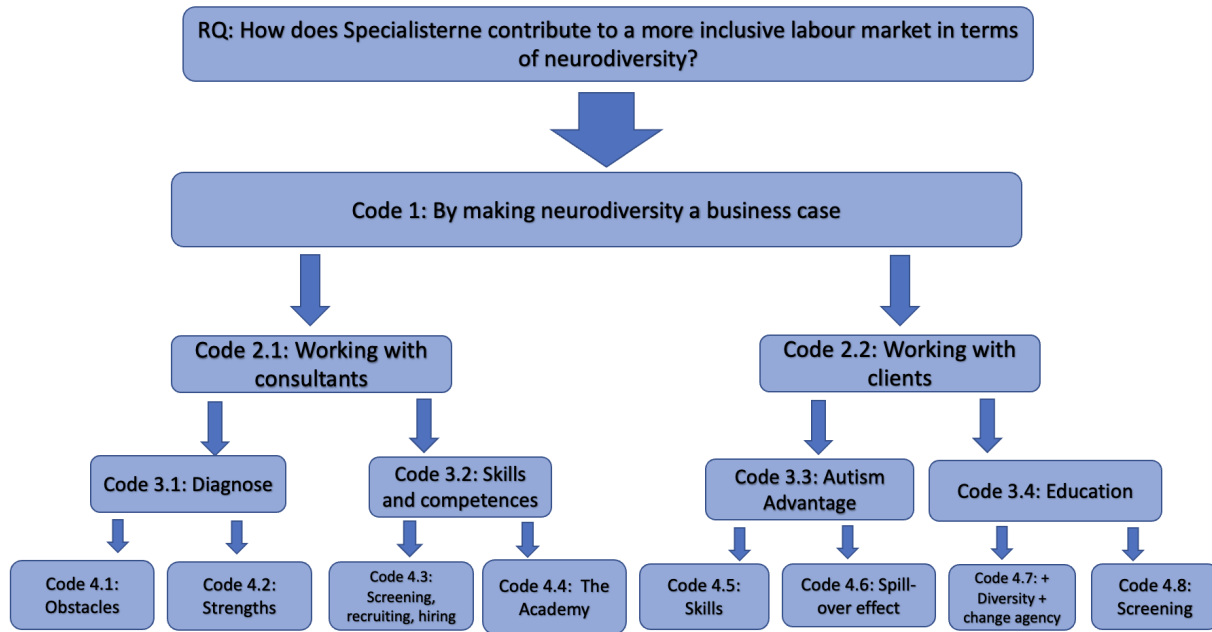
Transcription

All interviews were transcribed manually. The decision to transcribe manually was made to secure the validity and accuracy of the statements for two reasons: 1) interviews were originally conducted in Danish, and would therefore still need to be translated, which could cause something to be misinterpreted if the interviews had to undergo two rounds of transcription, and 2) maintaining statements from my interview subjects in the purest form. The integrity of this paper relies on appropriate representation of the autistic voice, which is why it would be a complete contradiction of that if I was to not transcribe the interviews precisely, but just roughly use parts of their statements. The authenticity of the statements and insights delivered by the interview subjects could not be kept if I had chosen to either not transcribe at all, or if I had chosen to do automatic transcription. In both scenarios, something might have been lost in translation. Additionally, I often had to elaborate on my question and/or explain back to the participants what they had stated, and therefore most of the interviews consisted of the interviewer (me) talking and repeating things. Transcribing the interviews fully would not be of any relevance. All original interviews (whether audio or written) will be made available if requested.

Coding

The coding process is based on the rootcause philosophy. This came about as I was searching for empirical insight into autism and employment and came to the realization that the research previously done tended to lack a higher level of details. Much of the data I was able to collect would end and conclude with statements that remained highly generalized, which left me asking: “Yes, but how?”. Therefore, I decided to do just that with Specialisterne and their work and see how far I could get if I kept asking “how/why”. I initially asked myself how I would answer my research question and ended up with code 1. I then asked myself “how” code 1 could be answered (“How do they make it a business case?”), which resulted in code 2.1 (Consultants) and 2.2 (Clients). I repeated the same process by asking “how” they work with consultants/clients, which resulted in Codes 3.1-3.4. Once again, I asked “how”

and ended up with Codes 4.1-4.8. Below is the visualization of my coding process. Further elaboration of the codes is in the analysis section.



3.3 Validity of research

As I am a former employee of Specialisterne it is only natural to point out the potential bias that has resulted thereof. I have been involved with formulating, translating, and organizing many of the powerpoint slides used as primary data. My objective is to explore Specialisterne’s contribution to the neurodiversity debate and the overall societal progress, but it is also to provide them with perspectives that hopefully inspire conversations and constructive discussion. Even though my fundamental attitude towards their work is positive, my goal is to highlight blind spots within their organization, which could be a hindrance to their mission.

In terms of literature, research, and statistics, I have paid attention to the dates and location of the data. Autism, and neurodiversity in general, is still heavily debated, and our understanding and perception of

those topics are still under revision. Therefore, I have made sure to remain critical when sourcing academic journals and statistics, as I only wanted the most relevant research.

Another aspect of this thesis I would like to address beforehand is my usage of quotations. As I will dwell deeper into in the literature review, there is a consistent omittance of autistic and neurodivergent voices in research. Therefore, as I wish to represent their perspectives in the purest form, I will include as many of their own formulations as possible. This may go against classic academia; however, I do not feel comfortable changing my interview subjects' experiences as it would go against my research philosophy of being attentive, intelligent, reasonable, and responsible. I believe the validity of my research lies in the authenticity of the insights provided by my interview subjects. Therefore, I remain unapologetic in relation to the number of quotations used in this paper.

4. Literature review

To research and properly answer my research question, I have chosen to divide the literature review into three categories: 1) literature on autism, 2) literature on diversity and inclusion, and 3) change management. I have chosen to pursue literature within these three categories because I have yet to find a paper that combines those fields of academic research. Much literature exists on neurodiversity, and many papers examine the prospects of employment among autistic individuals. Likewise, how to implement and embrace diversity in organizations can be found in academic journals. Nonetheless, I have not been able to find substantial academic research on how to successfully employ neurodivergent individuals with sustainability in mind. By sustainability I refer to the ability to maintain, retain and support the neurodivergent individual in their employment. I have also struggled to find literature on case studies of organizations like Specialisterne.

4.1 Literature on autism

The first theme in my literature review is about autism and employment. It is also about neurodiversity and includes perspectives from stakeholders and activists. To this day ignorance, prejudices and misinformation concerning autism and neurodiversity still exist, which is why it is important to examine the most current research on the topic. However, this is not a paper that gives a thorough description and exploration of autism. Autism from a clinical, medical objective is not the focus. There is enough literature on that topic as it is.

4.1.1 Neurodiversity terminology

Even though the term neurodiversity is relatively new, science and researchers have a long history with neurodiversity, however, as this section will explore the comprehension and study of neurodiversity have come a long way.

Records dating back to the 1700s report issues relating to autism-specific behavior, such as lack of eye contact, troubled social communication, and learning difficulties (Doyle, 2020). The term “autistic” was first used in 1912 by Eugen Bleuler, who described the “social withdrawal in schizophrenic adults” (Hurley-Hanson et al., 2022). In 1944, Hans Asperger recognized the differences occurring in autistic individuals, acknowledging varying degrees of socialization and communication skills, nonetheless, he still decided to go with the term “childhood autistic psychopathy” (Hurley-Hanson et al., 2022). Later, autism was hypothesized to be a result of “Refrigerator Mothers”, which was a term that described women who lacked maternal instincts and as a result neglected the child to such a degree the child did not develop proper social skills. The hypothesis was first postulated by Bruno Bettelheim, and it became a rather “popular” explanation to autism in the 1950s and 1960s (Hurley-Hanson et al., 2022). In 1981, the term Asperger’s syndrome came into place, and it was used to distinguish between “low-functioning” and “high-functioning” autism (Doyle, 2020; Hurley-Hanson et al., 2022). It was also in this period that the so-called “Autism Spectrum” became recognized. Today, Asperger’s is considered a part of the autism spectrum, and is not a separate disorder (Doyle, 2020).

So, what do we call “them”? What do we call all those people with neurological differences? In 1999, Judy Singer coined the term “neurodiversity” as a response to the increasing pathologizing research on

autism and other disorders (Doyle & McDowall, 2021). The term is a pendant to “biodiversity”, which emphasizes the importance of protecting and preserving diversity in nature to secure a thriving ecosystem (Doyle, 2020). Singer argued society would largely benefit from neurodiversity, as neurodivergent individuals possess unredeemed strengths, and instead of pathologizing and highlighting the perceived weaknesses, instead focus should be on the contributions that result from those “hidden” talents. Neurodiversity is therefore also a movement, calling for equal rights for members of the neurodiversity “family”. The movement argues that an increased understanding and appreciation of neurodiversity would help break down the societal structures and powers that contribute to exclusion of their members (Doyle, 2020). In the late 2000s, ‘neurodiversity’ as a term replaced ‘Specific Learning Difficulties’ among educational psychologists. Neurodiversity can be further dissected into four groups that are called “neuro minorities”. The term is used to underline the issues of discrimination and oppression that members of the neurodiversity “family” encounter in various contexts (Doyle, 2020). There are currently four distinct neurominorities, which are listed below.

Dyslexia, DCD, dyscalculia, dysgraphia	Tourette syndrome, autism and ADHD	Mental ill health	Neurological illness or brain injury
Applied, developmental neurominority <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Born with condition • Relates to applied, educational skills such as reading or motor control • Not considered a health condition 	Clinical, developmental neurominority <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Born with condition • Relates to behavioural skills such as communication and self-control • Considered a health condition (currently) 	Acquired neurominority (potentially transient) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develops in response to a health condition such as anxiety or depression • Could return to ‘neurotypical’ if health condition resolves 	Acquired neurominority <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develops in response to a health condition • Potentially resolves as injury heals or worsens as health deteriorates

(Source: Nancy Doyle, 2020, p 5)

4.1.2 Autism and employment

Literature on autistic people's motivation to join the labor market emphasizes the desire to work and its major contribution to the autistic individual's self-image. One study found that the monetary aspects of employment did not affect the autistic participants to a note-worthy degree (Baldwin et al., 2014). Instead, employment is a great contribution to the individual's perception of overall life quality and self-worth. Employment helps to develop professional competences and appeals to intrinsic values rather than monetary gains (Baldwin et al., 2014; Hurley-Hanson et al., 2019). Nonetheless, researchers adhering to the social model are less occupied with the reasons for autistic people seeking employment, and rather argue that it is their right (Scott et al., 2017)

Even though exact numbers may vary across countries the same disheartening pattern appears in statistics: autistic people are more likely to be unemployed – and stay unemployed (Hurley-Hanson et al., 2022). According to Hurley-Hansen et al.'s research, 85% of autistic individuals are unemployed. In Australia, 42% of people on the autism spectrum were employed as compared to 53% of all individuals with disabilities, and in the UK it is only 15% who are employed full-time (Scott et al., 2019). In the US that number is 11% (Scott et al., 2017). In Denmark, only 1 out of 10 are employed full-time, and 46% receive welfare benefits (Landsforeningen Autisme, n.d.). There are many initiatives and institutions aiding autistic people with employment, however, the outcome of those tends to be less successful. Unfortunately, employment services tend to overlook the individual person's needs, and are generally under equipped to deal with people on the autism spectrum. They simply lack knowledge on the topic (Scott et al., 2019).

Obstacles to successful employment

When assessing challenging factors there are both internal as well as external. Much literature has focused on the internal challenges, such as social difficulties, comorbidity, and the educational level of the individual (Chen et al., 2015), however, this paper is more interested in examining the external barriers to successful employment.

Employment among autistic people is difficult to measure accurately. This is due to several factors. First, individuals may not disclose their diagnosis to their employer, which means they do not show up in

statistics. Second, it is estimated that a substantial number of the working force is in fact autistic but has yet to be diagnosed. Third, individuals with autism are less likely to work full-time (which is the only type of employment that matters in many statistics), and that is despite the individuals' wishes to work full-time (Hurley-Hanson et al., 2022). Adding to that, research tends to be small-scale, and is therefore less likely to provide a correct representation of autistic employment (Baldwin et al., 2014). Also, research on employment among autistic people only showcases a small percentage of their employable years pointing to an overall lack of research on autistic employment during the span of a lifetime (Hurley-Hanson et al., 2019). Therefore, long-term employment and the effects thereof have yet to be examined. Lastly, there is not a standardized norm to work from, meaning the values and measures to evaluate outcomes are different from each researcher (Chen et al., 2015; Scott et al., 2019).

One of the general issues observed is that autistic people are often misplaced and overqualified for the job positions they take on, resulting in the individual acquiring fewer competences appropriate for career advancements. Studies also show individuals who are overqualified get paid less (Baldwin et al., 2014; Chen et al., 2015; Scott et al., 2019). It is also a cause for burnouts and depression, which causes the individual to leave the labor market for long periods (Baldwin et al., 2014; Hurley-Hanson et al., 2019). One study examined self-efficacy in individuals with Asperger's (Lorenz & Heinitz, 2014), and found that the group with Asperger's displayed lower self-efficacy compared to the neurotypical group. High self-efficacy results in the individual feeling confident in dealing with conflicts or challenges, and it is therefore highly relevant in an occupational context. According to Lorenz and Heinitz (2014), self-efficacy can be affected by the individual's general self-image, but also the individual's occupation. If the job does not match the individual's competences and interests, it has a great effect on the occupational self-efficacy, and job-environment-fit is therefore detrimental to successful employment. Furthermore, Lorenz and Heinitz (1994) demonstrated in their study that occupational fields appropriate for people with Asperger's are more diverse than expected. Traditionally, literature emphasizes the relevance of "autistic traits" in job positions in STEM industries, however, Lorenz and Heinitz's research argues the opposite - autistic occupational strengths are many and needed in a much broader occupational context than first anticipated.

Successful employment of autistic individuals is less likely if the employer is not aware of or educated enough about the accommodations and adjustments needed. Often employers are unaware of how their hiring process discourages neurodivergent applicants, and when confronted employers often refrain from changing their procedures (Scott et al., 2017). Furthermore, a study in Australia disclosed that 72% of participants in their study stated they were not currently receiving any accommodations or support at work relating to their autism diagnosis (Baldwin et al., 2014). Some of the adjustments that can be made to accommodate autistic employees include modifying the tasks and content relating to the job position, offering flexible work hours, adjusting sensory input (such as light, smell, sound), coaching and consistent support (Baldwin et al., 2014; Hayward et al., 2019). Another study examined the conditions supporting retention of autistic employees and emphasized alignment of expectations of productivity and job roles, and support from the workplace to create an inclusive workspace (Scott et al., 2015). Other studies focused more on the relationship between neurotypical and autistic employees, and how it affects employment. The studies emphasized the need for more education and a better understanding of autism and the challenges that may arise in a workplace (Hayward et al., 2019; Spoor et al., 2021). Another study pointed to the attitude of the employer as the biggest hindrance to hiring autistic people due to their mismatched perceptions of what it costs and requires of the employer (Scott et al., 2017). The study found that if the employer has had previous experience, they will be more prone to hiring.

Examples of successful autistic entrepreneurs or public figures often get discredited, and their success is considered an exception to the norm. This is referred to as sub-typing, and it is a form of stereotyping, which serves to make subdivisions within a group (Praslova, 2021). The outcome of subtyping autism is that some autistic people are considered 'real autistic' and those are typically the ones that meet the expectations and reinforce the existing stereotype, whereas the other group who are successful and 'well-functioning' are out of the norm and therefore not representative of what autism is. For example, great leadership skills are often attributed to characteristics that autistic people are not associated with. Although studies on effective leadership emphasize the importance of competences and personality traits that neurodivergent people often possess, the consensus is that neurodivergent, and in particular autistic, people do not have what it takes to lead (Praslova, 2021).

Occupational contributions and strengths

Other studies highlight the evident advantages of autistic employees. Some of the detected occupational strengths of people with Asperger's were long-lasting concentration periods, great ability to identify patterns and processing visual data, and better ability to remember facts (Lorenz & Heinitz, 2014). Other studies mentioned reliability and attention to detail (Scott et al., 2017; Hayward et al., 2019), and some emphasized the compatibility with industries and environments that required a high degree of precision and repetition (Scott et al., 2019). However, the contributions are not only linked to the individual, but also how it affects the team dynamic. One study on employers' perception of autistic employees indicated a positive impact due to a variety of factors: increased awareness and knowledge, increased creativity, and a shift in attitude towards inclusion (Scott et al., 2017). Also, organizations who have effective neurodiversity programs installed report other positive outcomes that result from hiring neurodivergent talent (Bruyère, 2019). Some of the tangible benefits are increased innovation and better, more direct communication, however, other more personal benefits were mentioned as well. For example, managers reported they felt they had become better managers.

However, the perception of job roles and responsibilities appropriate for neurodivergent people is still quite limited. Neurodivergent leaders are considered a rarity, as prejudices and stereotypes prevent people from associating neurodiversity with leadership. Contrary to that, studies on self-made millionaires in the UK showed that 40% of the respondents were dyslexic, whereas only 10% of the general population are dyslexic (Praslova, 2021). Another study showed that 20% of UK entrepreneurs are dyslexic, whereas the number is as high as 35% in the US. In comparison, only 1% of corporate managers are dyslexic (Doyle & McDowall, 2021). This points to a realization that is: neurodiversity is appropriate in an abundance of industries and in a plethora of job positions. What is hindering them from exercising their talents, are the stereotypes pertaining to the various neurodivergent categories.

4.2 Literature on diversity and inclusion

Diversity and inclusion are among some of the most promoted buzzwords in corporate branding and communication. Just as sustainability and corporate social responsibility, the actual promotion of genuine diversity and inclusion still lacks in many organizations. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate the research done on successful strategies to thoroughly evaluate the efforts and value of the job done by Specialisterne. My intent is to examine various concepts, ideas and theories on how humans interact in corporate settings and relate the theoretical observations to real life.

4.2.1 Management levels of diversity and inclusion

Due to the increased global competition and many tumultuous changes corporations face, management literature focuses on creating “formulas” on how to come up with the best strategy to deal with those obstacles. What are the elements you need to succeed with your corporate mission? How well organizations deal with never-ending changes and pressures from competitors and external circumstances depend on their choice of strategy. To ensure your survival, you have to develop an appropriate strategy to help you cope with various influences (Mensi-Klarbach and Risberg, 2019). Mensi-Klarbach & Risberg introduce a framework to diversity and inclusion agendas, which divides management into three levels. Those levels are the normative level, the strategic level, and the operative level. Mensi-Klarbach & Risberg argue that for diversity and inclusion practices to have any effect, it is necessary to investigate all three managerial levels. It is therefore not enough to address one or two levels. Nonetheless, before engaging in any type of activity or formulating any kind of plan, it is essential for corporations to deal with the first level, which is the normative level. The three levels will be described and explored in the next section.

	Focus	Reflections
Normative level (Why?)	Mission/ legitimization	What is our mission? Why are we engaging? What can we do for society? What does it mean to us?
Strategic level (What?)	Effectivity	Where are the opportunities? How do we generate profit but remain innovative?

Operative level (How?)	Efficiency	How do we achieve our goals? How do we measure our work? What is the responsibility of the managers, employees, directors etc.?
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Source: Based on Mensi-Klarbach & Risberg (2019)

Normative

The normative level is the top of the managerial levels and is the first level that needs to be addressed. At this stage corporations need to ask themselves why they engage in a particular activity, such as why do we want autistic people in the company? This step might appear rather self-explanatory to some, which unfortunately causes corporations to skip it or delegate the task to personnel without authority. Hence, employees and managers lack the fundamental understanding of why they suddenly must engage in a new mission or new practices. Therefore, the purpose of the normative level is to make the whole organization understand the legitimizing arguments for pursuing a new strategy, practices and/or mission. Sometimes organizations are forced to re-evaluate their strategy due to societal or political changes. Pressures from the outside put corporations in a position where they must take a stance on a particular subject often relating to an inclusive discourse (Mensi-Klarbach & Risberg, 2019).

Strategic

When the legitimizing arguments are agreed on, the next level is to figure out what exactly needs to be done to complete the mission. There are three approaches to pick from: the systemic, functional, and episodic approach. When choosing a systemic approach, diversity is considered a strategic issue and the company is pushed to put diversity and inclusion on the agenda. In this approach, initiatives and practices are linked to the corporation's existing strategies and values and is part of their core activities. The responsible person (or people) therefore tends to be positioned higher up in the organization, which allows them a greater degree of autonomy and authority. As a result, more resources in terms of finances and personnel are allocated to the strategy. Furthermore, diversity and inclusion initiatives are

mainstreamed throughout the organization, meaning it becomes an integrated part of each department (Mensi-Klarbach and Risberg, 2019).

Another approach is the functional, which is more commonly applied than the systemic. As the word may reveal, diversity is then seen as a function or a competence in the organization. Typically, the responsibilities of diversity and inclusion initiatives are placed within certain departments, e.g. HR, talent requisition, marketing. As a result, the strategy is perceived as a sub-strategy, only relevant for certain activities. Top-down support and mainstreaming tend to be missing in this approach. The person (or personnel) responsible for initiatives tend to work in HR or CSR, and are therefore placed outside of top management, making implementation more difficult, as they do not have access to resources to the same degree (Mensi-Klarbach & Risberg, 2019).

The last approach is episodic. When companies choose this strategy activities tend to be isolated, and more of an ad hoc character. External pressures are low, meaning the companies do not feel particularly obliged to make it a priority. This approach tends to lack an actual strategy. An example of an episodic approach could be mentoring programs. Many companies offer mentoring programs where different segments can get advice on various topics such as career advancements. However, if core activities and processes remain the same, do these episodic activities matter in the big picture? (Mensi-Klarbach & Risberg, 2019)

Nonetheless, companies have been observed going through cycles of various approaches, meaning they might start off with an episodic approach, but later develop a more systemic approach. Most organizations do not exclusively work with one approach. The strategic level is therefore not a static condition, but rather one that can change as the organization matures or changes their stance (Mensi-Klarbach & Risberg, 2019).

Operative

The last level of management is the operative, which is concerned with efficiency and getting things done the right way. The strategic level was the opposite - getting the right things done. At this level the organization must consider what tools, processes and measures they need to put in place in order to successfully evaluate their progress and work towards whatever goal they may have. For instance, if your goal is to hire more neurodiverse employees, what resources are needed to do so? Who is in charge of getting this done? How do we measure our progress? At this level concrete guidelines, protocols and action plans are expected to be formulated (Mensi-Klarbach and Risberg, 2019).

4.2.2 Key concepts to understand diversity and inclusion dynamics

Individuals with disabilities often face discrimination and as a result are more likely to be excluded from the labor market (Mensi-Klarbach & Risberg, 2019). It is therefore necessary to take a further look at some of the dynamics that contribute to existing stigmatization, prejudices, and stereotyping.

Norms from an organizational perspective often involve unwritten rules and guidelines for organizational behavior (Friis Christensen, 2018). They are based on the perception of normality, difficult to see, but still present in all social and organizational settings. As they are repeated and thereby reinforced, norms become normalized over time. Norms are often taken for granted, and only become visible when violated. *Norm criticism* is therefore an approach where the objective is to question the legitimacy of norms especially from an organizational context (Friis Christensen, 2018).

One important dynamic is *unconscious bias*. An individual's unconscious bias is shaped by personal experiences, cultural factors as well as personal background (Tate & Page, 2018). Unconscious biases are particularly difficult to detect and control, and therefore inherent to some degree. In organizations this can affect recruitment processes, training, advancement opportunities and overall daily operations. If the vision is to become more inclusive and foster more diversity, it is imperative to identify areas that could be influenced by unconscious biases.

Similar to other social dynamics, *categorization* is a natural occurrence in the human brain, as it provides a way to make sense of the environment (Risberg & Pilhofer, 2018). Categorization also helps humans in handling complex situations and conflicts. Categorization even helps us in everyday repetitive situations such as doing laundry. People tend to be categorized according to gender, age, ethnicity, social status, sexuality, religion, and disabilities. However, categorization also helps individuals to understand how to act in certain social contexts, which can become valuable in an organizational context. When organizations want to explore diversity, categories can be helpful, as they are also used to highlight the positive attributes of a person within a diversity category, but it can also reinforce stereotypes (Risberg & Pilhofer, 2018).

To better understand the power dimensions of diversity, it is necessary to include *intersectionality theory*. The origin of the theory stems from a black anti-racist, feminist movement, which criticized the white middle-class feminist movement for leaving out black women's experiences in the labor market (Mensi-Klarbach & Risberg, 2019). Intersectionality is therefore a theory, or an approach, used to address the lack of representation based on various social categories. Even though the approach originally addressed gender and ethnicity, it has now become a way to talk about how power is affected by intersection of social categories. It is therefore a relevant theory when talking about disabilities, or perceived disabilities, such as autism.

When promoting diversity in organizations *rejection and resistance* to new initiatives is to be expected. Resistance can take form in different ways, ranging from an overall opposition to diversity to individual resistance. According to Mensi-Klarbach & Risberg there are four levels of opposition: overt, subtle, individual, and organizational resistance. The two most relevant for this paper is individual and organizational resistance. Individual resistance pertains to the employee and their thoughts on diversity. The employee may have prejudices or other preconceived ideas about a particular group, and their actions will therefore contribute to the exclusion, isolation, and/or avoidance of that group. Like subtle resistance, individual resistance is often unspoken and only detected between the lines. Lastly, organizational resistance comes to show in the practices and initiatives of an organization, such as their HR practices, training sessions and even social activities. For instance, if activities take place after work, it may exclude people with children from participating in activities as they need to care for their children.

Likewise, if social activities involve alcohol, it may exclude employees who do not wish to drink or be in situations where alcohol is involved (Mensi-Klarbach & Risberg, 2019).

4.3 Literature on change management

Diversity and inclusion are almost always associated with change, but not always with success. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the relationship between the perception of change and the tools used to navigate with. One definition of organizational change states that it is:

“[...] a set of behavioral science-based theories, values, strategies, and techniques aimed at the planned change of the organizational work setting for the purpose of enhancing individual development and improving organizational performance, through the alteration of organizational members’ on-the-job behaviors” - Porras & Robertson as cited in Weick & Quinn, 1999, p 363.

Many scholars have contributed to the debate regarding organizational change, however, for this paper I have chosen a few theories I deemed most appropriate for the research purpose. To avoid causing a muddled picture I intend on reflecting on two types of change, episodic and continuous, followed by a distinction between the various roles a change agent can play.

4.3.1 Episodic vs Continuous change

Episodic change refers to activities and initiatives that tend to be infrequent, discontinued, but still intentional. Organizations tend to engage in episodic change when they are straying from their status quo, or the equilibrium, which often is caused by a growing gap between external environmental conditions and internal structures and activities. Organizations taking on episodic change tend to be more concerned with short-term adaptability rather than long-term and are more likely to compare their own practices and activities to other competitors. The process of change is usually initiated by someone placed

higher up in the organization; however, implementation tends to be slower because of inertia. One final observation about episodic change is that the solution is often to replace the old with something new. Some scholars argue against that type of mindset and claim replacement of entities will not necessarily lead to sustainable change (Weick & Quinn, 1999)

When dealing with episodic change the role of the change agent is to initiate the first move or be a so-called prime mover. In the past, theories and studies have encouraged engaging with large groups within organizations, however, more recent studies argue working on a smaller scale yields better results. Some of the problematic dynamics that may occur during large group gatherings is reduced participation and involvement, decreased sense of accountability and responsibility, fewer unique contributions, and reduced willingness to express opinions. One of the ways change agents can act as prime movers is by using their language and communication skills (Weick & Quinn, 1999).

The other type of change is continuous. Continuous change is typically on-going, constantly evolving, and cumulative. While some scholars argue that change is emergent and is a realization of shifting demands or needs externally as well as internally, others believe change is a constant update of practices, both social and organizational. Therefore, change accumulates when small daily adjustments take place simultaneously all over the organization. Examples of smaller scale changes include redefining job descriptions, allowing more self-organizing structures as opposed to fixed structures, implementing more feedback and response sessions, and allowing change to be a natural occurrence in the daily operations. One idea pertaining to continuous change is that it is a process of learning, meaning expanding and altering knowledge is more important than carrying out a specific action, such as replacing or substituting something. In this context, the role of the change agent is to help organizations facilitate a transition through rebalancing. Rebalancing refers to relabeling and reinterpreting processes, which could otherwise cause blockage and obstacles. There are several ways to rebalance, such as reinterpreting issues into opportunities, or responding to injustice (Weick & Quinn, 1999).

The nature of change is an on-going debate, but the philosophical dilemma can be summed up: Is change something you manage, or is change something you lead? (Kotter as cited in Weick & Quinn, 1999). When comparing episodic change and continuous change, they appeal to two different logics. Episodic

change is based on a logic of replacement, whereas continuous change is a logic of attraction. The key difference simplified follows as goes: Logic of replacement is concerned with telling people what to do, whereas logic of attraction is preoccupied with showing people how to be. Studies on managerial attitudes towards change show a substantial preference for logic of replacement, and surprisingly less interest in logic of attraction. To exercise logic of attraction, managers need self-empowerment. When managers redirect their attitudes and behaviors, it has a great impact on their subordinates as well as the people they report to. Organizational change is more likely to succeed if managers can demonstrate personal changes (Weick & Quinn, 1999).

5. Findings and Analysis

5.1 Autism and employment in Denmark

Data from a Danish perspective are inconsistent and few. Nonetheless, there is an abundance of literature relating to the diagnosis and the difficulties that arise during childhood. Furthermore, it is easy to find a substantial amount of literature on how to deal with autistic people as a “pårørende”. The literal meaning of the word is: person who is a member of the nearest family of a person who is sick or has been involved in an accident³ Needless to say, there is an overwhelming gap in literature describing the life and employment of adult autistic people in Denmark. Although not representative for the autistic community in whole, it offers an insightful portion of experiences and perspectives that all contribute to understanding the circumstances autistic Danes are faced with.

5.1.1 Employment motivation

The majority of the respondents expressed the same motivation and reasons for contacting Specialisterne, however, with a few variations. How the consultants became aware of Specialisterne also varied. One

³ Definition of the word found at Ordnet.dk

consultant was referred to Specialisterne through their therapist; a couple of consultants were told by their family members; others got suggestions from the job center, and lastly some of them found Specialisterne on their own. The main reason for contacting Specialisterne was to find a job, which all the consultants mentioned. Nonetheless, other intrinsic values were mentioned.

“I felt like my previous jobs had been difficult, and I wanted to know where on the autism spectrum I was in comparison to others” - Christian

“I didn't have anything else to do [...] I was extremely bored” - Abel

“I wanted to find permanent employment, so I thought I needed some competencies. I thought it would be a place where I could fit in without worrying” - Elias

“I don't have much work experience, that's why I've come here” - Bastian

“For me it's about being a part of society and showing that I also belong, that I exist and can be productive even though I'm not like others” - Jonathan

“For the money [laughs] You need the money [...] I didn't want to be unemployed. I wanted to contribute to society, I wanted to do what I want to do which is programming” - Hannibal

Despite the last statement, the majority of the interviewed consultants responded in a way that indicated getting hired was not a monetary necessity.

5.1.2 Occupational strengths and advantages

Research on the positive aspects of hiring autistic people tends to be clear about the contributions ascribed to the autistic traits. However, much research is conducted and formulated by neurotypical researchers,

and therefore offers an external perception and evaluation. It is therefore important to ask autistic people to put into words what they believe is their contribution and area of expertise. The respondents I interviewed gave the following insight:

“In my case, I have a different perspective. When people are focused on certain things, I see things differently. And if people are willing to listen, it can lead to a discussion, which could make you do something” - Bastian

“I am very, very good at numbers, which is the main thing. Very analytical, logically-thinking, structured in the way I organize” - Abel

“I am more likely to double check and be thorough” - Daniel

“I feel like I absorb information” - Gabriel

“Other neurotypical people have a tendency to make mistakes here and there, but I don't really do that [...] It could also be a special interest. I can dive into things more deeply and know a lot about something, which may be relevant in another situation” - Elias.

“I am logical, I see things objectively. I follow the rules if there are rules, which there most often is. I am really good at figuring out things I didn't previously knew anything about” - Hannibal

“I'm really good at troubleshooting, sorting data. I'm really good at data entry because I always find a flow, and then it goes from there” - Kristina

“When I start on a task, I don't stop until it has met the standard that I think is acceptable, which means I am very efficient” - Jonathan

One observation when conducting the interviews was that when asked about their skills most of the respondents had difficulties answering. The consultants did not necessarily understand how their diagnosis offered them a different set of skills, and therefore found it hard to answer. Some of the respondents could not decipher whether it was a personality trait or rather a part of the diagnosis:

“In my opinion, it has more to do with my approach being different. I find it difficult to leave a task behind” - Daniel

“I don't know how much it relates to the diagnosis, but I guess there are similarities, such as absorbing new knowledge” - Bastian

Lastly, not all respondents perceived their autism diagnosis as something that could contribute to their professional position in a positive way:

“Detail-oriented and maybe the ability to see connections, but I tend to see the disadvantages rather than the advantages. There are advantages without a doubt” - Christian

The disadvantages that Christian mentions is something several of the respondents mention. When asked about whether or not they choose to disclose their diagnosis to a potential employer, the majority of the consultants answered they did not. One of the reasons for not disclosing their autism diagnosis, is the discrepancy between what qualities and skills autistic people possess, and what neurotypical people perceive autistic skills to be. Many of the respondents are aware of this, and therefore choose to wait to disclose their diagnosis in fears of being judged or stereotyped. Often autism is associated with talents and skills exceeding those of neurotypical people, which several of the respondents commented on. Some of the statements included:

“I don't have any of those superpowers, but I am also not restricted to a point where I don't function if there's a purple color on the wall” - Abel

“[...] But I have seen on TV that some people have certain talents. I'm just not there. I don't have any hidden talents, unfortunately” - Christian

One of the respondents even expressed how he tries not to associate with the diagnosis too much. When asked why, he answered:

“There could be a couple of reasons, I think. One reason is that some people have a romanticized idea of autistic people, like they can do all these special things, but if you show up and you can't do those special things [...] I fear they might expect too much” - Daniel

For many of the respondents the possibility of being rejected due to mismatched ideas about autism was the main reason for not disclosing their diagnosis. Even though a part of the feedback is rooted in a positive perception (almost to the point of putting autistic people on a pedestal), a lot of the feedback is still negative, or at least perceived to be negative by the respondents.

“I've done it a couple of times, but it didn't really make sense before landing the interview [...] It only helps to separate people, it's not something positive” - Bastian

“It requires resources from an employer. If they post a job position, they didn't allocate resources to those specific needs, so for a neurodivergent person I don't think it's gonna help when competing with others without a diagnosis. I don't see how it would position you better [...] If you don't feel the need to talk about your diagnose, you need to avoid certain things and express things a certain way” - Christian

“If you write about your autism or that you're neurodivergent, it might be off-putting to some people, because you've expressed that you have social challenges even before meeting the person [...] I don't mind people knowing, it's more about choosing not to write it because it can be a criterion for rejection” - Filip

“Personally, I would feel more comfortable with the employer knowing, but it is the fewest who actually know how to deal with it so I try to do it in my own time and tell them” - Jonathan

A few consultants responded that they disclosed their diagnosis to avoid any “unpleasant surprises”:

“I usually disclosed it every time because there are limitations such as it takes me longer to get into the tasks, and sometimes I need to take a sick day because it is too overwhelming, or I have too many questions and I don't want to look stupid. So I have always thought it would be best if they were aware of it” - Abel

“In the cases where I chose to disclose it, it was because I wanted to say "Hey, I am autistic, I have competences within this and that field", but also to make them aware of the challenges so they don't come to them as a surprise” - Elias

“Going ‘under the radar’ and appearing normal can work in the short run, but it can also lock you in and set the bar too high compared to your functional level on bad days” - Isak

Judging by the respondents’ answers two patterns, or observations, emerge. One pattern is having difficulties relating the characteristics and aspects of an autism diagnosis to the labor market in a constructive and positive way. Another pattern is the doubt concerning whether to disclose the autism diagnosis or not, as prejudices and preconceived notions of the diagnosis (no matter positive or negative) could affect the autistic person’s hiring process and later employment negatively.

5.1.3 Employment challenges and obstacles

This section will examine the respondents’ perspectives on employment in general, and what challenges they have encountered along the way. The respondents offered insight into various areas of the recruitment and on-boarding processes that can be a hindrance to autistic applicants, as well as hurdles in the daily operations and procedures. All respondents have had previous experience in other workplaces; some prior to receiving their diagnosis, and some while aware of their diagnosis.

The initial phase of reading and understanding the requirements in a job description is the first hurdle to overcome. One of the troubling aspects is the discrepancy between what is expected of the applicant and what is communicated in the job posting.

“I think one of the main issues is that what they're asking for is not what they really want. It seems like, applications are written by people who have no clue what is needed, and somebody was just told "Can you write this and that" and what nice words to use for google searches” - Bastian

“Lot of the requirements are just there to be there, and they are not always the actual requirements. If it's the actual requirements, they tend to be rigid. There are people in HR who do not know a lot about the specific job area, and therefore add more rigid requirements. So it's really difficult finding something that makes you think "This is something I'm good at". Otherwise, it's "Will they expect too much of me?" - Hannibal

“It states what you need to know something about, but you will always end up doing something else when you get out there” - Gabriel

Another aspect of applying for jobs, and subsequently going to job interviews, is the ability to sell one's own capabilities and skills. The respondents are aware of this, nonetheless, find it difficult:

“When searching for the right job, the problem has been the gap between what I can do, experience on paper, what people are looking for, and what I can convince them of” - Bastian

“There weren't any jobs that matched the things I thought I could do or the skills I had, so the competences I had to have, I didn't have, or I didn't know if I had them” - Elias

“Reading the job posts, finding out what are your strengths and weaknesses, structuring a resume, and getting it done” - Christian

“I have to show them what I can do [...] The chemistry has to be right. I know people recruit according to whether or not they can figure out a person” - Hannibal

“For me, writing ‘fluff’, like the social aspect of writing an application, is difficult. What to write because you want to sell yourself, usually you would want your application to stand out, so it's difficult to write the social aspect” - Filip

“I have had difficulties at previous workplaces because of my diagnoses [...] Believe it was because I didn't make people aware of my needs, but it's also difficult going to a job interview where the premise is that you function normally in all aspects. Being autistic is not exactly how I “sold the goods”” - Isak

In response to previous on-boarding sessions, only a few respondents had feedback. The few statements that I did receive pointed towards a lack of understanding and impatient attitude when dealing with the respondent. One of the respondents described previous experiences this way:

“With both of my previous jobs, it's been a problem that I didn't know what I had to do. And people get upset with you because they expect you to know what you should do [...] I didn't know the person in charge of onboarding me, but the guy who ended up onboarding me was not the intended person. Because I took up his time, he ended up lacking in other tasks, and then I got blamed for that” - Elias

For Elias, both employers were aware of his diagnosis, yet did not know how to accommodate him in their routine and instead projected their lack of resources onto his diagnosis. Another respondent noted similar obstacles:

“[...] Except some of them were impatient. One of them seemed annoyed” - Daniel

Nonetheless, many of the respondents realize that a contribution to the problematic employment dynamic is due to their own lack of ability to communicate their needs. Either because they do not know how to express them, or because they are unaware of them:

“In the past I’ve been fired because of my challenges, but I believe it was most likely because people didn’t know about them or didn’t know how to accommodate the needs even after being aware of them. I was really bad at talking about it, and it caused me a lot of trouble” - Isak

“He [former employer] asked about it, and what he could do to make it easier for me. At that time I just said there wasn’t anything really, it was all good” - Bastian

“During my first employment I knew about my diagnosis, but at that time I had not accepted it myself completely, so I tried to push it away. Looking back, it probably wasn’t smartest idea” - Jonathan

Worth noticing is that most respondents were diagnosed later in life, and therefore have work experience prior to their official diagnosis, which would explain to some degree why they did not express their needs clearly. One of the respondents further commented on how an invisible disability makes it more difficult to manage needs:

“It is just difficult when you have an invisible disability that people can’t see from afar. It can result in me being or feeling misunderstood, or that my needs are not met because people forget them. I don’t want to deal with people getting surprised if I react atypically in certain situations or if I get tics” - Isak

Another challenge that can arise after getting hired is the workflow. The respondents gave some insight into how daily tasks and work environment can hinder the neurodivergent employee:

“They need to be aware of the different needs, such as small talk, being social. That you don't always say ‘when’ [...] It's not only autistic people who need this, but for example wearing headphones and just working without interruptions. It helps a lot with such a small thing. Being in control of your own environment” - Bastian

“Sometimes I receive a manual explaining how to solve a task, and as soon as I start I realize that by following this manual I'll be spending twice the amount of time as opposed to how I would solve it [...] A lot of us have an issue with the pyt⁴ button. If something doesn't make sense it makes it difficult for us to do” - Kristina

“[...] Where you place people to avoid too much activity and sensory inputs, not overstimulating the person” - Filip

“One thing that troubles me is uncertainty, what is going to happen” - Elias

“The majority of the challenges at previous jobs were related to the social stuff, planning and sensory input” - Isak

Furthermore, the communication between neurotypical and neurodivergent employees can be a challenge if it is not direct:

“They need to be aware that if they express themselves with sarcasm or a joke, they need to include body language so that it's communicated more accurately. Also, they may understand things differently, so if we don't understand it, they should ask if it's understood” - Hannibal

“They have to be more specific, because it might be difficult to understand the social context, so you might have to do it one on one. You should try to avoid saying generic descriptions” - Filip

⁴ “Pyt” is a colloquial word used to indicate that someone is letting go or looking past something. The Danish equivalent to “Oh well” or “nevermind”.

“Sometimes if I ask about two things, I only get an answer to one. Neurotypical people sometimes think it’ll make sense if they just give the answer to one thing [...] I’ve learned to become better at asking questions, like instead of sending a lot of questions at once, I instead make a list of questions and go by that [...] When I communicate with autistic co-workers, I always get an answer to the question I ask” - Kristina

These are some of the challenges but summed up autistic people face difficulties throughout the employment process, and still find aspects of working troubling once hired. Even though the individual needs vary there seems to be two main themes: communication and job-environment fit.

5.1.4 Thoughts on terminology

Stakeholders of the community want to redefine neurotypical perceptions of autism, ADHD, Tourette’s and other neuro-related diagnoses. One of the ways to do so is by embracing the neurodiversity and neurodivergent labels. Like with other minorities and communities, progress of the debate and movement can depend on the national context, which is why it is necessary to get feedback on the movement from a Danish context. The respondents were asked what term would describe them best, and had to choose from autistic, person with autism or neurodivergent. They also had the option to introduce a new term in case they felt more comfortable with that. Despite that, many respondents expressed an indifference to the usage of autistic person versus person with autism, which is one of the distinctions progressive stakeholders wish to make. Although, they did argue that using the term ‘autistic’ is a way of owning the diagnosis as suggested by the social model, whereas ‘person with autism’ caters to the medical model. One of the respondents who preferred using the term autistic explained the following:

“I’m autistic because I feel like autism is a part of me. It’s not something I got. I see myself as autistic, because it’s a fundamental part of me, it’s not something I can get rid of” - Kristina

Nonetheless, the respondents emphasized the importance of context rather than the actual term.

“If you use autistic, as long as it's not used in a hurtful way such as "It's because you're autistic" or "you're such an autist”” - Hannibal

“I have to admit, I don't really... For me a person with autism is autistic, so whatever. As long as we know what we are talking about, it's okay that many people don't understand how the spectrum has been divided, so that it is more inclusive” - Bastian

“I have no preference. I think autistic is harsher than neurodivergent, but I am on the spectrum, so I am autistic” - Christian

“I have referred to myself as an ‘asparagus, so I really don't take it too seriously” - Elias

“Some people associate autistic with a person who can't do anything, the classic infantile autistic person who is in their own world, so instead I sometimes say I have Asperger's to emphasize that I'm not one of them. But it depends on the situation” - Kristina

Some of the respondents answered they did not care about the terminology, but some even expressed the desire to refrain from using the terms:

“Well, I personally use autistic [...] but the most representative would be my name” - Abel

“I prefer to not be called anything except from something normal” - Daniel

When asked about their perception of the term “neurodivergent” as opposed to “autistic”, the majority of the respondents did not indicate familiarity with the term enough to actually use it. Some of the respondents acknowledged that the terminology changes as society develops in a more progressive direction, however, when asked about their thoughts on why Specialisterne chooses to use the term neurodivergent, all respondents expressed a level of understanding of the reason behind. Hence, even though they did not necessarily believe it was a term that they would personally identify with, some of

the respondents associated the term with a new norm aiming to obstruct the prejudices and stereotypes associated with autism:

“The word ‘autism’ has been used negatively in the past, while this is a new word, so it's more of a blank slate” - Hannibal

“I assume you use the term neurodivergent because that's what research says instead of autism, and it's a way to steer clear of the things relating to autism, the prejudices” - Filip

“I know that the CCO uses ‘neurodivergent’ to create a level of professionalism instead of using ‘autism’ because people associate that to the dude in the corner with the dish brush” - Abel

Other respondents expressed how ‘neurodiversity’ and ‘neurodivergent’ offer a broader perspective and more inclusion:

“I think it may be a good thing, because it helps to show that people have different diagnoses and different areas employers need to be aware of or be able to include in the tasks and positions, they post. So, it's a great umbrella term” - Christian

“Neurodivergent is a funny word, which doesn't glide off the tongue easily. But in my case it covers several diagnoses, which I think is really cool. It is important for me to emphasize that I am different by using words such as ‘neurodivergent’ or ‘autistic’, because things can go wrong if people assume I'm neurotypical” - Isak

“You can be in one way or another, so it's difficult to say autistic, because it's not that descriptive. When you say neurodivergent, it's just a way of saying people think in a different way” - Filip

“I feel like it's the opposite of neurotypical. It's a fancy way of saying you're normal, or placed to some degree along the normal spectrum, so if you're placed in the ends of the spectrum, it's a nice way to address it” - Elias

Some of the respondents acknowledged the term as a selling point, and a way to make it more attractive for corporations to engage with neurodiversity:

“If you want an umbrella term then diversity is better than divergent, even though both are true. You have to sell it with diversity” - Bastian

“When you talk about business or something like that and you go out to talk to people it's necessary to use the modern terms” - Filip

“I know that it sounds nice and fancy, so I get why you use that word, especially if you're trying to sell us” - Kristina

Lastly, some of the respondents did not particularly like the term. A few of the respondents offered some explanation:

“I think it's weird. I'd prefer a word that is easier to pronounce” - Gabriel

“I don't care for it, because I think it's too fancy. It's too textbook-like. Sometimes I might use neurotypical, but when you start using neurodivergent, I feel like you're distancing yourself from what it really is. I think it's too formal” - Kristina

“It sounds almost math-like. It sounds very formal” - Daniel

Judging by this very small sample size of respondents the neurodivergent/neurodiversity terminology does not seem to apply to everyone. The vast majority expressed a level of distance, but they also understood the need and purpose behind using the terminology. The same goes for preference in terms of ‘person with autism’ versus ‘autistic’. Therefore, it is not clear to me what terminology is most representative, as it depends on the individual and the given context.

5.1.5 Theoretical analysis of Autism and employment in Denmark

From this limited sample size, similar patterns to existing literature emerge. First, the motivation for seeking a job, or “help” from Specialisterne, is consistent with what global literature demonstrates. Having a job is a fundamental source of personal self-efficacy and self-image, and the financial aspects of employment rank lower on the list. The lower self-efficacy was also somewhat reflected in the insights concerning insecurities when “selling” themselves to a potential employer. Most of the respondents generally felt like they did not know how to combine their skills and strengths with what the employer was asking for.

Disclosing the diagnosis is a recurring dilemma for the respondents. The majority chose not to, but some expressed that they felt a need to do so as they would otherwise lose support or understanding from their coworkers and managers. The respondents who did not want to disclose mentioned stereotyping and stigmatization, and both positive and negative preconceived notions were harmful. This is also in line with what literature has observed in regard to topics such as sub-typing. The respondents expressed worries or fears of disappointing a potential employer, as they did not have any hidden talents or extraordinary abilities. Some of the respondents also gave insight that indicated participation in emotional labor as they are trying to hide or blend in with their surroundings, which in return could backfire as it puts the individual under unnecessary pressure and stress. Judging by the respondents’ feedback, in an ideal world the diagnosis would not play a role whether disclosed or not. However, based on their experiences, disclosing it up front seems to only encourage further stereotyping and stigmatizing.

The challenges as well as occupational strengths also follow existing literature. The respondents mention a variety of qualities and skills (such as attention to detail, extreme focus, pattern recognition), but they also report similar challenges from the work environment (such as ambiguous or generic communication, disturbing sensory input, social issues). One interesting perspective from Kristina also touches upon the autistic ability to innovate, which is often disregarded in work settings. Even though the other respondents did not comment on it, it would be interesting to look further into the innovative drive among neurodivergent consultants and/or employees at Specialisterne.

5.2 Specialisterne's work with consultants

When interviewed about Specialisterne's role, the respondents provided answers and insights that pointed towards two areas of interests. One is the handling of the diagnoses, and the other is more related to how they deal with their competencies and professional skills.

5.2.1 Diagnose

Specialisterne differs from other consultancy firms in the way they also embrace the psychological and mental needs of their candidates and employees. The respondents' feedback highlighted two distinct ways Specialisterne deals with their diagnoses. First, they help the individual, whether candidate or consultant status, to identify their weaknesses and obstacles pertaining to their diagnosis. Second, Specialisterne supports the individual, whether candidate or consultant, to look at their diagnosis from a more constructive perspective and see the opportunities rather than the roadblocks.

Obstacles and needs

Specialisterne offers a quite unique opportunity for their candidates and consultants as they integrate coaching and mentorship. To what extent the individual chooses to take advantage of those opportunities relies on the individual, but Specialisterne will still make themselves available to the person in case they need anything. This level of support is offered to candidates at the Academy, and to the consultants whether they are working in-house or out-placed somewhere. Some choose to actively use the resources, whereas others do not feel the need. However, the well-being of the candidates and consultants is important because it can distract the individual and get in the way of work (Project leader, Interview, March 28). When asked to further elaborate on Specialisterne's role and involvement with the individual's well-being, the project leader answered:

“Specialisterne are different in the sense that we take care of the whole person, so our focus is on creating a higher degree of predictability but also showing interest in their well-being, because it affects their ability to work. That is the case for all people, with or without diagnosis

[...] The typical employer would probably hold back, but we know it has such a big impact on the candidates and consultants, so if we want to appreciate them, we just can't rule that out” - Project leader

Specialisterne also conduct conversations along the way to check in with each person. How often those conversations happen depend on the individual person and how well they are doing. However, when asked about how Specialisterne has supported them, respondents gave similar answers:

“I know I always have somebody to contact, and that gives a me level of security and peace that I know they are in the background” - Christian

“[...] You had the option to talk to the project leaders about doubting oneself and one's capabilities [...] we were informed of that. Not only at the office, but also when you're out” - Abel

“They've offered some tools [frames], where you are able to make demands for yourself. They have a plan, but it's up to you whether you do it [...] They're always there if you're not fully aware of where you're going” - Bastian

“There was an episode where I felt stuck with a task, and usually I would just continue working on the task without going anywhere. But project leader 1 and project leader 2 helped me move forward” - Elias

Most of the respondents are the newest consultants to become employed, which means they have yet to be put on projects out-house. Therefore, their experiences are related to working in-house in the same office as the Specialisterne's project leaders. However, one of the respondents with outplacement experience noted:

“It was nice knowing if I didn't have that job [Company X] Specialisterne would help me find a new, but I didn't need the conversations after 6 months” - Hannibal

Another respondent talked about how he has become more social because of becoming employed with Specialisterne:

“I haven't necessarily become more social, but I'm more open to joining for lunch or Friday bars. I feel more comfortable now that I know I have a diagnosis, so it feels safer to be around the people I work with” - Jonathan

As described in the first part of the analysis, the motivation for a lot of the respondents to join Specialisterne was rooted in the desire to increase their chances of getting hired and to develop more relevant competencies and skills. However, one respondent offered an interesting perspective to his motivations, which had more to do with figuring out his new diagnosis:

“In my case, it's been about finding out what the diagnosis meant for me, and how to relate to it. The Academy helped with that [...] I have a better understanding of my diagnosis, how it affects me and what I need. To some extent I've been given tools to do better, and understand what I need to be aware of” - Christian

In Christian's case, mapping out his relatively new Asperger's diagnosis was a big factor to contact Specialisterne, but for others becoming more familiar with boundaries and needs they had not known about previously, was just another positive by-product of joining Specialisterne.

“I found out that I have a greater need for clear communication regarding time when things happen and so on. And I didn't know that [...] There were several times where I thought I'd break down but after a calming conversation with project leader I I was able to get back on track, and that has worked every time [...] I've had issues communicating when I felt stuck, but he was able to pull me to the side and help me communicate that [...] I learned how to say "when" and involve others” - Elias

There are currently two project leaders connected to the consultants and candidates. The one project leader I interviewed assists with more pedagogical resources and is involved with various aspects of

Specialisterne Solutions' services. His responsibility is to assess the individual's social, professional, and personal competences, and is therefore involved with recruitment, screening as well as coaching. The degree to which an individual needs help varies greatly, as some of them deal with other things, such as ADHD, anxiety, and depression. Some are medicated, while others are not (Project leader, Interview, March 28). The project leader offered more concrete insight into how they work with potential obstacles, misunderstandings, and blockages:

"We talk about communication, written and spoken communication. Understanding organizational structures. It can also be the consistency in meeting up for work, showing up on time. How do you understand a given task, is it better to get a written or oral task" - Project leader

Some of the most palpable issues relate to applying for jobs or going to job interviews. Therefore, Specialisterne helps their candidates and consultants (especially during the Academy program) to better navigate and overcome those hurdles. When asked about what the general problem seemed to be, the project leader answered:

"They find it difficult because they're often asked open questions, which can be difficult for autistic people to answer. It could be a traditional question such as "where do you see yourself in 5 years?" But it's also about the unwritten rules such as reading body language, trying to have a more open body language, because it helps to create a sense of friendliness" - Project leader

The project leader also noted similar difficulties as the respondents in relation to applying for jobs. More specifically, writing a resume can be an overwhelming task because the individual does not know how to sell their skills (Project leader, Interview, March 28). The project leader further elaborated on some of the unwritten rules and norms pertaining the job interviews that can be tricky for autistic people:

"Sometimes you have to lie a little bit. For example, you tend to be more flexible at job interviews. We care about their skills and competencies, but we also give them strategies to land a job interview. We don't teach them how to lie, but we offer them tools to a variety of situations" - Project leader

Strengths and opportunities

Specialisterne does not only provide tools to their candidates and consultants to help them overcome hurdles, but they also support their candidates and consultants to see the opportunities and become familiar with their own capabilities. One way to look at it is that the efforts are targeted towards strengthening the individual's confidence and self-image. One of the respondents explained the following:

“In regards to self-confidence, it [Academy] has definitely proved that it's possible to be working even though there's been a long period without. It doesn't mean it's all depression” - Bastian

In this particular respondent's case, he may have had reservations about entering the labor market, and considered his neurodivergent conditions (autism and depression) a big hindrance to his efforts. Other respondents pointed to similar perspectives. Where they might have had doubts about their perceived problems associated with their diagnosis (mainly autism), many come to view themselves in a different light.

“It wasn't until I joined Specialisterne that I considered it [neurodiversity] a gift and an advantage in any way” - Isak

“They exposed that you're actually freaking great when you've gotten over the first couple of hurdles, and afterwards it's going stable, smooth, and faster” - Abel

“You don't have to worry about the social issues which there could be in other places” - Filip

“I've proven to myself that I can work full-time which I didn't think I could for years, and I've learned more things than what I thought I could, and I've been more social than what I thought I could” - Elias

Some of the tools Specialisterne uses are simple exercises such as preparing a list of weaknesses and strengths, and then learning how to address those weaknesses in a constructive manner that does not scare off the employer (Project leader, Interview, March 28). This is often one of those invisible, implicit norms that autistic people may find difficult. As the project leader put it:

“One of the things autistic people tend to do is to mention the difficult things, but not the strategy”

- Project leader

By preparing them to answer these types of questions, Specialisterne also helps the individual to see the positive attribute rather than the negative, pathologized characteristic. Often candidates do not have work experience, and they might not have completed their education either, which further hinders employment. Therefore, by adding the Academy program to their resume, the candidate gets an opportunity to narrow the gap to some degree. Similarly, if the candidates or consultants have issues “selling” themselves, Specialisterne helps them to formulate a self-biography or a profile. The project leader explained the reason for doing so:

“It is important because it means a lot when you are in the workspace, so a potential employer is interested in who you are as a person. We write them together with input from the candidates. We try to discuss it, for example being solutions-oriented, perfectionist, social. We talk about the meaning, but also what impression it leaves with the employer” - Project leader, Specialisterne

By helping the candidates and consultants write biographies and professional profiles, they not only help them identify their personal strengths and capabilities, Specialisterne also helps them to understand how to present yourself in a favorable light from an employer’s perspective. It can help them build some confidence as it is more apparent to them what their selling points are.

5.2.2 Skills and competences

The other area in which Specialisterne supports their candidates and consultants is through the Academy, which serves as a training program where the individual gets an opportunity to specialize in a particular

skill or even discovers competences unbeknownst to the individual. During the Academy program the candidates also get coaching and support to their diagnoses as described in chapter 5.2.1. Sharpening the technical and professional skills may not be enough, which is why Specialisterne put efforts into handling the processes and steps relating to screening, recruitment, and on-boarding. While screening has more to do with Specialisterne's own requirements for intake of new candidates, the way they manage job interviews and on-boarding for in- or out-placed consultants is another way to aid a more inclusive agenda and eliminate the counterproductive dynamics that autistic people may otherwise face. Therefore, this chapter is divided into two themes: The Academy, and the screening/recruitment/hiring process.

Academy

The Academy is a program which runs for 12 consecutive weeks at the office in Ballerup. The vision is to have a new program and a new group of candidates every quarter. The content of the Academy revolves around the four professional paths that Specialisterne are currently specializing in (Data, Tester, DevOps, Programmer). However, the program also puts emphasis on intrinsic development. In the case where the individual may not have a clearly defined goal, the Academy offers a way to address it. When asked about how Academy helped develop competencies unrelated to a work-specific situation, one respondent described:

“[...] In terms of saying what can I become better at, and what to work towards to get to what I want to work with. What is my goal, what are my competences, what are my current strengths, and what I should work towards” - Filip

Some of the more hands-on competencies developed at Academy relate to the specific competencies Specialisterne has experience with. Specialisterne are aware of the type of skills clients are looking for, and for those reasons, it is important to assure the level of skills and usage during the Academy. However, a couple of respondents highlighted different practical skills in their interviews:

“It wasn't until I had to make a resume at Specialisterne that I realized what a great resume is [...] I've improved my programming skills, and I've learned a lot of new things, such as excel” - Elias

“There have been a couple of presentations... It was quite positive to get feedback on that” - Daniel

Other respondents talked about how the Academy has helped them bridge the gap between the theoretical, educational level and the real world. To a couple of the respondents, the environment, and daily routines at the Academy in the office in Ballerup offered a transition, which gave them a “taste” of what is expected out in the real world.

“Academy made me realize that I'm better at some technical skills that I didn't expect prior to coming here. I realized I knew more professional competences, but it also opened my eyes to non-professional aspects I wasn't as good at, such as stress” - Christian

“It's also being able to deal with change, things do not always go as planned. So in that sense it's a good thing to get introduced to” - Bastian

“It wasn't a problem. You have to challenge yourself, like if you encounter problems, how do you solve it” - Filip

The last statement is taken from a conversation about how it felt at times during the Academy when the two project leaders from Specialisterne did not have time or were unavailable for various reasons. Several respondents put emphasis on the transition phase because as we uncovered in the earlier part of the analysis, what employers claim they want you to do is often not what you are going to do. The neurodivergent brain may not deal well with that, and in general prefers structures that are clearly communicated and stable in the sense that the neurodivergent individual knows what to anticipate. The neurotypical brain compensates for that, and the ability to adjust to such situations is almost taken for granted by both employees and employers. Whether intentional or not, the Academy offers a simulated

office-situation where people converse in the public areas, strangers entering and leaving, people are preoccupied due to meetings and can therefore not attend the needs of an employee, noisy and crowded canteen⁵ and so on. Nonetheless, the Academy is still built up around a structure, which some of the candidates and consultants appreciated:

“They have a plan ready for you, what they want to see from you, what they expect to focus on, where are the jobs, and what type of positions there are [...] It felt great that it was out of my hands. They took care of the annoying part” - Bastian

“They send us weekly schedules including tasks, when to meet” - Christian

So the Academy in its purest form serves two purposes. One, which is to develop the candidates' professional, social, and technical abilities in a life-like work environment. Two, assure the “quality” and skills of candidates.

Screening, recruiting, and on-boarding

Specialisterne helps their candidates and consultants by taking care of the “annoying” things, as one of the respondents called it. As described in chapter 5.1.3 as well as the literature review, the initial stages of employment often prove to be the hardest to overcome. That includes writing a resume and going to interviews, both two activities that require the ability to “sell oneself” to the recruiter. If they manage to write a great resume and thereafter earn the job after a well-received job interview, on-boarding follows which can be a tumultuous transition for many neurodivergent people. These 3 steps are those that one respondent called “annoying”. Nevertheless, all steps are crucial in the pursuit of a job.

The first step usually requires the individual to reach out and contact Specialisterne. Specialisterne thereafter arranges a physical meeting, which usually lasts for an hour. The purpose of the meeting is to figure out if the individual is an appropriate match for the Academy. That is to be determined by the

⁵ Absolutely horrible food challenging not only neurodivergent employees, but neurotypical as well

personal characteristics, the educational background as well as the technical competencies. Prior to the physical meeting, the individual is asked to prepare a resumé, however, the resumé does not determine whether they get a meeting. Some of the respondents offered some insight into the first meeting:

“[...] We held a meeting where we aligned expectations, what type of jobs I'd be interested in, and what the salary could be in case of employment after the Academy. Because you want to make sure you're not too far from one another after attending Academy” - Christian

“It was comfortable, relaxed [...] His [project leader] personality, and the fact that there weren't too many requirements. He said it wasn't necessary to be officially diagnosed” - Daniel

This first meeting is referred to as the screening process at Specialisterne, and it is still under development. One aspect of the screening process that Specialisterne struggles with is whether or not they themselves exclude individuals who might otherwise have turned out to be strong candidates (Observation, Screening Process Workshop 1, March 8). Therefore, Specialisterne conducts internal workshops to optimize the screening process by rethinking their way of connecting with potential candidates and the requirements as well as deciding factors. Now, potential candidates need to submit a resumé, which can already become a problem to some neurodivergent people. Thus, Specialisterne are considering alternative formats for potential candidates to show off their competencies. This includes among others a “light” version of the tasks presented at the Academy, which would allow potential candidates to demonstrate their skills within the four so-called paths that the Academy follows (Observation, Screening Process Workshop 1, March 8; Observation, Screening Process Workshop 2, March 21).

Nonetheless, Specialisterne still insists on basic requirements that all potential candidates must have in order to be considered. Initially the requirements involve presenting a resumé of some sort and attending a first meeting in person at the office. During the first meeting additional requirements are assessed:

“We do have requirements such as the ability to meet for 25 hours a week, because we have difficulties selling someone who works less [...] We also have some basic requirements such as a

level of stability, ability to get to and from work on their own, because it might happen that you have to go see clients” - Project leader

Although these are the entry requirements to enter the Academy, Specialisterne supports their candidates (as well as consultants) in developing those skills. Some of the respondents offered some more insight to how they had been supported during the Academy:

“They helped me with job interviews [...] They have practiced with me prior to job interviews, and given feedback on what I could answer next time” - Daniel

“It wasn't until I had to make resume at Specialisterne that I realized what a great resume is” - Elias

“If you want help with the job interview, the option is there. For example, how can you become more familiar with the interview before going in terms of the challenges associated with autism” - Filip

Here it is important to make a distinction between candidates and consultants. As the Academy program comes to an end, the candidates will either receive a contract or not. If offered a contract, they will become consultants, and will continue to get support and sparring as they are offered in-house tasks or offered projects placed at the client’s office. If not offered a contract, the plan is that the now previous candidates will leave with more confidence, a better understanding of their competencies and skills, and more tangible work experience, which ultimately could lead them to finding a job on their own. As one of the respondents put it:

“The Academy can help a person with the way they deal with various tasks from a professional and mental standpoint, like structuring and solving them, as well as being challenged in the different aspects of having a job [...] Whether you get a job or not, I hope you're able to walk away with something from the Academy in terms of understanding one's position at the labor market better” - Christian

As candidates become consultants, they are now eligible for new projects and if deemed appropriate could be outplaced for shorter or longer periods with clients. It is therefore not the consultant himself (or herself) who is in charge of getting hired or performing at job interviews with external clients; rather it is Specialisterne who is in charge of that. Specialisterne introduces clients with potential “matches”, but ultimately makes the decision who would fit the task better. Thus, the client is not in charge of choosing who they believe is the most competent for their project. When a consultant is picked for a certain project, the consultant will then meet the manager or HR personnel representing the client, allowing both parties to meet in a less formal job interview. Even at this stage, Specialisterne still offers their support.

“When I went to the job interview with Company X the CCO attended [...] She was in the meeting, and helped translate what I was saying” - Hannibal

“She [CCO] was there to make sure the conversation was constructive” - Jonathan

When consultants become outplaced, Specialisterne are still present during the on-boarding period. When asked about their experiences, respondents gave similar perspectives:

“She [CCO] is going to be there to introduce you and show you around so you're not alone” - Bastian

“They prepared me before starting at Company X by being present during the recruitment and on-boarding process. It made me feel more secure that I had somebody I somewhat knew on the side lines, somebody who also understood the challenges [...] What helped me the most was that they were very present in the beginning, making sure we were in good hands” - Isak

“[...] So by skipping, not actually skipping, but as you're being led through the on-boarding process more smoothly, it is easier to shine and show one's actual competences” - Abel

Specialisterne are therefore present and responsible in all stages of the employment circle. The consultants do not need to worry about how to interpret job descriptions, how to sell themselves, or how to disclose their diagnosis. All those steps have already been taken care of.

5.2.3 Theoretical analysis of Specialisterne's work with consultants

Autism and neurodiversity

As per Brownlow et al. (2018), disclosing the diagnosis is easier said than done. The respondents talked about similar worries and experiences that were also reported in Brownlow et. al.'s study. Some respondents expressed how revealing their diagnosis could cause them to be rejected by a potential employer due to prejudices and negative stereotyping. However, a couple of the respondents also found it necessary because they would otherwise end up in a situation where their behavior or needs were misunderstood and judged.

Studies by Baldwin et al. (2014) on the motivation for autistic people to seek employment were similarly reflected in the respondents' answers, such as feeling like one is contributing to society, having something to do, feeling "normal", and independence. However, it is worth noticing that the Danish welfare model offers several financial initiatives, securing the individual's income and livelihood. If intrinsic values played a lesser role in the motivation for seeking employment, it could be hypothesized that autistic individuals would spare the efforts of applying for jobs.

Whether or not the respondents displayed a lower degree of self-efficacy can be difficult to determine as there is no average or median value to judge from. However, the respondents did give some insights into the difficulties that followed with job applications and interviews, where the questions seem to revolve around the same two things: what their competences are and contributions and are they good enough. That could point to a lower self-efficacy, but it is something that would have to be investigated further.

Diversity and inclusion

One way to look at Specialisterne's Academy is through categorization. As stated in the literature review, categorization can be a two-edged sword. On one hand, categorization is a way to quickly identify how a particular individual contributes to the organization. On the other hand, it can reinforce stereotypes or keep individuals "locked" in their category. In Specialisterne's case, they have decided to divide their Academy into "paths" (Data, Tester, Programmer, DevOps), which makes it easier for them to know where the individual candidate's abilities and skills lie. Categorization also helps Specialisterne when they are communicating with potential clients. By introducing the four "paths", the client might find it easier to understand and the resemblance to something they are already accustomed to is higher.

Another aspect of Specialisterne's work which makes them different is how they handle multiple processes on behalf of their consultants. In terms of identifying a match between a project or job position with a consultant, Specialisterne are in full charge of doing so. This means the consultant does not have to read through any more ambiguous job descriptions wondering what it all means and how they can "sell" themselves to the potential employer. Also, Specialisterne evaluates the consultants' personal competences, which allows them to make a qualified decision as to whether the person's personality would fit in with the given client and their organizational culture. By taking on the responsibility to match the client with the consultant, Specialisterne could eliminate the presence of unconscious biases that otherwise could have affected the process. Additionally, Specialisterne practices specific scenarios that can happen during job interviews with their candidates and consultants and offers palpable advice such as how to dress for a job interview or what body language to use. Specialisterne is therefore helping their consultants and candidates to understand the unwritten rules and norms that can be incredibly difficult to detect - even for neurotypical people.

Change management

Even though the major change happens with the client and on a societal level, Specialisterne still deals with their candidates and consultants in ways that indicate a change agency. As candidates attend the Academy, not only are their professional and technical qualifications upgraded, but they are also offered

tools to deal with mental obstacles and strategies to cope with the societal structures prescribed by neurotypical people. The point of the Academy is to move the individual in a better and more progressive direction no matter if they get offered a job with Specialisterne or not. One of the ways they contribute to that is by framing autism and other neuro-related disorders in a different light. That is done through the consistent use of terms such as neurodiversity and neurodivergent. Even though the respondents did not necessarily want to use the term to describe themselves, they all understood the value of it and how it moves the discussion in a different direction. The best outcome of that would be if the individual, rather than looking at the downsides of their autism (and other neurodivergent diagnoses) and all the obstacles associated with it, could turn it around and perceive it as a major strength adding value not only on a corporate level, but also to society in general.

However, the change management literature chosen for this paper is primarily concerned with stone cold management and is less concerned with the individual's progress. It could therefore be interesting to look at Specialisterne's impact on their candidates and consultants, and how they equip them with change agency. However, it would require a different type of literature which is more concerned with change on an individual level rather than the corporate level.

5.3 Specialisterne's work with clients

Although coaching, training, and supporting the autistic candidates and consultants are crucial parts of bringing inclusion to the labor market, it is simply not enough. It is only half of the solution. The other half is educating and supporting the labor market. During my research it became apparent that Specialisterne contributes to the diversity agenda in two major ways: through their unique services and talents, and through education.

5.3.1 The Autism Advantage

Specialisterne has a distinction that makes them unique, and that is their eye for neurodivergent talent. Specialisterne refers to this talent as the “Autism Advantage”. On their website, Specialisterne describe the autism advantage as follows:

“Meticulous, persistent, and innovative consultants. The autism advantage are the competences that your company benefits from when investing in autistic, or neurodivergent, employees. Like all other people, autistic people possess specific competences depending on their individual interests and skills. However, many share similar competences as they are reliable and persistent, and most of all — they are innovative. They are the specialists” - Specialisterne website

On their website, Specialisterne touches on three important aspects of neurodivergent talent. First, they try to identify the competencies and skills most often observed in neurodivergent, especially autistic people, such as “zero error tolerance” and long concentration span (Specialisterne, n.d.). Second, even though they try to communicate a level of stability and uniform competency profile, they still emphasize the individuality of each person by mentioning how hobbies and interests may have caused neurodivergent employees to develop skills within a specific field. And third, Specialisterne argues there is an observable positive spill-over effect in the overall team dynamic in the form of “[...] improved internal communication, production improvements, improved sense of teamwork, and higher degree of dedication to the workplace” (Specialisterne, n.d.).

On Specialisterne’s website one can access numerous former client cases. The structure on the website follows the services offered, meaning if you are looking for a recruitment program, you will be introduced to client cases that include recruitment. However, for this analysis I will divide the feedback into two categories: the actual skills and competencies of the consultants, and the positive impact on the team dynamic.

Competencies and skills

Judging by their clients' feedback, there is an overwhelming correlation between what Specialisterne (and literature) claim and what the clients experienced in terms of competencies and qualifications. All statements were retrieved from Specialisterne's website. Some of the typical autistic advantages were mentioned by several customers:

“The consultant approaches every single task with the same thoroughness and solves all tasks in the exact same manner [...] The consultant quickly notices errors that can be found in existing or new functions” - Semler Gruppen

“The consultant is a fantastic tester, who is stable, persistent, and always delivers great work on time, regardless of how complex the task is. You are never nervous about giving the consultant a task, because you can rest assured that it will be solved in the consultant's own way” - SDC

“Not only did the consultants expertly master using Microsoft Visio – they also had the ability to stay focused on the task even though it was very monotonous” - Sund & Bælt

“When they receive a task that is described in detail and steps, they perform it fast and accurately. They are enduring with big tasks, and they spot mistakes where others does not” - LEO Pharma

These are some of the few statements from former clients, and what they all seem to report back are the documented characteristics such as thoroughness, reliability, consistency, precision and exceptional attention to detail. Some of the clients noticed the way the consultants communicated:

“The consultant was also good at seeking clarification, when he ran into issues that stopped his work. He didn't like wasting time” - DA

“They are self-sufficient and correct data that they possibly deem as incorrect. Otherwise, they contact relevant co-workers and have them double-check” - LEO Pharma

Spill-over effect

One of the other positive outcomes of hiring neurodivergent employees is the improvement in team dynamics. Several of Specialisterne's former clients noted changes in their teams directly as the consultants offered alternative options or helped innovate processes:

“Our team has become more dynamic. Our new colleagues have a different approach to many things, and they inspire us to rethink our work and processes as well” - Nordea

“Overall, the consultants are incredibly fast at obtaining new knowledge and use it to create new products [...] Thanks to their contribution, 1 and 1 equals 3 in a process, none of us experienced IT folks have tried before” - SimCorp

“It might have taken a little longer than we expected. But suddenly it became apparent that he had spent time trying to make all things come together and then be able to do the tasks flawlessly” - Netcompany

“Not only did the consultants solve the tasks with great precision, endurance and a minimum of mistakes; they also provided useful suggestions for further optimization of the process” - IHFood

The spill-over effects mentioned by these specific clients relate to the productivity, efficiency, and innovation in teams. Other clients commented on the consultant's social abilities and compatibility:

“They work fine socially, and they can simultaneously help us with setting new standards for pattern recognition in our picture analysis of luggage” - Copenhagen Airport

“The consultant was very well functioning and a nice addition to our day-to-day. He liked being social with us, and clearly prioritized coming along to lunch and meeting early for common morning coffee on Friday mornings” - DA

5.3.2 Education

Specialisterne aims to educate their clients, and their goal is to leave their clients with tools and reflections that will spill over into other aspects of their organization, which ideally become a part of their future operations. Whether the educational efforts are fruitful depends on two things: bringing awareness and understanding to their clients and choosing clients who are mature enough to receive this knowledge. Therefore, two themes emerged relating to education: screening of the clients, and addressing diversity dynamics and change agency.

Screening clients

Specialisterne also goes through a screening process with potential clients. Part of the initial conversation is also to establish whether there is a common ground. For Specialisterne, it is imperative that the clients are willing to learn and educate themselves on neurodiversity. For that reason, it is not possible to omit the awareness sessions and just get the “product” or the service. The initial phase with a new potential client therefore evolves around aligning expectations and assessing the client’s maturity level (CCO, Interview, April 26).

Even though the ideal scenario is to work with clients who are all-in and invested, Specialisterne needs to deal with clients with a variety of backgrounds and motivations. The responsibility of matching clients with Specialisterne’s services largely relies on the CCO. The CCO explained why it is necessary to have the initial conversations:

“For me, it is only natural to figure out what the client wants, because the client might be in HR or someone involved with diversity and inclusion, so their purposes are different. We need to know what they want. Is it because of talent and manpower, or is it because they actually want their departments to better their understanding of diversity?” - CCO

Sometimes Specialisterne gets clients who initiate a change top-down, meaning several departments get involved at the same time. However, even though the support comes from top management, the departments sometimes function differently as needs and previous experiences vary:

“No clients are the same. Even within the same company the departments are different. They have their own culture, their own people. So, I care a lot about the individual department. It also gives us a better understanding of what's important to talk about. We talk about overall, general stuff, but the open dialogue is concentrated where the issues are. Some departments have no issues like ‘Oh, my daughter is also autistic’, so they're very open and understanding” - CCO

Therefore, Specialisterne must address the client and the respective departments at the level they are at. Some clients approach Specialisterne with support from their top management, and the decision has essentially been made on behalf of the departments. However, at other times the corporation is interested in the idea, but the responsibility to convince departments to allocate resources relies on Specialisterne:

“With the one solution they just let us know, but with the other solution we have to sell the product, and that's heavier, so we recommend that the decision is made from the top, and that's something we talk a lot about in the initial conversations. We look at the maturity model, where are they at the moment, where do they want to go, and it's obviously more fun to deal with those who decide to work with it on a bigger level, and not just hire two employees because that would save them money or because there's a gap” - CCO

Sometimes Specialisterne deals with potentially resistant clients. The resistance is rooted in a variety of reasons. One type of resistance comes from pure ignorance. The CCO recalled how a couple of times clients have asked what to do in case the consultant had a meltdown and started screaming. Another reason to resist is the possibility of potentially getting criticized for their own behavior and procedures. Lastly, some potential clients are afraid of mishandling or failing the autistic individual as they do not have the resources to accommodate their needs at a given time (CCO, Interview, April 26).

Addressing diversity dynamics and change agency

In terms of educating their audiences, Specialisterne includes awareness sessions for the client's employees, and they also offer a specific manager coaching program. The first lesson begins with terminology. Specialisterne consistently refers to their candidates and consultants as neurodivergent:

“There is a degree of stigma that comes with being autistic, which means it's not always positive. Therefore, by using a word such as divergent we remove ourselves from the stigma, but also embrace not only autistic people, but people who think differently [...]” - Project leader

By using a different terminology, it also makes it more comfortable for neurotypical people:

“Often they seem to like that they have a term like "Is it okay to say you're neurodivergent?" We actually want people to have an open dialogue about it, that it isn't a taboo. For some people it's easier with a term that is accepted by neurodivergent people as well” - CCO

When Specialisterne conducts awareness sessions, they take the participants through various aspects of neurodiversity and how it impacts the work environment. Even though the services are adjusted to the individual client, the presentations remain largely uniform. To start with, there are several slides explaining neurodiversity and more specifically autism.



OUR TAKE ON NEURODIVERSITY

Neurodiverse (ND) and neurodiversity refer to the infinite variation in cognitive functioning that can lead to **differences in thinking, attention and memory.**

Neurodiversity is not just considered a disability by neurodivergent individuals; a good description is simply **'thinking differently'**.

Neurodiversity is an umbrella term for a set of differing skills profiles, including autism/Asperger's syndrome, dyslexia, dyspraxia and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

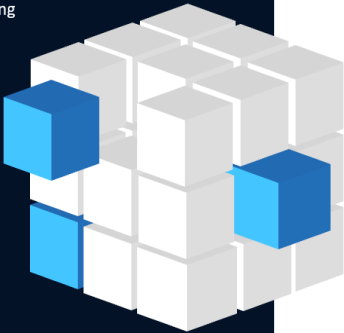
While not all neurodiverse employees will display the same skills profile, there are common themes. A neurodiverse worker will often have **distinct peaks** in their skillset and **distinct dips**.

+15 per cent of any workforce will be neurodiverse, 10 % of the UK population is dyslexic, 1-2 % is autistic, 5% has ADHD and 5-10 % has dyspraxia

THE AUTISM ADVANTAGE

People on the Autism Spectrum are often known for:

- Independent thinking
- Excellent math & computer skills
- Orientation to Detail
- High level of perseverance



People on the autism spectrum solve problems **60% faster** than neurotypical peers.

Source: Harvard/Univ of Montreal Study, 2016

Roughly **44%** of people with ASD have average or above average intelligence.

Source: US Centers for Disease Control, 2014

High retention rate
Loyal employees, not motivated by status and large compensation

The ideal labor force in companies that can't afford to say **oops**

SPECIALISTERNE
Passion for details

(Source: Specialisterne)

These slides are followed by a thorough description of various challenges and factors that may have a negative impact on the individual. Specialisterne then goes through various tools and points of attention, which can help the co-worker and manager in dealing with neurodivergent employees.

LEADERSHIP AWARENESS STRATEGIES

Points of attention in the management of neurodivergent and neurotypical employees:

- Communication
- The way we, as humans, perceive the behavior of others
- Understand the individuals needs and behavior
- Diversity in the way people in a team think and approach tasks
- See the employee's talent and keep an eye out for possible challenges
- Pay attention to how you organize the work and convey the tasks to the individual and for the team
- Create an open and trust-filled environment where you can communicate openly about needs and challenges
- A manager does not always have the answer to everything – but you can always ask and start a dialogue
- It is you, as a manager, who shows the way



POINTS - PAY ATTENTION TO

Diversity in the way people in a team think and approach tasks

Management	What to do	Awareness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Try to understand the individual and your team ✓ See the employee's talent and keep an eye out for possible challenges ✓ Create an open and trust-filled environment where you can communicate openly about needs and challenges ✓ Demonstrate inclusiveness and meet challenges ✓ Use dilemmas and inconsistencies to gain more insight and understanding of your employees' behavior ✓ It is you, as a manager, who shows the way 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Clear communication ✓ Balanced workload ✓ Tasks well scoped and suited to individual strengths ✓ Reasonable deadlines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Do not let yourself be controlled by the fear of dealing with a conflict ✓ Make up for the "pleaser urge" ✓ Manage conflicts instantly. Ask questions, but also cut through ✓ Build a culture that has an eye for talent that can accommodate diversity

SPECIALISTERNE
Passion for details

(Source: Specialisterne)

If the material is aimed at managers, the slide show will also include several exercises that are called cases. The cases can be formulated by Specialisterne based on their own experiences, but they also reflect real-life dilemmas that the client, or manager, faces in their team. I have included an example of a case below.

CASE 01



During a joint meeting with all team leaders, a major organizational change is to be announced. You are told that the change has not yet been announced in the organization. You do not yet know if your employees will be affected by this change. E.g.: if they will stay in existing teams, be laid off / relocated or get a new manager. Your team consists of 4 neurotypical employees and 1 neurodivergent employee.

When you meet your neurodivergent employee in the common office, he or she says aloud: "What is going to happen to me now? What will the organization's change mean? Am I being fired?"



What do you do as a manager?
What action options do you see?



Information

- Choose a representative who can present the case and your work
- Read the case and discuss what each of you would do
- Feel free to share your experiences from similar situations and the challenges you see.
- Discuss relevant actions
- Choose which one of the actions you prefer and use it for the presentation




SPECIALISTERNE
Passion for details


(Source: Specialisterne)

The purpose of conducting awareness sessions is to educate the participants on autism and neurodiversity, and possibly address potential misconceptions and prejudices. Therefore, the autism advantage slide, which highlights the occupational strengths. The awareness sessions educate on both the strengths and qualities of neurodiversity, but also the daily actions and conditions in a work setting that can cause stress and discomfort to the individual.

THE AUTISM ADVANTAGE



- A rare passion for details
- Thoroughness, concentration, sees the task through
- High quality – only the best is good enough (zero tolerance for errors)
- Focus on the task – not the process
- Logic fact based approach
- Taking on repetitive task with great endurance
- Pattern recognition, the ability to discover deviations in data and systems
- Honesty


SPECIALISTERNE 
Passion for details

TYPICAL SIGNS AND CHALLENGES

- Lack of eye contact
- Locked on details
- Communicative misunderstandings (concrete, imagery, irony, Smalltalk)
- Can have challenges with body language and unwritten rules (decode intentions)
- To express needs and dreams
- Executive functions



- Can have difficulties with changes and have rigid behavior
- Lack of filter = stress-sense sensitive
- Eating situations
- Public transport
- Limited social network
- Low confidence
- Other diagnoses

SPECIALISTERNE 
Passion for details

(Source: Specialisterne)

By doing so, Specialisterne brings awareness to the things that are taken for granted in neurotypical context, such as sensory distractions in terms of light and noise, or what impact it has on a neurodivergent employee when there is a deviation in the plan or daily procedure. The purpose is not only to educate participants, but also to equip them with tools and strategies to better handle tricky situations. In that sense Specialisterne breaks down the management of neurodivergent people, making it easier to act on as an individual. It is rather detailed, and the audience should be able to immediately identify one or two things they could effectively change from day to day. The awareness session tends to close with a slide for reflection as shown below.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What can we afford to say and what can we not?
- How is our behavior and how do we communicate?
- How do we manage NT and Neurodivergent employees? Is there a difference ?
- Are we as managers aware of how we affect other people and what our behavior does?
- What do we mean by good leadership?
- How do we deal with dilemmas and conflicts as managers?
- What do we do when we experience a challenge that seems difficult to solve?
- What can we, as managers, do to include all employees?
- How do we as managers deal with diversity?
- How do we achieve the best performance among our employees?
- What can we, as managers, do to create a well-functioning team?

SPECIALISTERNE
Passion for details

(Source: Specialisterne)

5.3.3 Theoretical analysis of Specialisterne's work with clients

Specialisterne acts as a change agent in the way they deal with their clients, and in their work, they incorporate elements of change management strategies as well as diversity and inclusion concepts. To avoid a muddy analysis, I have divided this section into the three different streams of literature.

Autism and neurodiversity literature

One study from Australia conducted by Baldwin et. al. (2014) reported a very high percentage of autistic people who did not receive support for their diagnoses at their workplace and suggested what kinds of accommodations could be made to better facilitate autistic employees. Some of those adjustments were flexible hours, controlling sensory inputs, coaching, and mentoring, and modification of job descriptions. These are all accommodations that Specialisterne practices not only at their office, but also recommendations they pass on to their clients in a recruitment or on-boarding context. The other study conducted by Spoor et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of educating the teams that are involved with the autistic employee. Specialisterne are clearly agreeing with those observations, as they make awareness sessions mandatory. Based on their experience, simply sending a consultant to a client to solve a task is not a success, and it is therefore necessary to involve managers and co-workers to secure the right work environment for the consultant.

An overwhelming amount of global literature points to beneficial aspects of autistic employees (Lorenz & Heinitz, 2014; Hayward et al., 2019; Scott et al., 2019). Specialisterne refers to those competences as the Autism Advantage, and the strengths and opportunities are clearly communicated to external stakeholders and clients. Whether you are looking at Specialisterne's website or attending an awareness session, Specialisterne makes sure to educate their audiences on the occupational strengths, but also the obstacles that are often taken for granted. However, it is not enough to communicate it; it is necessary to provide those competences and professional skills, otherwise Specialisterne will not be able to sustain their services. At the Academy, Specialisterne gets the opportunity to accurately assess the individual's strengths and opportunities, but also to further develop those skills that are the Autism Advantage.

Diversity and inclusion

Specialisterne sometimes refers to their consultants as specialists both on their website (Specialisterne, n.d) and in a commercial video (Specialisterne, 2021). Even though it is not clearly stated why, it can be considered yet another way to address the pathological perception of autistic behavior. Take the abilities to concentrate and explore things for longer periods. On one hand it can be considered a hindrance by some because the autistic employee is perceived to be too involved and potentially stuck, but on the other hand it is also an amazing ability as the individual is able to work intensively without becoming distracted. By using a different term, Specialisterne creates a new narrative and positions the autistic characteristics positively. Furthermore, the reflection slides are a discrete norm critical element. By asking the participants to reflect, and essentially defend, on their norms and structures, Specialisterne potentially plants a seed of norm criticism.

As described by Mensi-Klarbach & Risberg (2019), opposition to diversity comes in levels, and the hardest level to address is organizational opposition because it is ingrained in the corporate practices all over the organization. Through their awareness sessions, Specialisterne addresses the organizational opposition discreetly by pointing out attitudes and daily practices that are excluding neurodivergent talent either from getting hired or thriving in the workplace. The awareness sessions also educate the individual, and as the CCO pointed out, sometimes the opposition reflects the individual's mismatched ideas of autism, fears of failing, or uncertainty as to if they need to change their own behavior. Awareness sessions therefore function as a tool to dismantle all the excuses. Even before signing a contract, potential clients can read client testimonials on Specialisterne's website, which may ease the hesitations. Furthermore, over the past few years Specialisterne has introduced a mix of two services: consultancy and recruitment. By offering clients the possibility of starting off with consultancy work, the fear of failing or misaligning expectations can be reduced. Essentially what Specialisterne is saying is: if it does not work out, no problem; if it works out, great! By adding the on-boarding consultancy service to their portfolio, Specialisterne has found one way to convince some of the skeptics.

Change Management

As the CCO described, Specialisterne assesses their clients early in the process in terms of maturity. Furthermore, their clients may have different interests and motivations for engaging with Specialisterne, and it is therefore important to determine what mindset the client has. Therefore, Specialisterne's way of handling clients somewhat follows the management levels as described by Mensi-Klarbach & Risberg (2019). The initial meeting is to understand the client on a normative level. The conversation also involves the strategic level, as the client is asked to identify their expectations. In that sense, Specialisterne tries to assess if the client is coming from a strategic, functional, or episodic strategy. As the process moves forward, the client is then introduced to awareness sessions, where the content touches upon the normative as well as the strategic level again. Even though Specialisterne has a clear preference for clients with a systemic strategy, they mainly deal with clients with functional, and to some degree episodic approaches. For the operative level, Specialisterne makes it clear that they can assist HR with procedures and protocols, however, it is a service that is not included automatically. The client therefore has to ask for it, and as a result the operative management level is somewhat up to the individual client.

When held up against Weick & Quinn's (1999) perceptions of change, Specialisterne deals with both episodic and continuous change. Specialisterne have a clear preference for clients who are engaging with a continuous change, but reality is a lot of their clients approach them as an episodic change initiative such as recruitment for specific positions or hiring consultancy services for a specific project. The change agent's role in an episodic change context is to act as a prime mover, and one of the strongest tools available is their communication. For continuous change the objective is to help address smaller dynamics and everyday occurrences that either hinder or aid a change agenda.

Specialisterne works with their clients in both ways, but one focal area is the communication. Specialisterne affects their clients by changing the language used to talk about autism, and by encouraging dialogue around the topic. The awareness sessions vary in size but are typically limited to specific departments with an attendance of 8 to 20 employees. The sessions are therefore targeting a very specific audience, consisting of the people who will be most involved in the process, which correlates with the theory on episodic change agents. However, the awareness sessions invite the participants to

talk about their reflections in plenum. The CCO emphasized there is not a right or wrong answer, but the aim of the case discussions and reflection questions is to push participants in a direction where they are more attentive to their own actions and how it potentially hinders or encourages neurodivergent employees (CCO, Interview, April 26). In that sense, Specialisterne act as change agents dealing with continuous change. Another aspect of Specialisterne's role as a change agent is how they empower managers to become change agents themselves.

Summarizing their strategies and tools, Specialisterne approaches their clients depending on their mindset towards their strategy (systemic, functional, or episodic) and change in general (episodic or continuous). Even though the clients differ, Specialisterne tends to operate on basis of a logic of attraction, where the focus is to change the smaller and more implicit parts of daily operations, such as language and norms. This is done via their website, their written 'insights', and their services. Specialisterne introduces the audience to a new type of conversation, new terminology, and new perspectives. However, if the client wishes to change their organizational procedures or optimize their processes, which is a logic of replacement, Specialisterne can help with that as well.

6. Discussion

When it comes to neurodiversity and autism, there is a lot that can be said and discussed. I believe it is imperative that Specialisterne's work, and impact is discussed, as the research question revolves around exactly that. The first part of the discussion addresses limitations. The second part discusses the impact of Specialisterne's work. The last part is dedicated to recommendations.

6.1 Limitations

6.1.1 Limited sample size and access to subjects

Due to the modest sample size, it is difficult to confidently make any conclusions that are representative in a general perspective. This paper is a snapshot in the sense that it provides a better understanding of a concentrated group of people in a particular setting. It does not offer an appropriate insight into what it is like to be autistic in Denmark anno 2022. In the ideal world I would have conducted interviews with

all Specialisterne's consultants, whether they were employed in-house or outplaced with clients, however, due to the limited time frame and ethical considerations, it has not been possible to reach out to all their consultants. It would also have been useful to get more insight from previous consultants or candidates, but due to GDPR laws and the ethical aspects of "cold-calling" it was not an option. Both categories of interview subjects could provide Specialisterne with substantial insight on their operations and potentially the areas that need more attention.

Likewise, I would have conducted my own research and interviews with clients. The feedback I have used for this paper was provided by the clients both parties had mutually agreed to, and it is therefore potentially a one-sided perspective as it is used as sales material available on Specialisterne's website. It would have been more useful if I had been able to ask in-depth questions about the process, cooperation, and communication with Specialisterne. However, one of the unfortunate realities of diversity and inclusion work is that people working in those positions tend to shift jobs (which is also explained in literature by Mensi-Klarbach & Risberg, 2019), and it is therefore difficult to get a hold of the person who is either in charge of the area, or the person who was involved with the project. Furthermore, former clients may not be interested in getting interviewed if they have had any negative experiences or made realizations about their organization that compromises their brand or self-image. For those reasons, I have not been able to get access to clients.

6.1.2 Autistic memory and question structure

During my interviews I noticed an overall difficulty recalling or reflecting on the respondent's own person as well as their experiences relating to past employment. Very few respondents were able to give insight into past experiences with co-workers or employers, which leaves that area of my data rather weak. This could either be due to the respondents not experiencing any issues worth mentioning, but it could potentially be due to poor autobiographical and episodic memory. Whereas autistic people exhibit outstanding memory when factual information is involved, the ability to store experiences and feelings relating to a specific event is considerably weaker. Recalling episodic events can therefore be hindered

in autistic people. Similarly, autistic people tend to self-reflect less than neurotypical people (Bowler, 2014; Goddard, 2016).

One study explores episodic memory in autistic people, and they demonstrated how the usage of what they call unsupported question structures make it difficult for autistic people to answer (Norris & Maras, 2022). An example of this type of question structure is: “Please explain what happened”. Reflecting on my choice of question structure, I recognize how I have asked questions of that nature. One takeaway from my research is therefore when questioning, or interviewing, autistic people it is necessary to consider that they may experience difficulties answering questions if they are either too vague and general, such as the unsupported question structure, or if the event or experience happened in the past. Studying autistic employment therefore require a higher degree of precision, both in terms of the timing and the nature of the question.

6.2 Impact of Specialisterne’s work

To answer my research question properly, I must take a further look into Specialisterne’s work and the various aspects that either contribute or hinder their agenda. From afar their business and contributions look successful, however, throughout my research I have picked up on areas within or outside Specialisterne that deserve attention. As I am aware of the national context, I also must address the specific elements that may be contingent to Denmark.

6.2.1 Measuring and defining goals

As most of the literature on autism and employment indicates, exact data on employment is incredibly difficult to obtain due to a variety of reasons. First, there is an overwhelming population of autistic people that remains undiagnosed. Second, research does not follow individuals throughout their professional lives. Third, successful retention of autistic employees is less studied. Fourth, studies tend to only count

in full-time employment. Five, there is no standardized norm or measure, meaning studies report and research according to their own interpretations and formulations.

Specialisterne Solutions' definition of employment covers the consultants that work in-house, the consultants that are out-placed, individuals recruited on behalf of a client, and consultants who have become on-boarded with a client and later employed by them. However, Specialisterne also considers it employment in two more cases: 1) if a candidate who did not get offered a contract after finishing Academy manages to go out and find a job on their own afterwards, and 2) if a consultant gets employed elsewhere on their own while employed with Specialisterne. Therefore, Specialisterne's definition of successful employment is rather broad, which makes it more difficult to measure and validate. Nonetheless, Specialisterne's philosophy and corporate DNA is to increase overall neurodiversity in the labor market, meaning if they assist an individual, one way or another, in pursuing a job elsewhere, it is considered a success to them. In other industries or contexts, this type of argumentation would not persist. Especially if the claims could not be supported with data that either proved a change in the individual's attitude and self-confidence, or an upgrade of their professional skills.

Some diversity and inclusion experts would probably criticize the lack of concrete numbers and statistics. Due to my employment, I am aware of initiatives aiming at collecting data from all the global Specialisterne hubs to compare statistics on employment. However, questions arose during my employment, such as do they know how many are retained and thriving with clients who chose to recruit through Specialisterne? On their website it says 95%, however, where do those numbers come from? Do they collect data and recommendations from former consultants and candidates to explore potential blindspots? On their website it also says that they educate 40-60 new candidates per year, which would mean each program had 10 to 15 candidates. Now, that is not the reality as the Academy is a fairly new initiative. Despite the Academy program showing promising results, I wonder where the number comes from as it is not representative of the status quo. It may be the vision to reach 40-60, but as of now, the number is considerably lower.

6.2.2 Socio-economic identity

Specialisterne's socio-economic status puts them in an eternal paradox. The 'socio' aspect is to advocate for neurodiversity and its stakeholders, however, the 'economic' aspect points to profit and the ability to remain competitive. It comes to show in different ways. On one hand, Specialisterne wants to challenge their clients and external stakeholders to move in a more inclusive direction. They do this through their awareness sessions, managers programs, and insights on their website. On the other hand, Specialisterne still must cater to the client and respect their requirements. They have to remain realistic when screening, training and hiring people. If the client needs a consultant who is skilled in a specific area, Specialisterne needs to find someone appropriate. Therefore, the occupational profiles offered by Specialisterne depend on the demand. If all clients inquiry about STEM-relevant skills, it would be problematic to Specialisterne's business if they did not have enough consultants for those tasks, or if their consultants did not possess the appropriate skills. However, if Specialisterne does not expand their portfolio of competences and profiles, they will not be able to attract clients within other industries, which could slow down their competitiveness at some point.

This is a paradox of being a socio-economic corporation. Nonprofits and charities try to change the structures reinforcing outdated norms, and therefore have more leverage as they are not dependent on generating profit. Their societal stance is that every person has a right to be included, and it is the corporate world and employers who need to change their position on employability to include neurodivergent individuals. Specialisterne rely on their ability to match the right talent and services with their clients. In the process of doing so, Specialisterne may adhere to some of the very same norms they are trying to change, as they otherwise may drive away the client.

6.2.3 Expanding the perception of neurodivergent competences

Specialisterne is selling inclusion of neurodivergent employees as a business case. Their consultants are highly efficient, innovative, and their attention to detail is immaculate. However, making autism a business case is another way of reinforcing stereotypes and outdated opinions. For instance, say the

consultant working at Specialisterne performed at the same level and at the same speed of a neurotypical consultant. What would the selling point then be? Even though Specialisterne is a strong, loud voice in the debate and in a lot of ways a trailblazer, at some point they must ask themselves the question: What do we do if our consultants are just like everybody else? What do we do if our services are of the same quality and same standard as neurotypical people? In the event of choosing between two consultants, one neurotypical and one neurodivergent, how can we make sure that the default choice does not fall on the neurotypical consultant every time? Specialisterne therefore has to be aware of how much they contribute to sub-typing of autistic people. Are they advocating for all, or are they advocating for those who are better or faster than the norm?

Specialisterne might want to ask themselves how comfortable they would feel if one of their project managers or student assistants (for instance) was autistic. Now, the vast majority of neurodivergent full-time employees are consultants, and a few works in other departments such as IT and economy - two fields of work that are considered 'autism appropriate'.

6.2.4 Reliance on local governments

One of the issues with employment of autistic people is the lack of understanding from the very own institutions and initiatives that are in place to support them with just that. Naturally, there are variances depending on the national context, however, even in Denmark the institutions seem to fail the autistic community. Some of the respondents commented on it when asked about what they believed could be improved about the Academy:

“The local government has been a big problem. They didn't approve of the Academy, so I had to convince Specialisterne to call it an internship instead, because that could easily get approved since it's for free [...] They don't understand that Specialisterne actually helps people getting jobs. They said I was already in a program that offered the same things” - Bastian

“6 months went by because of lots of back and forth with the local government” - Daniel

“I have had a long struggle with Copenhagen municipality. They didn't really wanna help [...] They didn't want anything to do with this” - Filip

Even though Specialisterne Solutions are not in direct contact with the local governments, they are still highly dependent on the relationship between the responsible employee representing Specialisterne and the local government. One employee from Specialisterne described the factors that contributed to a troubled process as a general lack of education and knowledge of neurodiversity, prolonged and slow procedures, lack of financial resources, and a lack of understanding of what actually works in real life (Specialisterne employee, e-mail correspondence, May 6th 2022).

6.3 Recommendations

Based on my research and interviews, recommendations for Specialisterne will be divided into two major themes: the consultants' feedback and my own. I believe it is necessary to include the perspectives of the consultants as their voices play a crucial role throughout this paper. Their recommendations are based on their personal experiences. Afterwards I will present my recommendations for Specialisterne, which are based on the data I have collected.

6.3.1 Consultants recommendations

The consultants provided very valuable insight into areas that may need more attention from the neurodivergent individual's perspective. Most of the respondents have attended Academy (six respondents), but five of them had just recently “graduated” from the program and are currently on their first consultancy project with Specialisterne. Therefore, they cannot offer enough representative feedback relating to working as a consultant. However, three of the respondents have been with Specialisterne for a considerable amount of time and have been on different projects. Lastly, one respondent has been recruited directly on behalf of a client, and he could therefore not provide any recommendations relating to the Academy nor the consultancy projects.

The Academy

One of the recurring themes with the respondents is development, both professional and personal. Many of the respondents expressed how they wanted to be challenged on their technical capabilities throughout the Academy process:

“If you want to test yourself professionally, the range of complexity in tasks isn't that broad. So in that regard, more challenging tasks could be added” - Christian

“I was missing a task that was motivating, interesting, and relevant professionally [...] They could've helped me a bit more to figure out what I want to do and what motivates me” - Daniel

“It would be nice with some more development of competences” - Filip

“I don't know if the program is too short, because there are certain topics and tasks that we just flew past, which I felt we could've talked more about. It seemed a bit too hectic” - Elias

Some of the feedback related to a perceived gap between what is taught at the Academy and what will eventually be relevant in the “real world”. Quite a few respondents felt they were not exposed to a realistic picture of what employment outside of Specialisterne could potentially look like. Some of the insight included:

“We didn't do a lot of group work, it was more individual. They could've focused more on that, because you will eventually encounter that” - Filip

“If you show up at the Academy and there are no deadlines or demands concerning how we structure the tasks, and you then do a good job, it might feel weird that the demands all of a sudden are completely different [...] Aligning expectations in terms of how much Academy represents the real world can be difficult” - Christian

“There could've been more focus on tools that are used in companies. We've worked with Excel, but it doesn't seem like that ranks high on their [companies] list of desired skills” - Daniel

The respondents' commented on the lack of specialization within the competencies, which is also something that the CCO and project leader mentioned. From the respondents' point of view, the Academy (as well as the consultancy services) could include more “paths”:

“It would be cool if we could get some of the more "softer" competences into play” - Bastian

“It wasn't an option to say ‘Hey, I've tried it, it didn't work, I still have half of the way to go, could I do something else in the meantime?’ That wasn't possible, because they wanted us to go through them all, which is also okay, but I think they should consider adding that option, because they were also aware of my competences and that I wasn't interested in going through the other categories” - Abel

“It seems like it gets boiled down to either you are good enough at programming and that's what you'll do then, otherwise we'll go down the data path. So it seems like it's boiled down to those two” - Elias

Overall, two “themes” of feedback relating to the Academy emerged. One being the lack of alternative “paths”, and additional development of competencies and intrinsic motivational goals. The other theme is the perceived discrepancy between the Academy environment and an actual employer out in the real world.

Specialisterne also offers some feedback as to how the Academy could be improved, and it follows the same pattern as the consultants. Specialisterne is aware of some of the gaps in the program such as the lack of group work, and the narrow specialization within specific profiles (Project leader, Interview, March 28; CCO, Interview, April 26). Specialisterne is currently revising their initial screening process, and they are also increasing the complexity of the various “paths” in the Academy. How soon Specialisterne will introduce a potential new path and what type of profile it caters to is unknown.

Becoming a consultant

Some respondents still noted a lack of further development after the Academy program as they became full-time employees.

“[...] I wished they had more focus on the consultants that want to develop their professional competences, and their weaknesses and strengths relating to their diagnosis, so they get tools and strategies to become a better employee. My impression as of now is that when you are working full-time at Specialisterne your day is rather busy, and there's a lot of things to take care of, but I could have wanted more employee development” - Christian

Other respondents pointed out the lack of long-term projects and overall consistency in work:

“I have been put on many different tasks. Every task has been different [...] Every place has asked me to use different programs [...] It's very frustrating” - Gabriel

“It's a shame that I've gone a year without a project” - Hannibal

Another valuable insight was delivered by one of the experienced consultants, who have witnessed Specialisterne's journey since her arrival:

“They've changed their strategy a lot. We've always been very easy-going, there were always enough tasks for us, but never specialized within a field. I feel like now we're specializing [...] I think we've moved too close to "specialists", and forgotten someone like me, who have these abilities that are not necessarily the easiest to sell” - Kristina

This particular insight refers back to some of the feedback from consultants who had attended the Academy as well as Specialisterne's own criticism, which is: Have we become too narrow and specialized, and are we rejecting talent because of that? It also touches on a previous point made in

chapter 6.2.3, which is are Specialisterne contributing to sub-typing and reinforcing stereotypes to some degree?

6.3.2 Author's recommendations

My recommendations are rooted in my own observations mixed with data collected throughout the project. The data is a mix of literature and research on autism and employment in general, but also perspectives and insights provided by the respondents. The objective is to inspire dialogue and conversations, which hopefully contribute constructively to Specialisterne's efforts in creating a more inclusive labor market.

Implement feedback cycles

As stated in the limitations chapter gaining insight into this topic depends on access to the involved parties as well as precision in timing and questioning. From my time working at Specialisterne, it does not appear to me that they have implemented fundamental feedback cycles with their clients or their consultants except from a couple of private conversations here and there. During the Academy and after being outplaced, many of the respondents expressed a level of familiarity and safety-feeling with Specialisterne, which is naturally a healthy sign of trust and support. However, respondents also pointed towards a lack of further personal development. It would also be interesting to look at the consultants that either got hired elsewhere without the help of Specialisterne, had their contract discontinued, or simply did not get a contract offered at the end of an Academy program. Those three groups of subjects could provide Specialisterne with valuable insight into their own potential flaws. If the main objective of Specialisterne is to generate more inclusion of neurodivergent individuals, it is necessary to look inwards and examine their own procedures.

The same goes for corporate clients. Specialisterne needs to gather more information on their own role and how they could potentially improve their services. According to literature on rejection and opposition (Mensi-Klarbach & Risberg, 2019), it is essential to the diversity and inclusion agenda, because if people have negative experiences with a particular project, it naturally creates a dismissive attitude towards that

particular agenda. Specialisterne need to keep in mind that they are not only representing themselves, but also the neurodivergent community. Their potential missteps may leave the client with an impression of what neurodiversity is, which could hinder similar initiatives unrelated to Specialisterne. The feedback cycles could either be a direct communication between the client and Specialisterne, but it could also be a group session where the involved employees and managers from the organization discuss what they have experienced, what dilemmas they have encountered, and what changes they have undergone. This type of activity would be in line with the operative level, which is explained by Mensi-Klarbach & Risberg (2019).

Push the social model further

Even though Specialisterne aims to educate their clients on neurodiversity, I believe they can push the envelope even further. Due to their socio-economic status, Specialisterne is navigating between two agendas that are seemingly different from one another. It is therefore naive to think that Specialisterne would be able to generate the same profit solely on an activist agenda. Nonetheless, I recommend Specialisterne provoke their clients more than what they already are. As I have not attended an awareness session or a management program myself, it is difficult to speak on the depth of reflections made at the sessions. From the included powerpoint slide showing reflection questions, Specialisterne touches on norm criticism by asking their participants to think about what they do and why they do it. I believe it would be interesting to go deeper with the reflection questions, and include more overall norm critical questions such as:

- “What does attire mean to us, and why does it matter?”
- “What does ‘being social’ mean to us, and is it standardized and uniform?”
- “Does it bother us if people are socially awkward or different from us? Why/why not?”
- “Would we be comfortable with a manager who is autistic? Would we be comfortable basing a decision on an autistic employee’s recommendations?”
- “Are there any aspects of our daily routines and corporate culture that are excluding?”
- “Is this a separate, episodic event or is this the beginning of a new culture?”

- “How does it make us feel when we encounter individuals who do not follow the norm? And why?”
- “What are you personally doing to create a more inclusive environment?”
- “Would be hire a neurodivergent person if their performance was the same as a neurotypical employee?”

By asking heavier questions Specialisterne may face opposition, but that is only a natural part of change. The role of Specialisterne as a change agent is to inspire their audience to take on the role themselves so they can in fact act as a change agent in their respective organization. To succeed in that, Specialisterne needs to address attitudes, practices and norms that are taken for granted.

Adding more “paths”

In my opinion, the debate relating to neurodiversity in the labor market can be examined from three levels. I might even be bold and call it the social model maturity levels. First, what are the characteristics and traits that are appropriate for categorization, and thereby easier to “sell”. Second, what are the overlooked areas of expertise and competences of neurodivergent, in particular autistic, people. Last, where do neurotypical people find the audacity to pass judgment on autistic people and their capabilities and presence in the labor market. From what I have observed and assessed, Specialisterne are currently at the first level, but are in the process of exploring the second level. This is even though they have stated on their website that they believe that it is every person’s right to work. They are currently exploring the possibility of expanding their so-called “paths”, but still in a direction that relates to their existing focus which is within STEM industries. As will be discussed later, autistic women may not be as represented in these professional categories, which is why Specialisterne currently has very few female consultants. Therefore, if Specialisterne truly wishes to drive an inclusion agenda they need to consider ways to incorporate more female talents.

Be aware of intersectionality and stereotyping

This recommendation is an extension to the previous. It is no secret that Specialisterne has an overwhelming majority of male consultants, which can be ascribed to a variety of reasons, but the most obvious one being the specialization within fields that normally do not cater to autistic women. Literature does, however, point to a hidden number of autistic women as autism is still considered a male disorder (Wilkinson, 2017). Of course, there are autistic women who are working in the STEM industries, however, as autism expresses itself differently based on gender, the competences and areas of interest often differ as well. Literature emphasizes the lack of support and visibility of autistic women, and unfortunately coexisting diagnoses such as anxiety, depression and stress are more prevalent and stronger in autistic women (Socialstyrelsen, 2020; rtor.org, 2022). As a result, it can be a bigger burden to find jobs if you are an autistic woman, and if your skills are not the “typical autistic” skills you will face yet another hurdle.

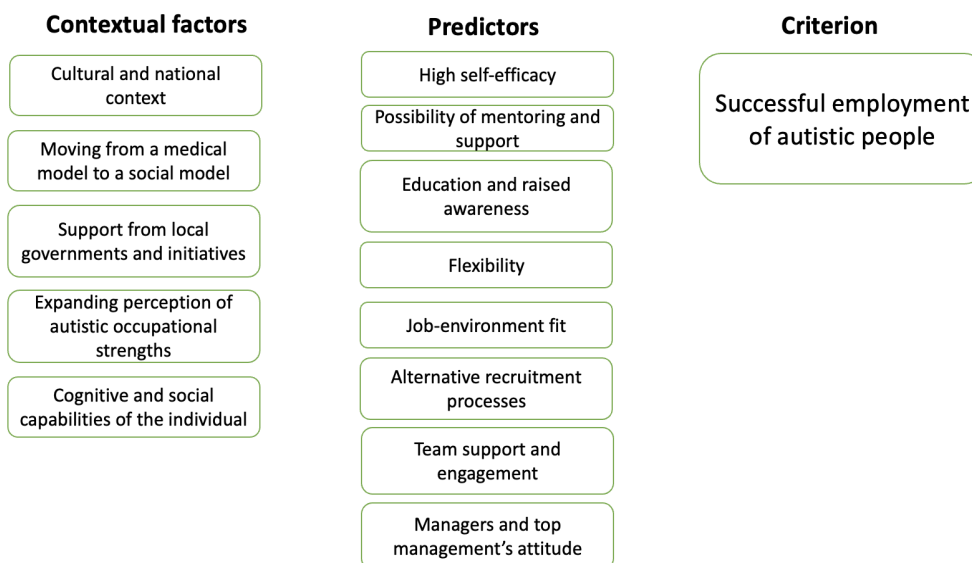
This brings me to my other observation. As helpful categorizing is, just as damaging can it be. By limiting their professional profiles to four distinct STEM-appropriate areas, Specialisterne is potentially contributing to the preconceived idea of what autism is and what their competences are. The reason why I bring up this point is to support my “maturity model” of discussion, and why it is necessary to make it past the first level. Even though they do talk about the individuality of their consultants and do a good job in educating the corporate world on what autism looks like, they are still pertaining to the good-old stereotype, which is autistic people are good with numbers, repetition, and lack social abilities. I particularly feel strongly towards the use of “social” when evaluating candidates and consultants as I believe the meaning of “social” is highly dependent on the context and the individual. It is understandable why it is necessary to access to some degree, however, I would recommend that Specialisterne do not distinguish between their consultants when communicating externally. By labeling some of them social and not labeling others, Specialisterne contributes to a stereotype that is harmful to the autistic community. Instead, Specialisterne should take this as yet another opportunity to educate their audiences on what the term ‘social’ means, or what interactions are considered socially acceptable. To initiate the social interaction, it could be helpful to inform the client of some of the personal interests or hobbies of the consultants.

To sum up: my concrete recommendations are:

- Expand paths and profiles to capture more of the autistic capabilities
- Identify potential blind spots in relation to intersectionality
- Abstain from evaluating the individual's social intelligence, and instead push the norm for what is considered social capabilities
- Systemize collecting feedback from current and former consultants as well as clients

7. Conclusion

As stated in the introduction, the objective of this paper has been to examine, highlight and discuss the elements that either prohibit or promote successful employment of autistic people. My research has resulted in a criterion-predictor model where some contextual factors have been added to explain the relationship between organization/individual and external factors such as national context.



My conclusion is to achieve successful employment conditions both societal, corporate and individual levels need to be addressed. The societal factors are what I refer to as the contextual factors, as they are happening outside of the organization and the individual is just happening to be a part of it. Both are still affected by them, and so is the fruitful outcome of corporate and individual contributions. The predictors can be divided into two categories: individual and corporate. However, the biggest responsibility and contribution still lies with the corporation. The individual can participate in activities or initiatives that increase their self-efficacy and help them navigate within their diagnoses, but if the corporate context remains unchanged, it will still be problematic for the individual. Therefore, the employer needs to make sure they are mature and educated to a point where they can accommodate, develop and retain the autistic employee.

Specialisterne Denmark are essentially working with all three levels. Specialisterne Solutions are directly working with the individual as well as the corporate level, however, they are heavily dependent on contextual factors such as local governments. For Specialisterne Denmark to achieve their vision and mission, they need to pay more attention to some of the other contextual factors such as expanding perception of occupational strengths and how to move in a direction of a social model.

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