



Centre for Inclusive Employment & Disability Employment Australia
Lunch & Learn Session | Wednesday, 27 May 2026

Exploring work styles without centring diagnosis

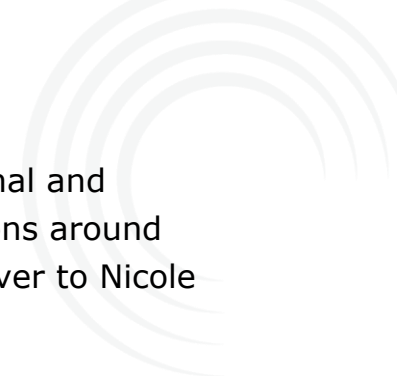
Speakers:

Nicole Done, Principal of Neurodiversity Enablement at Xceptional Academy

Host: Sally Karandrews, IEA Policy Manager, Disability Employment Australia

Sally Karandrews: Hi everyone, and welcome to this week's Lunch and Learn. I'm Sally, I'm the Policy Manager here at Disability Employment Australia, and it's lovely to have you all with us today. I'd like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which each of us are joining from. For me, that's the land of the Darkinjung people, and I pay my respect to elders past, present, and recognise that this is land that was never ceded. The Lunch and Learn webinars are delivered in partnership between the Centre for Inclusive Employment and Disability Employment Australia. The Centre supports providers by, developing resources, tools and offering practical advice around the delivery of high-quality employment supports. DEA is the national peak body for disability employment providers. The Centre is delivered by a consortium of members. It's led by the Swinburne University of Technology, and the partners offer a range of lived experience, research skills and experience in the area, but also skills and experience in the sector as well.

In terms of housekeeping, there are captions available for today's session. Liv is going to pop some instructions on how to access those in the chat. If you do have questions throughout the session, please feel free to pop them in the Q&A, and we will get to them at the end of the session. The session will also be recorded, and we will make that available in the coming days, along with a copy of the transcript and any resources that are shared or referred to today, so that you can access that or share it with colleagues at any time. Today, we are joined by Nicole Done from Xceptional Academy. Nicole is a neuro-inclusive

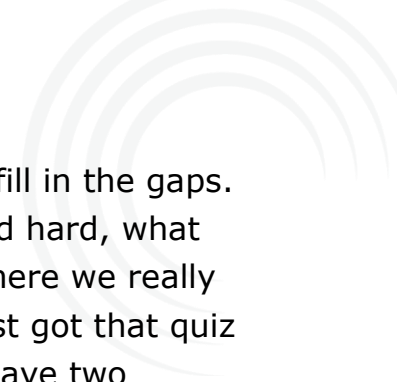


practitioner with over 20 years of experience in both an educational and advisory role, and today she's going to be discussing, conversations around workplace preferences. So, without any further ado, I will hand over to Nicole for today's session. Thank you so much, Nicole!

NICOLE DONE: Thank you so much, Sally. It's lovely to join everybody today. Sorry I got a little bit of a croaky throat all of a sudden. Let's hope that doesn't stop us throughout the presentation. Just a little bit of a snapshot of where I come from and where I fit in. As Sally mentioned I am part of Xceptional Academy, we are an organisation who supports neuro-inclusion across public, private and community sectors. We do supporting work around workforce planning, we do training, bespoke-style training for - and run a training program for neurodivergent individuals. Then we have our advisory service and coaching services. If you'd like to learn anything more about Xceptional Academy, I have up on the screen a QR code that leads you straight to our website and you are very welcome to check that out at any time.

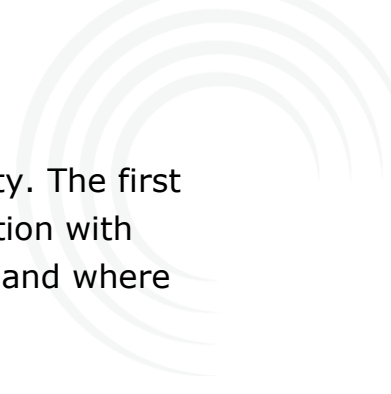
So what are we going to do today? Well, I'd like you to have a little bit of a think here. I have got two options on the screen. I'd like you to make a choice. You are about to meet a jobseeker. Before you meet them you are given one of two descriptions. We have got option one here, jobseeker with Cert IV in Business Admin to support job success, prefer written instructions, clear task priorities, works best in a quiet predictable environment and benefits from a structured one-on-one check-in at the start of each shift part-time. Or option 2, autistic jobseeker seeking admin work, part-time, Cert IV in Business Admin. Which option gives you more useful information to support this person at work? I invite you to use the poll that we have here to respond and let me know what do you think would be the best option? Which one is more useful for job matching, and employer conversations? I can see that there is a lot of votes coming in and it is very, very clear from those votes coming in that we definitely can see that everybody agrees number 1 is the most preferred.

What I want us to notice is - and I will share those results, it is just asking - I think Liv is sharing it, fabulous, thank you. What I want us to notice here is that diagnosis is irrelevant. Diagnosis can absolutely be important. It can provide context, it is validation, it is access to support, but diagnosis is definitely not an



instruction manual. When you hear a diagnosis our brain tries to fill in the gaps. We may think we know what the person needs, what they will find hard, what kind of job they can do, what support they require, and that is where we really need to be careful. Because two autistic people - sorry, I have just got that quiz jumping up from front of me, so it just distracted me. When we have two autistic people we may have completely different strengths, completely different communications, preferences, different sensory needs, different executive functioning profiles, different experiences at work and different ideas about what good support looks like for them. If we stop at diagnosis we risk making assumptions. If we explore work style, we are looking at practical information. We begin to understand how this person learns, communicates, managers and receives feedback. That is the information that's helpful for job matching. That is the information that helps employers provide useful support. That's the information that makes the difference between someone getting a job, and someone being able to stay in the job. Today we are going to focus on how we can have those conversations without centring diagnosis as the priority. We are going to look at how we can ask better questions, how we can listen for patterns and how we can translate what we learn into practical workplace supports. Because the goal is not just simply to put somebody into work or place somebody into work, I should say. The goal is to understand what helps them succeed, what helps them thrive and sustain themselves in the workplace.

So let's have a look here. What are we going to cover? We are going to look at how important it is to build trust. We are going to be framing what diagnosis - or reframe it, I should say, from diagnosis into work style preferences. Neurodivergent individuals quite often have challenges identifying some of their own preferences, and we are going to look at how we can support around that. We are going to discuss a framework to support it, look at some of those questions in action and we are going to look at how those preferences can be framed and translated for employers before we open it up for discussion at the end. For neurodivergent jobseekers meeting an employer consultant is not a neutral experience. They may arrive feeling anxious, guarded unsure not knowing what their experience is going to be like, if they are going to be misunderstood, judged, rushed, asked to explain themselves and just generally feel uncomfortable. Some people may have had negative experiences at school, in the workplace, in interviews with services with different employers. They may have been told they are too much. They are not trying hard enough. They are difficult to place, lacking confidence, not realistic enough about work. So before we can have useful conversations about employment preferences and

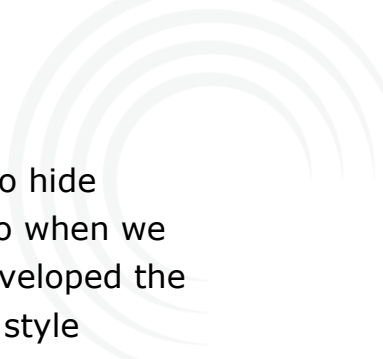


adjustments, we really actually need to build connection and safety. The first goal is not to just get all this information, it is to build a conversation with somebody where there is mutual respect and where it is practical and where this person sees that it is useful to engage.

So really our goal is we want to create trust. We want to have with that trust the foundations for a quality of gathering information. We want to go beyond service level answers and start to understand the condition that somebody performs. How they feel comfortable to participate and how we can support that environment so that somebody can have sustained employment.

Really a diagnosis is just context. It is not an instruction manual like I said. We do not need focus on someone's diagnosis to support them well. What we do need is to understand how best they work. This is where diagnosis can tell us about someone's strengths - sorry does not tell us about someone's strengths and exactly how someone works, learns and communicates. But two people with the same diagnosis we know need completely different supports. So gathering this information is really the secret ingredients to success. Our job is to understand that individual and not make assumptions based on a label. So instead of, what is a diagnosis, what support do you need? We could be moving towards, I want to understand what helps you do your job best? What gets in the way? What kinds of environments will help you succeed? Here is a couple of examples where we can reframe that diagnosis into work style preferences. So instead of asking, what condition do you have? What are your limitations? What can't you do? What we are asking is, what helps you to do your best work? How do you prefer to learn? What environments help you focus? What gets in the way of your productivity? When we have these conversations they are actually less confronting; they are more useful and often safer than disclosure conversations. This enables us to move past that centre of diagnosis or centring diagnosis and towards understanding the person.

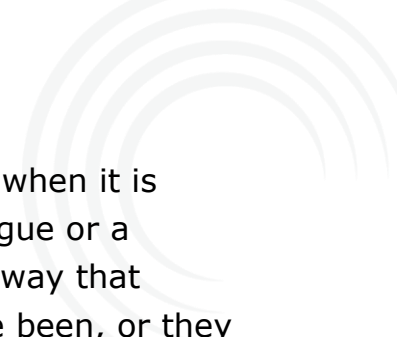
So how do we gather that information? What are the useful things that we can do? Many consultants assume that people can easily explain their needs. Some individuals can. However it is not always the case for everyone. I know in my work that I come across a lot of individuals who are either newly diagnosed and they are still navigating that diagnosis and their identity and the support that they actually need. Likewise, I work with a lot of individuals who have been



diagnosed years ago, but they are told to push through, to cope, to hide discomfort. They've never been asked, what support they need. So when we have these style of conversations quite often they have not yet developed the language to understand how they can actually describe their work style preferences. We see many people who have been masking for years, they have been adapting and trying different ways, but nothing seems to suit them, they've felt exhausted, overwhelmed, underperforming, had negative experiences, asking for adjustments and support. A consultant's role is not to interrogate, but to provide a supportive reflection. As a consultant if you notice patterns and help that person build language around works for them, we are on the right step. So how can we do this? The simple answer is we need to lean in and start asking the right questions. When we look at work style preferences, this is a very easy framework to look at. Because it encompasses all areas of work. These are actually conversations that we could have with any employee, because if we look through the lens of universal design, not just through the lens of neuroinclusive design, what we know is that everybody that is different preferences with the way they work. But supporting individuals who do require that scaffolded support around them at work specifically neurodivergent clients, focusing on what motivates them, their strengths, learning, communication and socialising, how someone likes to receive feedback, their executive functioning, understanding how they like to regulate themselves in the sensory environment and then of course understanding energy and sustainability to be able to come to work every day, to maintain long-term employment.

So here are some examples of questions that we can lean in and ask. Now not every question needs to be asked of every client. As we start asking these questions and not making assumptions, we start to be able to paint a pretty good picture of that individual. I always like to start with somebody's motivations. I like to know what motivates them at work. In previous roles what have they enjoyed doing. What is the tasks that they have found satisfying. Thinking of a time where they have felt confident in the work they've been doing. Or what helped them to feel that way. By leaning in and understanding purpose and motivation, it helps us understand how we can job match in a much more appropriate way.

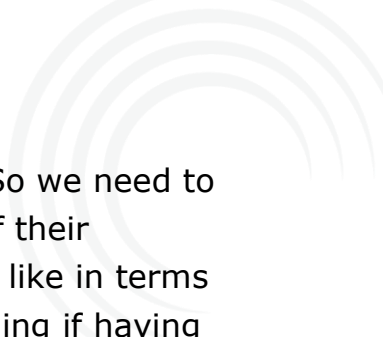
Quite often when I have these conversations individuals have never been taught or been asked questions about what are their strengths. So some inquiring questions around what somebody feels is their strengths that they bring, and



the language like I said, not having the language to discuss that, when it is framed about what would a family member or a friend or a colleague or a teacher in the past have said that you are good at seems to be a way that people can reflect on some of the areas that they know they have been, or they have strengths in the past. Like talk about what are the things that make - that you've always found easy? What are the natural tendencies that you lean to? Or how have you picked up information quickly in the past? By asking these questions and then follow-up questions we gather a really good understanding.

When somebody starts in a role we know quite often there is a lot of learning to do. So by being able to understand how best someone likes to learn, whether they are somebody who likes to shadow with somebody else or learn by working next to them. If they are somebody who likes a demonstration and to work quietly by themselves. Are they somebody who likes to read step by step instructions and navigate and independently learn? Talking about scaffolded support that may help them, whether they are somebody who prefers to have a checklist to be able to go through and make sure that they can check off and help them with a process. What we are doing is we are gathering information, because we are going to translate this - and we'll talk about this later on in the presentation - how we can translate this for employers.

The next area is communication. Now, communication again it is assumption if we just look at diagnosis. Because what we know is that everybody has their unique preferences in the way they like to communicate. So asking questions about preferred ways of engaging and having conversations, if somebody is in a Team meeting how they feel about speaking up, talking about forms of technology if that role requires it, how they feel about using video link, written information, emails, text messages, phone calls. I do find as a general rule a lot of individuals will tell me that they like to receive information in writing first, and an email is always really useful because it is easy to find that email later on and refer back, whereas more casual messages a lot of individuals like because they don't have to think about it, things like Team messages, it is harder to source those messages later on to reflect. A lot of individuals will say to me that if they've got their information in writing they are ready to go, whereas others have lots of questions to ask. Others would prefer to have a face-to-face conversation. Some people feel easier in a video link conversation because they can have some context and some information on screen to support them through that conversation. Some people are always going to feel comfortable

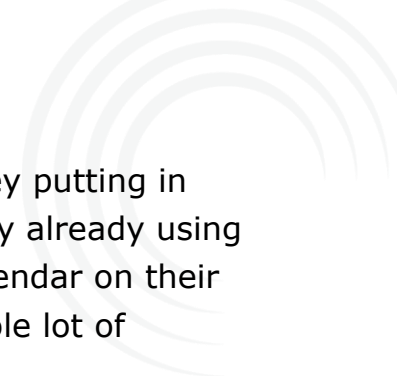


with using the phone, and a lot of other individuals not so much. So we need to understand what somebody's communication looks like in terms of their auditory processes and their listening. Understanding what it feels like in terms of time to reflect and process through communication. Understanding if having very clear agendas is going to support. When we look in the social context, how somebody feels about working with small groups or teams. How somebody feels about the information that is shared, and if they would require explicit information and to make sure things are clear. How they feel about checking in and asking questions when they are not sure. Some people feel very, very confident and social and love to interact with others, whereas of course some people will say that it actually is really challenging when I start a new job having to learn new names, new faces, and that can feel quite overwhelming, particularly with initiating conversations and needing to learn about somebody.

When we ask very specific questions about feedback it tells a lot. What we know is that some people, there is a very strong drive to grow and improve and want to know explicitly what they need to work on. Others who are more sensitive, it is feedback for the employer around the way they receive that information. A lot of people prefer having regular real time feedback, whereas others would prefer it in writing to reflect back afterwards. When we ask these questions we are just building out the picture that we provide once again for that employer.

We've got some more questions here, they keep going on, don't they? To give you a bit of a framing when I support somebody onboarding into a role, we spend a long time talking through these questions. Normally I try and put aside about 60 to 90 minutes to comfortably engage with that person, understand their back story and be able to write and understand all these questions when we work through it. So that gives you sort of some context, because of the level of depth here.

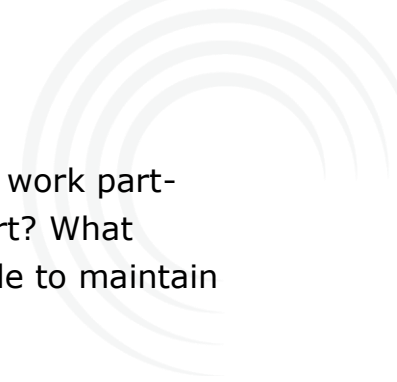
Now, normally when I have a conversation about executive functioning people can be very honest about this particular area, how they go with time management, what their memory skills are like, how they feel about changes in the workplace and what will support them when there is a change in environment. How their attention and how they cope with task switching, and whether they like to go into hyper-focus and the strategies they use. Having these conversations also helps us have a greater insight into the level of skills



they have in terms of self-moderation. So what strategies are they putting in place to help with memory-based skills? What technology are they already using to support their organisation? Are they somebody who uses a calendar on their phone to help with appointments? This is helping us gather a whole lot of information around that level of support.

The sensory environment, obviously is very important and only last month I did a presentation on the sensory environment at one of these Lunch and Learns. When we start discussing the sensory environment we are understanding how somebody can regulate themselves, self-regulate themselves and self-moderate themselves in a physical environment but it also leads us to understand around how that environment needs to be for them to be successful in their workplace, so understanding how they respond to light and noise, temperature, movement, visual distraction. Understanding how they actually regulate themselves, what it would look like with a desk set up or a workstation set-up. Talking about strategies that are used, whether they use noise cancelling headphones, whether they are somebody who needs to wear a peak cap at work, making recommendations if they were in a work environment would some of these strategies support. So I like to have discussions around if you are at a workstation would it be better seeing people walk towards you, or would you prefer to have your back to the room for distractibility? A lot of people will say after these conversations that they'd like to be near a window with a blind if possible. They'd like to be on the end of a row where people are not walking behind them at all times. Talking about what are the strategies they have in place, are they somebody who use movement or stimming, is there behaviours that they have to support their self-regulation and being able to frame that so that employers understand that that is a very important role, or it plays a function for them to be able to support themselves. Also talking about the importance of structure of work, and work flexibility. So is it that this is somebody who will really engage being in a role where they are face-to-face with people? Or does it mean that the way that they like to support themselves means that having low sensory days that ability to work from home a couple of days a week, or in some situations permanently all the time, is that going to be more sustainable for them?

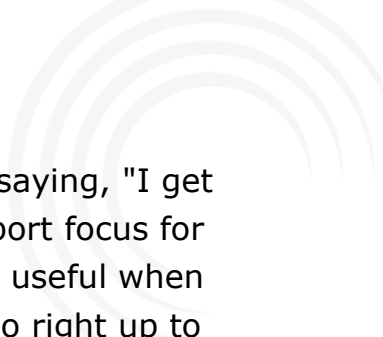
Understanding their energy and sustainability. So looking at how they do sustain themselves. What are their signs where they are tired. Is it an accumulative impact? Is it their thinking that burns their energy, is it the



sensory environment? Is it that they are somebody who needs to work part-time and have particular rest days throughout the week to support? What practically could we do to make sure that they are going to be able to maintain employment without going into burnout?

So once we have asked all these questions how can we actually put it in action? So one of the easiest ways of doing that is translating it into a more positive spin. Instead of asking, "How do you work under pressure?" "What type of busy deadlines or busy environments do you manage well?" "What types make it harder for you to perform your best?" What about if we think of somebody who is in a shift work environment? Will they be reliable to start at different times? Or what routines reminders and supports help you arrive on time, manage shifts and keep track of work? Expectations. What if somebody is working in a customer service role? The questions we need to ask around, how can you cope in that role, or what types of customer interactions feel manageable and what types feel more training or more difficult? When we move away from diagnosis as the centre of conversation we make space for that person. When we make space, we are ensuring that the job match is going to be much better. We have a much richer understanding of what support looks like to ensure that person thrives. We can then maintain that their employment outcomes are going to be sustainable.

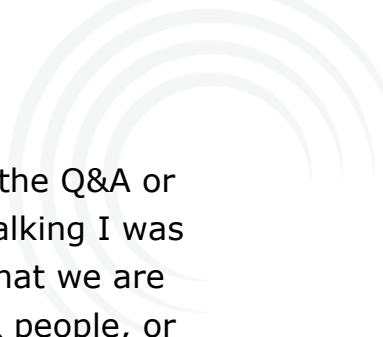
So once we have gathered all that information how do we translate it so that employers understand? Turning these work style preferences into employer ready information is a real skill. Once consultants gather those preferences they need to think carefully about how this information can be communicated. Employers do not need the full personal history, and the diagnostic detail or list of difficulties. What they actually need is clear, practical information that helps them support the person to perform in the specific role they have open. The consultant can act as a translator here. They take the person's preferences and they turn them into workplace language. So we may say, instead of the person saying, "I get overwhelmed when things change suddenly." It can become, "This person works best when changes to tasks or rosters are communicated as early as possible with clear information about what has changed and what is to be expected next." When there is a clear rationale they respond very well. This keeps the conversation focused on job performance and clarity and sustainability rather than the deficit or the diagnosis.



Here is some more examples. We've got just a couple, somebody saying, "I get distracted by noise." A quieter workplace or headphones may support focus for detailed tasks. Feedback can feel overwhelming. Feedback is most useful when it is specific, private and it includes a clear next step. What if we go right up to the top there. I need time to process verbal information. Written follow-up after verbal instructions will support accuracy and confidence. So we are restyling the way that we restructure this information and some of the useful structures that we could use, things like, "This person works best when." Or, "It may help to." Another one that's very helpful is, "To support success in this role we recommend." So you are providing that information for employers. Having that information in an onboarding report where the employer can refer back with work style preferences in any of your suggested adjustments and recommendations sets a fantastic document that can be referred to, not just by that one manager, but hopefully by other people within the team and people can lean in and learn from that experience. Over the years I have had many managers say to me that if they could have a document like that for every employee, not just their neurodivergent employees, it would be fantastic because it would be taking away that guesswork and that getting to know you period to try and work out how best to get the most out of every employee so they can thrive and be as productive as possible within their environment.

That's a lot of information. I am glad that all these slides are going to be shared with you, because obviously those questions you'll be able to refer back to at other times, and I would encourage you as you are starting to have these conversations to try and look at all of those sort of subheadings and ask a few questions from that list, or create your own that feel more authentic to you so that you get a much greater understanding of that individual. What I am going to do now is I am going to open it up and ensure that if anybody has any questions I am very, very happy to answer them. I've also just got my details on the screen because I am very happy if it is not now open to everybody as part of the Q&A, you are very welcome to contact me at another time to ask any questions as well.

SALLY KARANDREWS: Amazing, thank you so much Nicole, that was incredibly informative as always and I too are very glad that we will be sharing all of the slides and the recording because there is a lot of great information in there and some really practical and actionable advice and tips and steps that people can

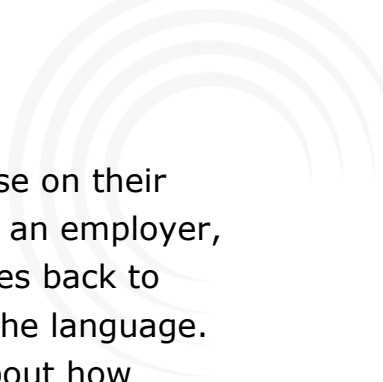


take. If anyone does have any questions, feel free to pop them in the Q&A or the chat and we'll get to them. But I guess to start, as you were talking I was reflecting on how this wouldn't only be beneficial for participants that we are working with, but also perhaps something that team leaders or HR people, or whoever the relevant person might be within an organisation might be able to implement for their staff as well. Would you have anything to add if organisations were to action this in that kind of context?

NICOLE DONE: Sure Sally. Like I said, I encourage teams when they are working together to learn more about each other. As a manager, as a leader, if you are asking these questions and understanding how best each of your employees works, you are actually capitalising on their strengths in much greater ways. You are able to direct their interests and help with their motivation and productivity, but you are also understanding their specific needs. One of the things I really advocate for a team to do as a whole group is to actually create a communication matrix where you understand every team member's preferences for communication. If we are talking about in a more clinical sense, really what that is is just gathering data points on everybody. I know myself that there is some people that I work with who really would prefer not to use the telephone. One of the reasons for that is that auditory processing is much harder for some individuals, but there is also not the visual context. Quite often when someone just calls you out of the blue you are not in the right thinking or the right frame of mind, so you don't have context to have that richer conversation. So I know for some of my colleagues I won't call them, it will always be a structured conversation where we have set up a video link and we have a very clear agenda, because I know that I am going to have a much better experience working with them. If we collect these data points on everybody we are working with, what we are just doing is being kind with different ways of working.

SALLY KARANDREWS: Absolutely, thank you. Question from Laila around how would you involve the employer in this process if we were using it in the context of working with participants?

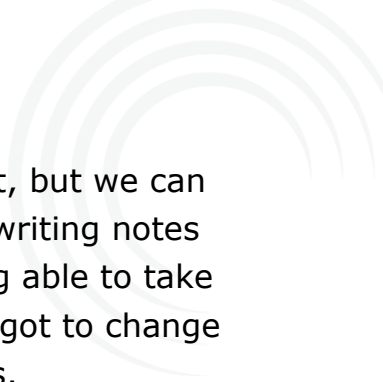
NICOLE DONE: I'd encourage you to have this conversation already where you understand the participant and you know their particular preferences and needs. Because that's going to help you with your job matching and making sure that



they are going to be performing for roles that are going to capitalise on their skills and their work style preferences. But if you are working with an employer, it is then how we share that information with them. So it really goes back to those slides that we looked at right at the end where we reframe the language. I have just gone back to one of them now where we are talking about how somebody will be able to work if we provide the support and structure. So clear priorities, deadlines and check-ins will help with the person staying on track. Instead of saying, "This person has challenges understanding priorities." We are talking about what will actually support them to understand those priorities. So having conversations, you can definitely bring the employer into it, but being able to have it prior is going to make a big difference.

SALLY KARANDREWS: I know you touched on this a little bit, but for those who might be having a little bit more trouble expressing and communicating, or even comprehending their own preferences, any further advice on how you might work with someone in that context?

NICOLE DONE: That's a great question. As we gain skills working with participants we start to learn general understanding of maybe how they may have preferences, and so I always just like to be curious and ask questions and people quite often have not thought about the answer before. So if you asked the question of how best do you learn something at work? Some people will be able to tell you that straight away; other people they've probably not had the opportunity to think about that in detail before, they've never been asked it. So being able to put that in a structure where you can ask more probing questions, how best do you retain information? I like to provide examples, so when you've been learning before, do you find that you pick up the skill better when you do it repetitiously over and over again? Is it that having something that you've created a written process going to help you? Are you somebody who would much prefer to do the task with somebody first of all to be able to reassure you? So I'm actually asking and giving examples so people can think about what they would actually like. I do come across participants who have never been asked before about their sensory needs and being able to give some examples of ways that they can support those needs and reassure them, whether it is by the location that they work, the flexibility and ways that may help with regulation. What they may do during the day or a lunch break to help with energy levels. If it is around using a fidget toy to be able to support. Being able to understand that people listen differently. What does their listening actually look like? So we



can put that forward, they feel confident to be able to express that, but we can put that forward to an employer and say, that when somebody is writing notes or doodling that is a way of them processing information and being able to take information in, it is not a sign that they are disengaged. So we've got to change the narrative with the conversations we are having with employers.

SALLY KARANDREWS: Amazing. Thank you. Getting close to the end of time. So if anyone has any further questions, Nicole has included her contact details, so feel free to send them through to DEA and we can pass them out when we send the resources out for today.

NICOLE DONE: Thank you Sally for moderating today.

SALLY KARANDREWS: Thank you for sharing, it has been fantastic as always.

NICOLE DONE: I might put up if people aren't familiar with Xceptional Academy we do have different resources online so people are very welcome to go and have a look at those. We do have one on understanding the sensory environment, another one onboarding toolkit, so many so of the things to support with working with employers and that might be useful for some of the individuals online today.

SALLY KARANDREWS: Fantastic. Thank you for that Nicole. Thank you for today. Thank you to Liv who has been here in the background making everything work and thank you to everyone who has come along and please don't forget to log your CPD points for those who are part of the professional membership program, and we'll also be back next fortnight where we will be joined by Elaine Nash from Flinders University who will be talking about creating good jobs. Until then enjoy the rest of your day and I look forward to joining you all again next fortnight. Thank you.

NICOLE DONE: Thanks.

(End)