

“Sometimes you just  
need someone to take  
a chance on you”

## An Internship Programme for Autistic Graduates at Deutsche Bank, UK

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In partnership with  
Deutsche Bank

**AUTISTICA**  
Building brighter futures through autism research



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## Executive summary

### The challenge

There is a well-established employment gap in autism, where autistic people are often willing and able to work, but struggle to find and maintain employment.

The consequences of this gap are far reaching; not only economically, but also with respect to the wellbeing and quality of life of autistic individuals who are not able to secure or retain employment.

There is almost no research conducted on the most effective ways of getting autistic people into work, but the small number of studies that exist have identified work placements as an important step in this process. There remains a lack of knowledge, however, about the real-life experiences of those involved in such schemes.



### Our research

The current study looked at one work placement scheme in the UK: a three-month internship for eight autistic graduates at the London offices of Deutsche Bank.

To understand the programme from all perspectives, four groups were interviewed: the interns; their hiring managers; the team members who worked alongside the interns; and their buddies (each intern was assigned a mentor from outside their own team, for the duration of the internship). Interns and hiring managers were interviewed at two time-points: before the internship began and during the final week of the programme.

Team members and buddies were only interviewed at the second time-point.

### Key findings and recommendations

A positive, meaningful experience was reported for the majority of those involved in the scheme, with five interns retained for an additional period of employment.

For the most part, the interns reported feeling accepted within the workplace and were well supported by their managers, buddies and colleagues. Many interns also reported growing in confidence, and all gained practical experience and contributed to their teams: “the most useful thing that I’ve learned is that I am very able and it’s made me realise that I can do anything” [Intern].

Managers and colleagues described several benefits, including better knowledge of autism and diversity, reflecting on their own management styles, and growth on a personal level.

**“The most useful thing that I’ve learned is that I am very able and it’s made me realise that I can do anything”**

The process, however, was not necessarily straightforward for all of those involved, all of the time.

Participants also identified, with remarkable agreement, a number of challenges that they encountered throughout the duration of the internship. Some interns reported elevated anxiety, difficulties in judging communication in the office environment and some confusion regarding office rules.

Our Report shows that Deutsche Bank's autistic graduate internship programme is a very promising strategy to turn around autistic people's exclusion from the labour market.

To build on this initial success, the findings in our report highlight four key ways in which the scheme's promise might be even more effectively realised.

With these amendments in place, the Deutsche Bank programme could well become a beacon of good practice for other employers across the world, ensuring that...

**‘...candidates of untapped talent will be given the opportunities that they deserve’**

1

### Be clear and always be committed



All groups highlighted the importance of providing clear expectations about the programme from the outset and sticking to those expectations throughout. Similarly, those interacting with the interns should be clear in their use of language and sincere in what they offer – say what you mean and mean what you say. Wherever possible, promises should be kept, deadlines met, and offers fulfilled.

2

### Treat people as individuals



Autism varies widely from person to person – even in individuals who are clever and articulate, like the interns described herein. With this in mind, it is important to avoid making assumptions.

As the saying goes:

**‘If you’ve met one person on the autism spectrum, you’ve met one person on the autism spectrum’**

3

### Provide widespread training on autism



Many of those we spoke to suggested that there should be more widespread training for all those who will interact with the interns (i.e. all team members, staff in Human Resources). Managers should also be provided with ongoing professional support during the internship. This could take the form of a helpline or regular meeting with a job coach with expertise in autism to allow managers or colleagues to seek guidance.

4

### Create a point-person for autistic interns and their managers



Several of those involved in the internship – from the interns themselves to hiring managers, buddies and team members – spoke about difficulties in communicating concerns, especially when potential disagreements between interns and managers emerged. Future cohorts would benefit from the establishment of a neutral point-person, who could facilitate discussion between different parties in the event of disagreement and could also be available as a source of advice.





## Preface

This report was commissioned by Autistica, the UK's foremost autism research charity, and the UK offices of Deutsche Bank, to assess the feasibility and outcomes of Deutsche Bank's first internship scheme for autistic graduates.

We are very grateful to Dr James Cusack, Director of Science, and Koral Anderson and Alex Wilson (Deutsche Bank) for giving us the opportunity to work on such an important innovation in autism practice – and especially for taking a chance on a group of young autistic people who are all too often excluded from such opportunities.

We also thank Dr Melissa Bovis, Dr Laura Crane and Prof Marc Stears for their very careful reading of the report and constructive feedback. We are indebted to all the interns, hiring managers, buddies and team members at Deutsche Bank, without whom this project would not have been possible. They were all extremely generous with their time. We have done our very best to convey their experiences as accurately as possible. Any omissions or errors are entirely our own.



## Abbreviations

ASD: Autism Spectrum Disorder

DB: Deutsche Bank

NAS: National Autistic Society

### Terminology

Autism is a developmental condition that affects the way that a person experiences the world around them. In this report, we use the term 'autism' to refer to everyone on the autism spectrum. The term therefore includes those with a diagnosis of Asperger syndrome or those who are labelled as 'high-functioning', who might be considered the subject of this report.

Although autism was once divided into separate categories (such as Asperger syndrome), there has been a shift towards using umbrella terms including 'autism' or 'autism spectrum disorder/condition'. Indeed, terms such as 'Asperger's' and 'high-functioning' are often perceived to be unhelpful shortcuts, which can generate false expectations about what a person 'looks like' and prevent people from focusing on individuals' unique characteristics and needs.<sup>1</sup> The term 'high-functioning' can lead people to assume that verbally or cognitively able individuals function well ('highly') in everyday life, which is not the case for some such individuals, who can struggle to find and retain employment, to live independently and to sustain friendships and relationships.<sup>2</sup>

There has recently been a move towards the use of 'identify-first' language (i.e. describing someone as an 'autistic person') rather than using person-first language (i.e. a 'person with autism').<sup>3</sup> In the UK, research has demonstrated that identity-first language is generally preferred to person-first language, especially by autistic adults and parents of autistic children<sup>1</sup> because autism is seen to be intrinsic to the person rather than something from which you can be separated. In this report, we therefore use predominantly identity-first language.



Our report shows that Deutsche Bank's autistic graduate internship programme is a very promising strategy to turn around autistic people's exclusion from the labour market.



## 1. Setting the scene

Autism directly or indirectly affects millions of citizens in the United Kingdom.<sup>4,5</sup> In recent years, there have been several legislative, policy and service initiatives aimed at improving the life chances and opportunities of autistic people. Millions of pounds have been spent on research focused on understanding autism, both its causes and its consequences.<sup>6</sup> All of this work has the potential to ensure that the lives lived by autistic people and their families are happy and fulfilling.

Yet the opportunities and life chances of autistic people often remain severely limited relative to the non-autistic population. Autistic people are often poorly served by health, education and social care services, they are more likely to be (and to feel) socially excluded, they have a greater likelihood of experiencing mental health problems, and – most relevant to the current report – they are much less likely to be in employment relative to non-autistic people.<sup>2, 7-9</sup>



## 1. Setting the scene



## → Employment in autism

**Employment levels in the autistic population are low. In the UK only 16% of autistic adults are in full-time employment. The rate is also lower than for other groups, with 32% of autistic people in some sort of paid work, compared to 47% of other disabled groups.<sup>10</sup>**

A similar picture is seen in the US, where compared to peers with other types of disabilities, young autistic adults have the lowest rate of employment: 58% of young autistic adults held a job at any point during their early 20s, compared to over 90% of those with reported emotional disturbance, speech impairment, or learning disability and 74% of young adults with intellectual disability.<sup>11</sup> This is despite the fact that many autistic people are verbally and intellectually able, could thrive in a structured working environment and want to be given that opportunity.<sup>10</sup>

For the minority of autistic adults who are employed, they are all too often in posts that are deemed unsuitable as they are not consistent with their skill set and abilities (mismatch) or for which they are overqualified for the role (underemployment).<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the cost of lost employment for autistic adults equates to £9 billion per year in the UK.<sup>13</sup>

Yet, for an individual, the consequences of not having a job are often far greater. Employment is associated with independence, identity, community engagement and self-esteem.<sup>14-15</sup> Not being in employment therefore places autistic people at serious risk for problems with their mental, emotional and physical wellbeing.

These facts and figures are deeply concerning. Unfortunately, however, they are unsurprising given that the many thousands of research articles on autism have focused almost exclusively on children, as opposed to adults.<sup>6, 16</sup> Of those articles considering the experiences of adults, only a tiny proportion focus on the most effective ways to support autistic adults in the community.<sup>17, 18</sup> This lack of research makes it difficult for those responsible for commissioning local autism services (as well as autistic people, their families, and those working in such services) to make evidence-based decisions regarding support, especially at work.

There are increasing efforts to turn this around. England's revised Autism Strategy<sup>19</sup> places much emphasis on increasing the number of autistic adults in work, calling for the provision of guidance and training for employers and employment support services, to ensure autistic adults benefit from employment initiatives. In addition, the National Autism Project (a UK initiative highlighting gaps in the evidence base for autism research and practice) recently named employment as a key component in addressing the inequalities faced by autistic people.<sup>20</sup>

A small body of work has also begun to examine barriers to employment for those on the autism spectrum, and ways to overcome them. The findings highlight the value of work experience, internships and supported employment schemes.<sup>21</sup> For example, a study of autistic adults (aged 21–25 years) in the United States revealed employment rates that were over twice as high for those who worked for pay during high school (90%) versus those who did not (40%).<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, a US internship programme that arranges work placements for young autistic adults that are embedded within a community business (e.g. banks, hospitals or government departments), has shown very positive findings. A comparative study found that 87.5% of participants in the group who participated in the scheme achieved subsequent employment, compared to 6.25% in the group who did not take part.<sup>22</sup>

With growing recognition of the importance of such schemes, it is vital to understand the experiences of those taking part: both the employees and their employers. Indeed, employing autistic people has clear potential benefits to the individuals themselves and to employers. Alongside the difficulties characteristic of those on the autism spectrum (see Box 1), it is now well established that autistic individuals show an intriguing profile of skills and abilities. Approximately one third of autistic adults – from across the autistic spectrum – have a talent,<sup>23</sup> often linked to art, memory, music, and mathematics.



## 1. Setting the scene



Research on attention and perception among autistic people reveals that these talents might well arise from seeing the world differently. For example, it seems that autism is characterised by Increased Perceptual Capacity – the ability to process more information at any given time.<sup>24, 25</sup> This can be problematic if the extra information results in altered sensitivities,<sup>6</sup> such as finding bright lights painful, or having difficulty focusing on a conversation in a noisy room. But in other situations, it could provide an increased ability to absorb and process useful information at an exceptional level of detail – which can give them skills to excel in the workplace.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to these technical skills, autistic employees show a high level of honesty, dedication and loyalty to their employer. One study of Silicon Valley companies suggests that while many non-autistic adults will move on from a job after approximately six months, autistic adults will stay longer.<sup>27</sup> Put simply, employing autistic people can make good business sense.<sup>28</sup>

**‘The most useful thing that I’ve learned is that I am very able and it’s made me realise that I can do anything’** Autistic intern

### Box 1

## What is autism?

Autism is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition that affects the way a person relates to others and experiences the world around them.

One in every 100 people lie on the autism spectrum – more than 700,000 people in the UK.<sup>4, 5</sup> This means if you are not autistic yourself, you will most likely know someone who is, whether they are your son or daughter, your mother or father, your neighbour or your colleague.

According to current diagnostic criteria, autistic people show a set of core features, including difficulties in social communication, different ways of thinking and behaving and unusual reactions to sensory inputs, i.e. sound, vision, touch, taste and smell.<sup>29</sup> These sensory differences, such as heightened sensitivity to the feel of clothes or the smell of perfume, can be particularly distressing and can lead to becoming overwhelmed by their environment, avoiding or not noticing certain sensations, or seeking out certain sensations as a means to reduce associated anxiety or stress.

Whether these features are considered disabling for an individual can depend in part on the extent and nature of the support provided by others. This support can include helping an individual to develop skills and strategies to understand situations and communicate their needs, as well as adapting the environment to enable the person to function and learn within it.

Autism is not a mental illness but many autistic people have additional, co-occurring difficulties, such as anxiety, depression and attentional difficulties,<sup>30</sup> which can have an enormous impact on their mental health and wellbeing – often to a greater extent than their autistic features. Many autistic people rate anxiety as the primary problem in their lives.

Autism is considered a spectrum of conditions. Some individuals may also have an additional intellectual disability, while others will have average or advanced intellectual abilities. For some individuals, spoken language is limited or absent altogether, while others may have fluent speech, but they may still have difficulties with understanding and processing language. Some individuals want to be around others and to have friends, while others prefer to be alone.

Every person with autism is therefore different and, like others, with a unique set of qualities, strengths and talents – and therefore a different way of seeing the world.

## 1. Setting the scene



### About this research

Learning how to promote autistic employment and evaluating how businesses might benefit from having a greater number of autistic employees is a complex endeavour. A fully comprehensive study of the DB scheme itself would require a detailed assessment of factors, such as: the cost of recruitment, training and additional support; the quality of work contributed by autistic interns; and the contribution the experience made to the long-term prospects of the interns themselves, for example.

This particular study examines just one of those factors, but a highly important one: it traces the actual experiences of those who took part in the scheme. To promote autistic employment, businesses need to know how autistic employees and interns (and those with whom they work) respond to life in the workplace. Knowing this can lead to simple adjustments to accommodate autistic people's needs and lead to a greater chance for the business to profit from the wide range of skills and interests that autistic people can bring to the workplace. A lack of information about those experiences is currently a key barrier for those firms considering an autism employment initiative.<sup>31</sup>

The current research sought to address this issue directly. It was commissioned by Autistica to understand the experiences of those involved in a three-month graduate internship programme at Deutsche Bank (DB) UK in London, offered solely for those on the autism spectrum, which ran from October to December 2016. It sought to examine the experiences of the interns themselves, together with the experiences of their hiring managers, buddies and team members.

This study's procedures were granted ethical approval by UCL Institute of Education's Research Ethics Committee (REC 843).

### This project aimed to:

1. Determine the experiences of all those involved in the internship programme, focusing particularly on their prior expectations, and triumphs and difficulties during the scheme;
2. Highlight strategies adopted to overcome challenges, and make recommendations for how future experiences might be improved.

To address these aims, we invited the eight autistic interns accepted onto the scheme, and their hiring managers, to take part in this study. In addition, we interviewed the nine DB employees who acted as buddies to the interns, and eight other DB employees who worked alongside the interns ("team members").

The interns (n=2 female, n=6 male) ranged in age from 22 to 26 years, were predominantly from white backgrounds and came from cities across England (three from London). All had received an independent clinical diagnosis of an autism spectrum condition, although the age at which they received this diagnosis varied widely – with some diagnosed very early in life (e.g. at 2–3 years) and others diagnosed only a few years ago (e.g. at the age of 20 years). Some interns had received diagnoses of additional co-occurring conditions either in the past or currently, including anxiety, depression, and other specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia and developmental coordination disorder. All had completed undergraduate degrees in a range of topics (e.g. Politics, English Literature, Natural/Computer sciences, Mathematics). Some interns were employed elsewhere full-time (n=1) or part-time (n=3) prior to being awarded the internship, while the remaining four were unemployed.

In late September 2016, before the internship began, researchers conducted individual semi-structured interviews with DB interns and hiring managers, asking about their hopes and expectations for the upcoming programme and any concerns they might have. Interns were also asked to complete a questionnaire about their previous experiences.

In late December 2016, during the final week of the internship, the same researchers spoke to the interns and hiring managers again.<sup>32</sup> In addition, buddies and team members were interviewed. All participants were asked to share their experiences of the three-month internship period.

Each interview lasted around 30 minutes (up to 1 hour in some cases) and were conducted either face-to-face or over the phone, depending on people's preferences. To preserve anonymity of the participants involved, all are referred to as male and all quotations reported in the remaining chapters are left unattributed.

## 1. Setting the scene



### → The Deutsche Bank Internship Programme

Deutsche Bank is Germany's leading bank, with a strong presence in Europe and beyond. The bank provides commercial, investment banking, asset management and transaction banking services to governments, financial institutions and corporations, along with retail and wealth management services to individuals. In the UK, DB employs 9,000–10,000 people across a number of sites nationwide. DB places an emphasis on corporate social responsibility and as part of these efforts, partners with a charity each year (now extended to two-year partnerships). As part of this partnership, DB staff not only undertake fundraising initiatives, but also examine what other support they can offer to the charity (for example, by providing infrastructure and consultancy).

In 2016/17 DB is partnered with Autistica, a UK charity which funds research to understand the causes of autism, improve diagnosis, and develop new treatments and interventions. Autistica's Research Strategy is designed to ensure a more coherent approach to the investment of scarce resources in UK autism research. Autistica is committed to funding research that will make a difference to people's lives and their aim is to move the research 'from bench to bedside' so that new discoveries can translate as quickly as possible into a better quality of life for all those affected by the condition.

As a result of the partnership, DB initiated a three-month internship for autistic graduates that would run in London towards the end of 2016.

### About the Internship

The internship was devised and implemented by a few key individuals within DB who have a passion for promoting diversity and inclusion, one of whom also has personal experience of autism. Following discussions with Autistica, an additional charity partner, Ambitious About Autism, was brought on board to market the scheme and provide training to DB staff. This training comprised two sessions: one for those conducting interviews, and a second more extensive session for hiring managers, buddies and a few of the team members who would be working directly with the interns. Eight hiring managers volunteered to be involved, in response to an internal email asking for internship posts.

The scheme was advertised via Autistica and Ambitious About Autism. As a first step, candidates were asked to submit a CV. Of those who did (16 in total), eight were then asked to provide written answers to a set of questions which covered some aspects of their previous experience ("Can you give us an example of when you have been in a position of responsibility?") and more abstract reasoning challenges. Based on their responses, all eight were invited for interview. The interview was divided into two sections (about 90 minutes in total): the first allowed a more in-depth discussion of the candidates' written answers, the second asked more generally about their CV and past experience.

All eight interviewees were subsequently offered a place on the programme and were assigned to teams across various business areas, including finance, operations, risk and technology. They were based across five DB offices in Central London, with one subsequently moving to a regional office (to reduce his travel time). Interns were paid a salary equivalent to that received by those on the general graduate scheme.

Just like DB interns on the regular graduate scheme, all interns were assigned a buddy (mentor) from outside their own team. The buddies themselves had responded to an internal email inviting them to be a mentor as part of the autistic internship programme specifically. Interns were encouraged to turn to this buddy if they had queries or needed support at any point over the three-month period. The interns were also offered weekly 'lunch and learn' sessions, monthly career dinners, monthly intern lunches, and ad hoc sessions (e.g. for networking). This information was given to the interns on their first day, and was reiterated in a follow-up email.



## 2. Expectations of the internship

One key aim of the research was to understand interns' and hiring managers' expectations of the internship, as well as their perceptions of the possible challenges and opportunities (and how they might overcome any such challenges) before the internships began.

On the next page, the main themes identified from these conversations are presented in detail (separately for each group).





## 2. Expectations of the internship



### About this research

#### Interns' views

##### Eagerness to work

All of the interns spoke of an eagerness to work and a sense of resilience that had enabled them to overcome the odds and that led them to this point: **"people like me aren't meant to get into these places I don't think. Born to a single mother on benefits, and now I'm here. Every single thing statistically has gone against me. The autism as well. But I can still do it"**.

They spoke of challenges finding work in the past, but a drive and determination to keep going: **"I'm an extremely ambitious person. If I wasn't ambitious I probably wouldn't be here"**. The interns also felt that they had much to offer DB, including mathematical and problem solving abilities, a strong attention to detail, and a high level of focus and dedication: "I can use the ability to work for a very long time without a break; and a lot of the perks, like the analytical thinking, the general work ethic".

##### Anxious optimism

When considering the upcoming programme, the majority of the interns were positive about the opportunity: "I am excited because I haven't been given this opportunity before". However, many were nervous about the new role, with one explaining that he was "just mostly terrified. I think getting there, new people, having a job that actually matters, a proper job. I don't know. Being clever, hard working". This anxiety seemed to centre on a perceived lack of qualifications and prior knowledge ("I was reassured I won't be doing anything that complex, but it's still a little bit of a worry. What if I don't learn it quick enough? I'm only there for three months"), as well as the issue of taking on responsibility and a fear of the unknown: "[I feel] nervous, because I still don't know what I'm actually supposed to be doing". It was also clear that the interns were determined to do well in the scheme and were worried about achieving the goals they had set for themselves: "I don't like doing anything wrong and I don't like being a liability. Yeah, I have a drive for perfection. I think many people on the

autism spectrum will, because they don't want to be seen as being carried or doing bad, which is probably why we avoid going out of our comfort zone really". Another intern echoed this sentiment: **"I'm almost scared that I won't be able to do myself justice and actually be of any benefit. I don't want to be a passenger; I actually want to bring something and gain something at the same time"**.

##### Awareness of weaknesses and support needed

The interns were perceptive about their own differences and how they might impact on the upcoming work placement. Some commented generally on the fact that being different might prove to be difficult ("the only real fear I have is that people will be put off by my quirks and craziness that I can't control") and the worry that they might be forced to conform: "I always find it a bit annoying when I'm forced to try and think how someone else would think because my thought process tends to be somewhat fundamentally different".

Others raised concerns about specific areas that they thought would be challenging, for example: the need for confidence ("I think one of the things I do need is confidence to know that if I'm not fitting in I won't be relieved of my position pretty quickly"); dealing with uncertainty ("We're autistic so we're used to having things planned out and noted down to the exact detail. So when something remotely small happens to change that routine we just sort of come to a standstill because it's not what we expected, we don't know what to do"); or multitasking ("I think sometimes I don't prioritise things – or I do, but not well. So if five different people say, can you do this, this and this, they're all equal to me, because they're all above me. So I might find that difficult. But I'll just have to learn, won't I?").

The social components of the role were also daunting for many: "I think the thing I'm also quite worried about is probably being able to network with other people. Because most internships, I think most employers are looking for people, not just people that can necessarily work, but people that can also equally network with other people and socialise as well". Others, however, were more positive about their abilities: "Obviously starting any new job isn't easy for anyone, but I like to think I can get on with people. I think that it's taken me a long time, I've had to teach myself to try and do it, but I certainly think that once I get to know people on both their personal and professional level, I certainly think I could get on with them really well". Communication was also a concern, particularly with regard to knowing how to ask for help:

**"I don't like asking for help because I don't want to seem like I'm not good enough. I try and persevere because I just don't want to show weakness"**



## 2. Expectations of the internship

Some interns were apprehensive about practical aspects of the programme such as living away from home, or coping with the sensory environment of the office: “I hear everything. So sometimes when I’m out and about I just plug into my mp3 player and listen to music through noise cancelling headphones. I’m not sure how loud offices are, but sometimes when it gets too much I just try to ignore it. But I’m not sure if I’ll actually need to [use headphones] in an office, but I’m willing to grin and bear it. **Sometimes you just, when some things don’t go your way, you just have to suck it up**”. This sense of willingness to embrace the challenges, and adapt where necessary, was reiterated by many of the interns: “I’m ready to try and tackle it, look at it, being open minded about it. **I just want to be always willing to learn and not be kind of fearful of what problems I might have and just try to get out of my comfort zone really. Because I think it’ll do me a lot of good**”. There was recognition, however, that their resilience in difficult situations may depend on the environment: “the only time when the hypothetical mask tends to come off is when I’m under extreme stress or tiredness”.

### A rare opportunity

The interns felt that the DB scheme was unique in its approach: “It was the first time I’ve ever seen anyone specifically asking for autistic people”. They also welcomed the chance to be part of it: “I feel that it’s a great opportunity because not many people who are on the spectrum get many opportunities like this. But like I said, it’s refreshing that we’re actually being openly reached out to by a big company like Deutsche Bank”. There were, however, mixed views of the application process. Some found it more accessible than other schemes they had applied for: “I thought the process was good because they actually allowed you to prepare yourself a bit more before the actual interview”. Others still encountered difficulties: “Well, there were a lot of forms. And I was just like, whoa. I don’t remember applications being this long. But I got through it with a little bit of help from my parents”.

There were high hopes that much could be gained from the experience, with interns anticipating: new skills, both technical and transferable (such as networking and negotiation), improved confidence, CV development and experience of the workplace (“A way for me to get more experience of another place so that another place would be able to hire me based on the experience alone. Because Deutsche Bank is a very impressive place and I’m sure someone would at least get an eyebrow raised when they find out an applicant has worked there for experience”). The financial benefits were also emphasised: “Because of having to pay my rent. And so the biggest cause of stress is always money, it doesn’t matter who you

are. So not having to be in ultra-saving mode for more than a week is quite nice”. Some hoped that the internship would result in more permanent employment at the end of the programme: “I just want to do everything well. Because, as I said, my aim is that I convert this into a full-time thing”.

Although the interns could see the key benefits for themselves, they expressed some scepticism about DB’s motivation for the scheme: “Sometimes I feel like they’re just doing it because it makes them look good, helping out a charity and stuff. Because I’ve got a stereotypical view of an intern in the City, working long hours, working really hard and I remember they said something to me, if you want to you just do nine till four every day ... it makes me think they’re not treating me like they would a normal intern ... So obviously in one way it’s pretty good that they’re being accommodating and things like that. But it’s like, why shouldn’t we [just] apply alongside everybody else and be equal?” Similarly, one intern felt as if he “was cheating a bit” applying for an autistic internship programme “because I don’t think it affects me in terms of ... well it doesn’t affect me academically; it helps me”.

Despite these views, the interns were positive that the scheme would offer them the freedom to be autistic in the workplace: “I trust and know that they will be supportive. The fact that they’re aware of the diagnosis, they understand that there is no shame in asking for help. That kind of supportive environment I trust will be there because of the nature of what this internship is”. This was in contrast to their previous work experiences, where disclosure of their condition was often met with negativity: “In their head they have the perception that if you’re autistic you have to do more work to combat that. And I feel like I’ve got that fairly under control for the most part. But then I feel like it’s not what I think, it’s what they think, so I’ve probably lost out on quite a few opportunities as a result of that. But it’s still a fairly big part of my identity. So I feel like if I don’t put it down then all of the work I’ve done to get to this point is kind of just being thrown away”. This sense of pride in their own identity was felt by several of the interns:

**‘I believe honesty is the best policy and autism is part of who I am. And if I say I’m not autistic it’s like denying who I am. And I won’t have it’**

Others, however, were wary about disclosing their diagnoses. This was mentioned regarding previous experiences: “I don’t try to hide it. I don’t need to tell them because it’s still got this negative sort of [connotation]. It’s not unjustified because a lot of autistics are badly affected. But I’m not, so if I tell somebody I’m autistic then I get tarred with that same brush.” And in relation to the internship: “Unless I’m working with them directly I don’t see why they should know”.

## 2. Expectations of the internship



### Hiring Managers' Views

#### Optimism Tempered by Uncertainty

The hiring managers were universally optimistic about the upcoming programme: "I'm pretty confident that whatever needs and whatever skills we identify in [the intern], that we will both identify them quickly, and secondly we'll be able to adapt and make best use of them and put him in an environment that works for him". This optimism was, however, tempered by a sense of uncertainty: "I think it's like anything, they [colleagues] are a little bit, let's say, apprehensive. It's like anything; it's something different".

It was clear that the success of the programme was important to the managers involved, with one explaining that: "everybody is very excited, but quite apprehensive about this, because nobody wants it to fail".



This uncertainty may, in part, have been due to managers' lack of prior knowledge about autism. While some had personal experience of the condition via friends or family members, others reported having little or no previous contact with people on the spectrum: "I guess I'm a bit worried because I just don't know what will be an issue and what won't be an issue". There was also recognition that in running this programme for the first time at DB, there was no template to which to refer for guidance: "I have no idea how it will work, just because we've never had any [autistic] interns".

One area that consistently raised concerns was the extent to which managers would treat the autistic interns differently from other interns. Many managers wanted to push for a greater sense of equality:

**"I don't want to really differentiate this type of intern with a regular one. I think my expectation would be probably the same and the interaction would be the same and the experience should be the same. That's my current approach to it"**

Another added that autism was incidental to the process: "So for me it's like I've got a role to fill, an intern role to fill; I have no qualms whether that was an autistic candidate or if it was just a normal graduate candidate is the honest answer. For me it's about finding the right person for that role".

In contrast to these sentiments, however, it was clear that the recruitment process had been altered significantly from DB's usual practices. For example, managers reported that they did not necessarily interview candidates who were applying for the internship in their team. One explained, "normally when you interview people, you've received a CV with their application and you've already reviewed them and you select the ones that you want to interview based on their qualifications and education and whatever, depending on the level. This wasn't done in exactly the same way". A number of managers did not agree with this change to the process and recommended that this should be amended, should the scheme be repeated: "I think it's important that the managers and people are meeting the candidates and selecting the candidates with a face-to-face interview". It was also noted that the entry requirements were significantly lower for this internship programme, resulting in a more diverse group of applicants that were more difficult to compare and select from: "the diversity of opportunities and the diversity of the candidates. You have some people who educationally quite frankly were way more qualified than I am. And you had some people who had Cs, Ds and Es at A-level. So I think it was difficult, that breadth was very difficult for everybody to get to terms with".



## 2. Expectations of the internship

### A programme with mutual benefits

Managers overwhelmingly spoke of mutual benefit, where both the interns and the organisation stood to benefit from the scheme: “[the internship] might be doing two things; supporting people and giving them the opportunity, so from their perspective, getting them into a workplace and a work environment, which can help them, obviously. But also some messages around how we might be getting something back ourselves by employing these people, perhaps seeing things in different ways and how that might help us in some of the work that we’re doing, particularly around change and process improvement. We might see things differently, for example”.

More specifically, managers felt that the scheme provided an important opportunity: “if I had son or daughter who had autism, I’d want them to have a chance of doing things as well. I think there’s probably not a huge amount of difference between anyone; we all have our own quirks”. They also talked about a number of perceived benefits to the interns, including improved confidence, experience of a workplace, and an understanding of how to operate within it:

**“I presume that part of what they’ll get out of the experience is dealing with new environments and change and things. I assume that’s a very important life skill for some of them to develop”**

For DB as an organisation, managers were optimistic that the scheme would add diversity, develop a culture of inclusivity and encourage new ways of thinking: “If we just hire white male graduates with a first from the same three or four degree courses you don’t get diversity of opinion, you don’t diversity of experience, you don’t get people challenging the status quo. I’m deliberately using an extreme but really that means we are constantly challenging ourselves, we are constantly being better, we are constantly being more effective and more timely and more accurate”. Managers also highlighted the potential benefit of this change for all employees, and the overall culture of the company:

**“What I’d like to do is learn how we can improve how the organisation is set up to allow people, not just with autism, but just to allow people that are very different to feel included, to feel empowered and enabled in the workplace so that they can add to the value that we as a bank create”.**

There was also an expectation that the intern would perform well and contribute to the work of the team: “these people are very focused and can concentrate on something, then actually it may be easier for them to overcome certain difficulties and maybe this learning curve, they can really move along this a lot quicker than somebody else. Quicker in the sense that their focus and concentration can be better”.

On a personal level, managers also felt that the experience of working with the autistic interns would be beneficial:

**“I actually think that’s an incredible benefit for the people around [the intern], to learn how to adapt themselves to somebody who isn’t of the typical mould. It’s a very good developmental thing for anyone”**



## 2. Expectations of the internship

Managers also identified the importance of corporate social responsibility and that the scheme was a way “to make sure that we are giving back something to the community”. They also stressed, however, that the programme was not a form of charity, and that the interns’ contribution was important to the company: “I think that will be the biggest challenge, not seeing this as some charitable thing, but seeing this as a commercial endeavour. Understanding that what we’re trying to do here is get a perspective that’s different and get people that can produce quality work when you give them the instruction to do so”. Tied to this was the sentiment that the internship should offer a meaningful experience for the participants: “The whole purpose of this is that they actually have a proper work experience. If I’m going to make up a role which is just sit in the corner and go and make me a cup of tea every two days, then actually that’s not doing them any benefit at all. So the end of this is that they have to experience the proper role”.



## Mixed expectations

In many cases, perhaps due to a lack of prior knowledge about autism, managers approached the internship without any expectations regarding the performance of the autistic interns: “well I don’t anticipate any problems with practical things like getting to work or adhering to the dress code. But maybe I don’t know, not quite sure what to expect”. Yet they recognised that the social aspects of the role, including networking in particular, might be especially challenging for the interns: “a lot of people do struggle with that. I think again, we’re going to go to extremes here with people with autism where we’re almost going to have to write a protocol for how they can talk to people and just find out more about people when there’s no key objective”. Likewise, in keeping with some of the key characteristics of autism (see Box 1, p. 9), communication was flagged up as being a potential issue, both with respect to interns being overly direct, or hesitant to come forwards. One manager said: “he is very direct. So I think we just need to manage that sensibly and see how that goes. Sometimes the office is quite quiet; it’s an open plan office, there are other teams sitting around us. So that’s something I’m conscious that I just need to protect him a bit there to make sure that he’s not too loud and direct and people get the wrong impression”. Conversely, another indicated that his “big worry is that my intern does not feel that he can raise concerns at any point and keeps problems to themselves and lets anxiety get too high”.

The managers recognised that they would each play a crucial role in helping navigate these challenges, both with respect to their own behaviour (“The question is, can I make sure they have all of that knowledge, how do I ensure that I get that knowledge over to them, and how do I ensure that my instructions are clear? These things are things that frankly we are out of practice in doing”) and that of their team (“I will re-emphasise some basic behaviours that I would expect people to generally do and that actually may have an outsized impact on someone with autism than that it would have on a neurotypical person”).

**“Say you’re going to do something; do it. If you say you’re going to meet them; meet them. If you want them to do some work; send them exactly what you want them to do. These are things that people should be doing but they’ve had the luxury of not doing it”**



## 2. Expectations of the internship

Tied to these concerns, was the importance of setting realistic expectations for the outcomes of the programme:

**“If they come in with the expectation of ‘I’ve got a three-month internship and that will then convert into a permanent role,’ then actually I think they’re going to be disappointed – in my area at least. That’s where I just need to be very transparent and say, well actually this is about experience, it’s about learning”**

Indeed, rather than formal outcomes, for most managers indicators of success were linked to learning, on the part of the intern (“How much they have learnt about the employment, how much they have learnt about the project they are working on, how much they have learnt and picked up the background behind what we do within the function”) and of DB as an organisation (“to create a blueprint that we could use again or other organisations could use again”).

### A personalised approach

A common theme, which emerged in many of the conversations, was the need to consider the intern as an individual and to tailor the experience accordingly: “Whether someone is on the autistic spectrum or not, we can really find where people’s specialisms make them successful in the job in this kind of industry. So really it is just a matter of understanding what people need in order to be successful and then putting them in the way of that work”. Likewise, managers were ready and willing to make necessary changes to facilitate a successful internship. These changes generally centred around encouraging breaks from work, providing a quiet area for interns when necessary, a dedicated desk (even in a hot-desking environment), keeping a rigid structure to the work, forming a routine for each day and minimising distraction in the office: “We took advice that was given during these meetings

and some other training that we’ve been attending. We’ve tried to take things into account – light, sound, all these things”. Many managers also reported planning to be led by the intern when it came to making decisions regarding these adjustments: “I think we’re flexible and we’re going to be guided in a lot of it by [intern]. Because everyone’s different, so find out from him where he is comfortable and where he’s not”.

Not everyone agreed with these accommodations, however. Some were concerned that making accommodations might be doing the intern a disservice and creating a false sense of ability: “I don’t want to create an artificial work environment that he might not be able to replicate for the whole of his career”. Others felt that the interns needed to adhere to the rules of the organisation rather than have adjustments made for their benefit: “Hopefully they’ll get a good appreciation into how they can thrive themselves in a professional environment and understanding how they can put some rules around their behaviour such that they can overcome some of the difficulties that they face either in terms of communication or social interaction, or through challenges or whatever”.

### SUMMARY

- Both the interns and hiring managers were excited about the opportunity offered by the internship programme but, at the same time, were anxious about their own roles within it.
- They saw the scheme as potentially mutually beneficial such that the interns could learn the intricacies of working within a corporate environment and DB employees and the company itself could benefit from people who “see things differently”.
- Yet there was disagreement within each group about whether a separate internship programme was necessary and whether, during the internship, they should be treated differently from those on the regular graduate scheme.
- Communication, particularly regarding asking for help and support, was anticipated by both interns and managers to be critical to the success of the programme.



### 3. Experiences of the internship

Immediately following the end of the three-month internship, we spoke to the interns and their hiring managers once again. In addition, we spoke to their buddies and team members to understand people's experiences of the internship from a range of different perspectives. Particular emphasis was placed on understanding perceived barriers and opportunities for success. In this chapter, we identify the main themes from these conversations within each group.

One of the key indicators of success for any internship programme is retention within the company. It is notable, therefore, that, of the eight interns in the DB programme, five interns had their contracts extended for an additional period.





### 3. Experiences of the internship



#### Interns' Views

##### A meaningful positive experience

In the main, the interns were happy with their experience at DB. They spoke of the scheme as a positive chapter in a challenging work history: "I was obviously struggling before because I'd been struggling to get into employment.

"And I think that had been hampering my social life because you have to prioritise one thing over another. But now that I've had three months within the bank, that's actually improved. And I think I've grown as a person as well. I think **sometimes you just need someone to take a chance on you and let you demonstrate your skills and what you've got**". They were proud to be the start of what they hope is a lasting legacy at the firm: "we showed we could get the job done and hopefully opened the doors for a bigger internship in the future". A number of the interns were pleased to report that their contracts had been extended at the end of the three-month period: "I work really hard, so when he offered it I was, thanks. But every time I thank him he says, you've earned it".

This was seen as a measure of success, but by no means the only one. The interns also spoke of how the programme had helped them in a number of areas, both work-related and more broadly. With respect to technical skills, interns felt they had learnt quickly and contributed well to the projects they were working on: "I was actually surprised on how well I picked up on it and how good at it I was. Because I thought banking was so different from everything else, like you needed a maths degree to do it. I'm pretty sure one of the other interns has one of those". Some also appreciated that their individual skills were taken into account, allowing them to perform to the best of their ability: "I think as they got to know me more they worked out the tasks that I was good at and the ones I didn't like as much. I think they recognised I'm brilliant with numbers and data and not good with walking around talking to everyone, so they gave me more of the data stuff and no more of the talking".

As well as acquiring these technical skills, interns also commented on the increased social connectedness that resulted from the programme, and highlighted the value of other 'soft skills' that they had learnt (more informally) from other more experienced colleagues, such as time management, networking and responding to deadlines: "You can't really teach those soft skills. You can read a textbook and learn a new language or whatever, but those soft skills are natural I think". Levels of self-confidence also appeared higher following the scheme.

**“The most useful thing is really my confidence. It's actually me knowing that I can do a graduate job. I think I'd say the most useful thing that I've learned is that I am very able and it's made me realise that I can do anything”**

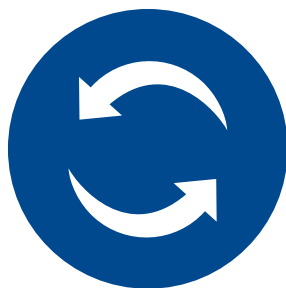
These gains in confidence seemed to be accompanied by an increase in wellbeing: "I think it's actually improved my actual health. I've been actually in a better place through the last three months, and that's mainly because I've actually had a job that I've actually enjoyed". Connected to this was a sense that they were contributing to the organisation ("I've benefitted, I think the bank's benefitted. I think that shows in the fact that they've wanted to keep me on for another few months".) and that others value what they have to offer ("I learned how others perceived my work in terms of things I do normally, like I considered something of value or as I'm just like, no. So I think that was a revelation to me in terms of I can do something that somehow people find interesting").

Others, however, were less positive about the outcomes, questioning whether they truly played a meaningful role at DB: "I partly kind of felt a bit embarrassed to be on the scheme because quite a lot of the time it feels like the only reason I'm here is because I have autism.

**“Because I just want to be seen as an employee, not as the autistic employee”**



### 3. Experiences of the internship



#### A supportive environment

Interns reported receiving good support through the programme from managers: “The support has always been there from my line manager. Every time I’ve seen him he’s gone, ‘what can I help you with?’” They also felt supported by their buddies: “I felt I was able to approach him very well, so that if I had any struggle with the work or dilemma he was able to give me some general advice as to how to approach things, from his own perspective.

“It’s also on a weekly basis I’ve had coffee meetings with him and he’s been very helpful so far. And it’s been really good that the buddy system has been introduced because you’re an intern and you’re pairing up with someone who’s actually worked there for so many years and it’s having that sense of access, that one-to-one relationship that I’ve found was very helpful so far”. In the best cases, this support was tailored to the individual and was available if needed, but not forced.

**“I didn’t want to be mollycoddled in any way, but I wanted to know that there was support there and I wasn’t just going to be sent down the river without a paddle”**

Most interns also felt DB staff were accepting of their autism: “They actually accept it fully. Like when I had Christmas drinks and all of a sudden they went into impromptu Christmas carolling, [colleague] just went, that’s awful singing. And I was like, yeah, but my hearing’s better so I hear like voice cracks and stuff. And he was like, ‘[the intern has] sensitive hearing, guys. Yeah, because I’m not sure if you’re aware but it’s common for autistic people to have heightened senses, which is why loud noises overwhelm them more”.

There were, however, differences in levels of disclosure across the teams. One explained: “I don’t think the team knows I have autism. It hasn’t needed to be mentioned as such. Just having that label of, I don’t know, autism, openly, I don’t see the benefit of it at all. Everyone’s got their foibles. But we all work together quite well”. Another felt that he would have preferred more openness: “I would have wanted them to know because at the end of the day, because if they’re more experienced, I think if they understand, look, I’m part of the internship. And if they had structured rotations, it would have been more helpful so that they’d be like, they would be able to dedicate more time to me”.

These differences between interns were reiterated a number of times. While some did not want much, if any, special assistance, others commented that more support should have been offered: “I think that others might have needed a bit more support and I’ve tried to give that support to them. But I feel like they needed more support perhaps from the programme. Perhaps anxiety management and also time management”. Additional adjustments would also have been welcomed: “I did tell him that I felt as if I needed some practice. It was a mixed response I got. I think he still was of the opinion that it was something I could do quite easily”. This perhaps reflected limited understanding of autism for some managers, with a couple of interns stressing the need for all managers to attend the training. One remarked, when asked about adjustments made for him in the workplace: “Not with my manager. He didn’t know what autism was”.

#### Challenges along the way

Despite the many positive sentiments outlined above, this was not uniformly felt across the group: “The scheme has proved to me that if I want a job somewhere like this then I can’t be myself”. There were a number of difficulties that interns faced over the three-month period. In many cases, they felt that the work offered to them could have been more challenging, and did not match their skills: “Well, I think I wasn’t really matched very well in terms of my skill set. I made it very clear what my interests were, and surely if you want someone to perform then you want to put them in an area that’s of interest. But yeah, I think I found it challenging because the work wasn’t satisfying to me”.

Some were devoted to one project for the whole period but wanted more variety: “I just wanted to do some sort of shadowing, some sort of networking with different divisions and try to enhance my experience and broaden my experience in the bank and try and see which role would be more appropriate for me rather than the current role”. In a number of cases, managers did not support interns’ requests for extra roles and would not facilitate introductions. Instead, the interns spoke of needing to be resourceful and create their own opportunities to maximise their experience at DB: “So I had to kind of develop my own opportunities. So I did some work with [other team] after my normal shift ended, so I could just do something that I was actually interested in”.



### 3. Experiences of the internship

As predicted by both groups in advance of the internships, communication was a key area of difficulty. With respect to how managers and colleagues communicated with them, interns felt that there was a lack of clarity, and issues with conflicting information: “I think the hardest thing was getting time with people to explain what they wanted me to do. And also people not doing what they say they’re going to do”. Another added: “Actually I wasn’t all that great with people, the contradictions anyway. It was like, ‘don’t tell people what you feel like’, and then ‘tell people what you feel like’. It was all getting a bit frustrating after a while. It was like, ‘don’t ask for more help’, and then ‘what are you doing? You should ask for more work”. In a number of cases, interns reported on promises that did not materialise, and managers who they felt failed to appreciate the impact of not delivering on a seemingly unimportant issue that was in fact crucial for the intern.

Likewise, interns recognised issues with their own communication: “So either I’m too honest about my emotions or I’m not honest enough and I’ve been having a migraine for four weeks and people don’t notice that kind of thing, because I told them everything’s fine in order to make them not worry. But then again I always find that picking up social cues tends to be a bit difficult anyway”. However, there was a willingness to work on overcoming this challenge: “I was very nervous about talking to vendors on the phone. I didn’t mind exchanging emails with them, but on the phone I found it very, very hard. And I kept putting it off and putting it off and I kept trying to find ways of how I could get round it you know...but I thought to myself, well I have talked on the phone before. The way I dealt with it was I basically had a script that I said, right, I’m going to follow this. Whatever they ask me or try and do, I’ve got a script I know I can follow. And so I went into a quiet space and I felt it was OK. It was a bit painful. I had to have a lot of patience to get the answer I wanted, but it paid off”.

For most interns, social aspects did not prove to be a major struggle. For some, however, they were problematic: “I didn’t realise that there was a hierarchy. I completely missed that. The other interns were like, ‘oh I was just emailing her secretary’, and I’m just like, oh right; really? Secretary? Oh shit. I mean it was great that she responded to me but it just didn’t really occur to me that it would matter so much”. Some interns also felt that the impact of social difficulties seemed to be undetected by managers: “It takes me much longer to come and come back, and also just to recover socially. But I just found it very difficult. And there’s no way I could ask my manager. He’s just not approachable at all. So there was no way I could say, ‘I’m having a difficult time with this; can I modify my hours?’”

The interns also emphasised how the sensory environment could be challenging at times: “Sometimes we have quiet periods in the office and when people are coming in it’s all like roar, roar, roar. It wasn’t overwhelming, just like ... noisy”.

To help with these challenges, the interns suggested the need for more preparation before they come on board: “I feel like I should have had a bit more time to get prepared before everything started. Because I didn’t actually know where I was going to be based until one week before it started”. In addition, they felt that it would have been helpful to have greater collaboration in the programme: “Instead of being thrown into different areas just randomly, I would prefer it probably that most of the interns were in the same office or the same location or the same role”. They reflected on the need to support each other within the intern group, rather than relying on managers/colleagues who they felt were sometimes too busy to help: “I’m having one-to-one meetings with him on a regular basis, on a weekly basis – he was able to help me. But then at the same time, everyone was really busy with their work and it was kind of hard for me to ask for help”. They also raised concerns that asking the manager for help would reflect badly on their abilities: “I felt as if, if I kept coming to him with all these different concerns it wasn’t going to look good. So I just tried to get on with it really”. In response to this, they used WhatsApp (a group-messaging application) to raise questions/ concerns with other interns and offer support. They felt this sense of collaboration could be formalised in the programme.

**“I believe that one of the ways of enhancing this internship or making it more positive so that instead of one person being in each and every individual project, I think teamwork should be kind of encouraged”**

### 3. Experiences of the internship



## Hiring Managers' Views

### Surprisingly successful

In keeping with the interns' views, most managers also had positive views of the scheme: "We've managed to find five people that we want to employ, which I think is remarkable". Nevertheless, they also acknowledged that the experiences of those involved were mixed at times: "Yeah, it's been interesting. Varied outcomes I think. We've had an outcome which I would consider one I was not expecting, which was somebody has been put forward to be interviewed for a permanent role, which is phenomenal.

"And there have been outcomes that I wasn't expecting on a downside, uncovering mental health issues and stuff. So I think the volatility of outcomes was much higher than I was expecting". The majority, however, spoke of meaningful experiences where all those involved had benefitted from the scheme. They reported not only work-based skills and project contributions but also that the interns were a welcome addition to the team on a personal level: "So he did some very sound, some of it technical, some of it organisational, work for us. It was complex and challenging and pushed the boundaries of not his skills set so much, but certainly his comfort zone. But he always got a success out of those, so he's left us with a very good kind of packet of work that he's done. And secondly, he really made a good impact on us socially as well". Managers also recognised the importance of workplace experience, including "operating in an office environment". They were also impressed with the soft skills that the interns demonstrated, both at the start ("I think he is very good at navigation. He probably in the three months, even I may not have spoken to as many managing directors as he did. So he's not afraid of emailing people and asking sometimes just to learn something") and the way that they developed during the internship ("I think he's more comfortable networking. I think he seems more sociable, he seems more willing to get in front of people and just ask for some time and I think that's very good").

The success of the scheme was also measured in terms of the managers' own learning: "We've learned a lot, sometimes more than I was expecting. And I think we end up writing

a way of doing this properly that is meaningful and that can be shared with other institutions as well". They gained experience "dealing with different personalities" and working with autism specifically: "I think I'm much less nervous about someone with autism than I would otherwise have been. I didn't know what to expect". They also found a new perspective when considering diversity: "It gives people a different perspective on things and they're more conscious about not just work, work, work, work, work, but actually how they're approaching things and everything else". This sense of embracing diversity extended beyond autism: "That's made me think about other people who perhaps haven't got the same challenges as [intern], but they do have their own challenges, to try and be able to be more sympathetic and accommodating in that situation". In some cases, the success was surprising and exceeded expectations: "I think my anticipated challenges from the training provided were way off scope and I was just a bit sort of nervous that I might not be able to manage someone with autism with the expertise required, when I could have actually just behaved and treated them like normal". Another manager said, "I was expecting someone with autism to have perhaps more defined or more traits that were part of the training". The nature of the success also countered the stereotypes that managers reportedly had regarding autism: "The things that I was concerned about, like let's say doing his presentation to the management team, he was perfectly comfortable with. He didn't mind at all".

### A sense of equity

One issue that divided opinion was the extent to which the autistic interns should be given 'special treatment'. Some managers felt that no distinction should be drawn: "I didn't treat this any differently from a normal internship. I've deliberately made sure that we haven't treated him any differently from anyone else, right? Obviously bearing in mind if there's anything he finds disconcerting or anything else". There was a sense that making accommodations might be doing a disservice to the intern, and produce a false sense of achievement: "I got a sense that through their lives they have been supported, people have been trying to build confidence, support them and tell them they're fantastic and so they come in thinking all of those things which is true, but within this environment they're here to work". In some cases, this resulted in normative expectations: "I hope he's learned some standards in terms of professional standards. I hope he's learned to be a bit more flexible in his approach to things". There was also frustration when interns failed to meet these expectations: "I had to give him a rule-based thing, [those hours] are a minimum and you should hang out until you're done. And I had to tell him to stop talking to me about hours. I think he struggled with that. So that inability to flex, I think he needs to control it".

In contrast to this, there were managers who felt it was important to recognise and attend to individuals' needs and personalities: **"Everyone has strengths and weaknesses. You need to work out what the strengths are of your candidate and what the weaknesses are and find the right way.** The same as you'd do with any intern. If there are things you need to make aware of, if they've got specific issues around, I don't know, dress or where they sit, stuff like that, I would make that clear for the candidate".



### 3. Experiences of the internship

Modifications were made accordingly, for example giving very specific instructions, communicating in writing, or addressing sensory issues: “Wearing headphones, being able to chill out in a room somewhere, having clear arrival times and clear departure times. Were those modifications made? Yeah. I don’t think that was an issue at all”.

#### Challenges along the way

Despite the overall perceived success of the internship programme, managers reported areas of difficulty along the way. Some were work-related, such as trouble taking feedback on board, producing sufficient quantities of work or seeing the bigger picture: “[intern] kind of got stuck on details, obsessive stuff like presentational nuances, like why is this column there and not here. He asked some amazingly insightful questions and he also asked about formatting. And you know, you want to focus on the interesting, intellectual questions because that’s where it’s interesting. Do you really care about formatting? And I think he did”. Other challenges were the need for constant support (“I wasn’t around a lot; I was doing 18 hour days and stuff, which is difficult. So I think he probably would have liked more support from a senior person and he didn’t get that”) and the high levels of anxiety in some of the interns (“It always tended to be challenges of confidence and dealing with the anxiety of new situations and new things to do and new people to talk to. I imagine the first time you say to anyone ‘call the person who’s in charge of account management at the New York Stock Exchange’, that’s probably a little bit daunting, right? And it was acutely, not just acutely daunting for [intern], but also that anxiety affected him slightly more and certainly differently to how it would affect other people in the team”).

Managers also noted some social issues, including, for example, understanding the hierarchy of the office: “And I said to him, she is one of the board members and I don’t think you’ll have any time with her. Just learn what’s going on. This is the line. What is your project about etc.? So yeah, it’s one of those things, you need to just let them know at what level people operate here”. Nevertheless, there was an understanding that integrating into a new workplace is difficult, irrespective of autism: “I think the social stuff to start with he found challenging, but I think anybody would find that challenging in a new team and a new environment”.

Managers also recognised that many interns were aware of these areas of difficulty, and worked hard to overcome them: **“He’s incredibly self aware, incredibly ready to talk about what, where he needs help and getting access to that help. And then you could always see that he’d keep going on that until he got the result he needed”.**

To better respond to challenges if and when they occurred, managers expressed the need to have access to ongoing coaching or advice throughout the scheme: “I would have liked a bit more real-time guidance. I just think it’s something I could have done with at the time. I wouldn’t do it again if I didn’t have a 24/7 mental health line or something I could call [for advice] or something like that”. In addition, several managers suggested that autism training should be made mandatory for all managers and team members (it was offered, but not enforced this time). Despite this, managers wholeheartedly recommended the scheme: “You know, be brave and go for it. Teams, even teams that are stretched and busy and feel that there’s not enough of them and feel that they’re underfunded, find time to help interns to be successful. We’ve always needed to hire from a much more diverse pool. So it’s just another reason why we should be casting the net far wider with our candidates and internships like this help us do that. So yeah, be brave”.

#### SUMMARY

- Interns and hiring managers felt that their experiences were generally positive and meaningful. Interns contributed to the team, learned both technical, work-related skills and more informal, ‘soft skills’, and felt more confident as a result. Hiring managers also felt that the interns “had a good impact on us”, including more knowledge and experience of working with autism and with diversity more broadly.
- For the most part, the interns reported feeling accepted within the workplace and were well supported by their managers, buddies and colleagues. They were divided, however, about issues related to disclosing their diagnosis and seeking special support or assistance. Likewise, some managers felt strongly that the interns should be treated the same as any other intern, while others felt that they needed to attend to the individuals’ specific needs and personalities.
- Despite its apparent success, the interns highlighted key challenges during the internship, including the lack of breadth in the work provided, problems with communication, and colleagues not following through on promises. This was in addition to some social and sensory issues. For hiring managers, difficulties with responding to feedback, being overly focused on details, elevated anxiety and difficulties with social interactions were all cited as particularly challenging.
- To respond to these challenges, managers felt that they should have access to ongoing support and advice throughout the duration of the internship.



### 3. Experiences of the internship



#### Buddies' and team members' views

##### A positive experience

Those who worked with and supported the autistic interns were positive about their experience of the scheme. They reported forming good relationships with the interns, some of which they felt would continue well beyond the programme: "I've offered to maintain our kind of, well I wouldn't even call it a relationship; I'd call it a friendship now anyway. But as somebody that [intern] can reach out to and come to going forward. So for me it doesn't end this week anyway. So that's a really nice thing" [Buddy].

Both team members and buddies felt that working with the interns resulted in their own personal development: "I think it's opened my mind about the different skills that people have that perhaps don't work in a conventional way, that they've got something to offer. I always thought that anyway, but it's confirmed that" [Buddy]. Some had personal connections to autism but, overall, very few buddies or team members had previous knowledge of the condition: "I'm not going to lie, before the briefing I knew nothing. I didn't know whether it was a mental condition, a physical condition, could you spot someone with autism; very, very little" [Buddy]. But they reported learning from the training and were able to implement modifications based on their new insights: "It helped me anticipate a lot of things as well. So for example, the whole sarcasm thing; that's a big thing in the office. It helped me understand, you know what: sometimes don't be sarcastic. Say what you mean and mean what you say. So if I'm saying, see you in a minute, I'll say that to someone and they'll know that with me a minute means I'm going to see you in 15 minutes. But to them it would be like, I'm just doing something now; I'll be about 15 minutes" [Buddy]. They observed that those who had not received the training appeared to have issues working with the interns, and seemed to be doing things that were at odds with what had been suggested during the sessions (for example, by not following through on promises, or choosing noisy places to meet). They also remarked that their preconceptions had been changed by the experience.

One team member was particularly struck by his experience and went on to express a controversial but apparently deeply held view: **"I think definitely you've got to enter this with an open mind. Don't see this as a disability, because autism is certainly not a disability. Play to people's strengths"** [Team Member].

Both groups also commented on the ways in which they believed DB has benefitted from the programme, including recruiting new talent ("I think it's a massive untapped market, so there's the potential to hire people. Just because they've got a disability doesn't mean they're not effective bank workers" [Team Member].) and enhancing the diversity of the organisation: **"This diversity element is really important for business, to have people with different perspectives and different ideas. It's helpful for business"** [Buddy]. The buddies and team members also noted benefits to the interns (echoing those highlighted by the managers and interns themselves), including improving their CV, increased confidence, and a new network and experience of a workplace: "I honestly think that the interns coming in, having time in a normal office environment, going through the interview process – I think the buddy scheme works excellent" [Buddy].

Team members and buddies felt that the success of the scheme was indicated in a number of ways. Team Members confirmed that the intern was a valuable member of the team, performed well, and did meaningful work: "He hasn't been just given tasks that nobody wants to do; he's been asked to actually work on things that are key to taking projects to the next level". Both groups also remarked on the importance of interns' personal development and wellbeing, rather than more formal outcomes:

**"I think that success really is measured in the way their confidence grows over that period of time. Whether they stay or leave at the end of the internship, do they leave more confident in themselves and about going into another workplace than when they arrived. And I think in that respect the scheme has been hugely successful"**

### 3. Experiences of the internship



#### Offering support

Buddies and team members were often surprised at how little support was needed. In some cases, team members felt that they did not distinguish between the autistic intern and any other intern: “You know my interactions with interns, I wouldn’t say there was any difference. We haven’t really accommodated him in any other way at all. He sits at a desk, he does the same work, he’s got the same equipment and everything that everybody else has, and he gets on with it”. As a result, some felt that they had perhaps offered too much support where it was not warranted: “I think we probably wrapped him in cotton wool a little bit to start with. We were very, very supportive. Maybe a little bit too supportive initially” [Team Member].

This sentiment was echoed by the buddies, with one suggesting that if the scheme was repeated they would “probably not try to hand hold him so much at the beginning, because they are, after all, adults. I was probably a little bit too, you know, overseeing him twice a day, checking him”. The eagerness to provide adequate help also resulted in support being offered from many directions, including manager, buddy, team members, scheme organisers: “I think we maybe slightly smothered him a little bit to start with in trying to be helpful. There were quite a lot of us trying to support him and cover him. We did tread on each others’ toes a little bit in terms of trying to provide that support and make sure that he got a good mix of work to do” [Team Member].

With respect to the work demands placed on the interns, there was concern that their abilities had been underestimated: “But actually [intern] is very capable and I think therefore we perhaps did maybe treat him slightly differently actually to others that join the bank, and we did a little bit too much on his behalf instead of making him accountable for things that he perhaps should have been accountable for” [Team Member].

In other cases, colleagues felt that a high level of support was required: “He needed a lot of support from me. I think one of the challenging things for me is that I had to say instructions over and over again. So rather than saying once and then do it again, I’d get the same question day after day after day” [Team Member]. This support seemed to revolve around a few key areas, including office etiquette (knowing how chatty to be with colleagues while working), practical aspects (adhering to working hours, moving between buildings), workload (not having enough to do, not finding the work fulfilling), the sensory environment (too much noise, too many people around) and anxiety (often linked to uncertainty): “And I did overhear [intern] when he was speaking to senior management, or someone had sent an email asking to sit down with him, I think he gets quite stressed out by that. So he’s quite anxious when he’s not aware of the full context or the reason for a meeting”. Anxiety around performing well on a task was also highlighted, together with the impact that has on meeting deadlines: “He’s not the quickest because he wants to get everything right. He can’t work under speed. So if we’d got a time line down I’d try and avoid giving it to him. But unfortunately a lot of what you actually do in a bank relates to time in some shape or form, which is quite difficult. Unfortunately you get that in just about every line of work” [Team Member].

Anxiety issues seemed to be the most serious challenge encountered by team members and buddies, with some reporting incidents of interns showing high levels of distress. In these cases, staff tried to help, but felt that they were ill-equipped for the task: “You sometimes feel like you’d be chipping away for ages trying to get there and it was just emotionally quite exhausting at times when they were very, very, very anxious because I just felt like I couldn’t get through” [Team Member].

To try and help overcome these issues, a number of adjustments were made by the buddies and team members. One of these adjustments related to communication styles: “If there is something we would like to communicate, his preferred style would be having it in writing. So to help with something it would be to write it down and send an email to make sure he’s understood it; which is not a problem, but obviously not my standard style of working” [Team Member]. Others related to the physical environment, for example, giving the intern a dedicated desk: “So we work in a hot-desk environment, but we had set aside a dedicated desk so he knew exactly where he was going to sit every morning” [Team Member]. Other accommodations were made in an attempt to reduce distraction: “I think we unplugged his phone so that wouldn’t distract him. We sort of diverted some of the phone on to mine so we wouldn’t miss any calls but he wouldn’t have to take any sort of thing” [Team Member].

### 3. Experiences of the internship



#### A personal challenge

The buddies reflected on their own challenges over the internship. They spoke of working hard to build the relationship with the intern from the start: “When I first met him he was very awkward and obviously found our meeting a challenge because he wouldn’t look me in the eye. It was quite uncomfortable.

“And I’ve never done anything like this before, I’ve never mentored anybody in any way, shape or form. So I came away from that thinking, oh my goodness; what on earth am I going to do and how am I going to be of any help to him?” [Buddy]. They also noted that other colleagues were initially apprehensive about how to treat the interns: “I think especially at the beginning people would come up to me and say – because one of the interns had got headphones on – people would come up to me and be like, I’m not really sure what to say; do I go up and introduce myself? Do I not introduce myself? I think that was a challenge at the beginning, just interacting with the interns”. There was also confusion regarding the lack of consistency and predictability of the interns’ difficulties, for example being told that someone finds loud environments problematic, but then seeing them thrive at a loud event.

Team members pointed out that while the training was offered to buddies and managers, it was not offered to team members, which they felt posed a challenge for them. This concern was reiterated by buddies, who stressed the need to ensure that those directly involved fully understand the nature and intention of this specific internship scheme and attend the training: “I’d make sure everyone goes to the training and that boundaries are set up and roles are defined”.

Colleagues reported that there were some difficulties finding the right work for the interns. Team members and buddies highlighted the need for better planning in advance (“The training could have come a bit earlier and got teams more prepared for it”), and better communication within the team in order to improve the interns’ placements. One suggestion was perhaps to offer more variety in the work offered: “He was very focused on a specific piece of work, but maybe within the team, having a bit more of an opportunity to understand some of the other aspects” [Team Member].

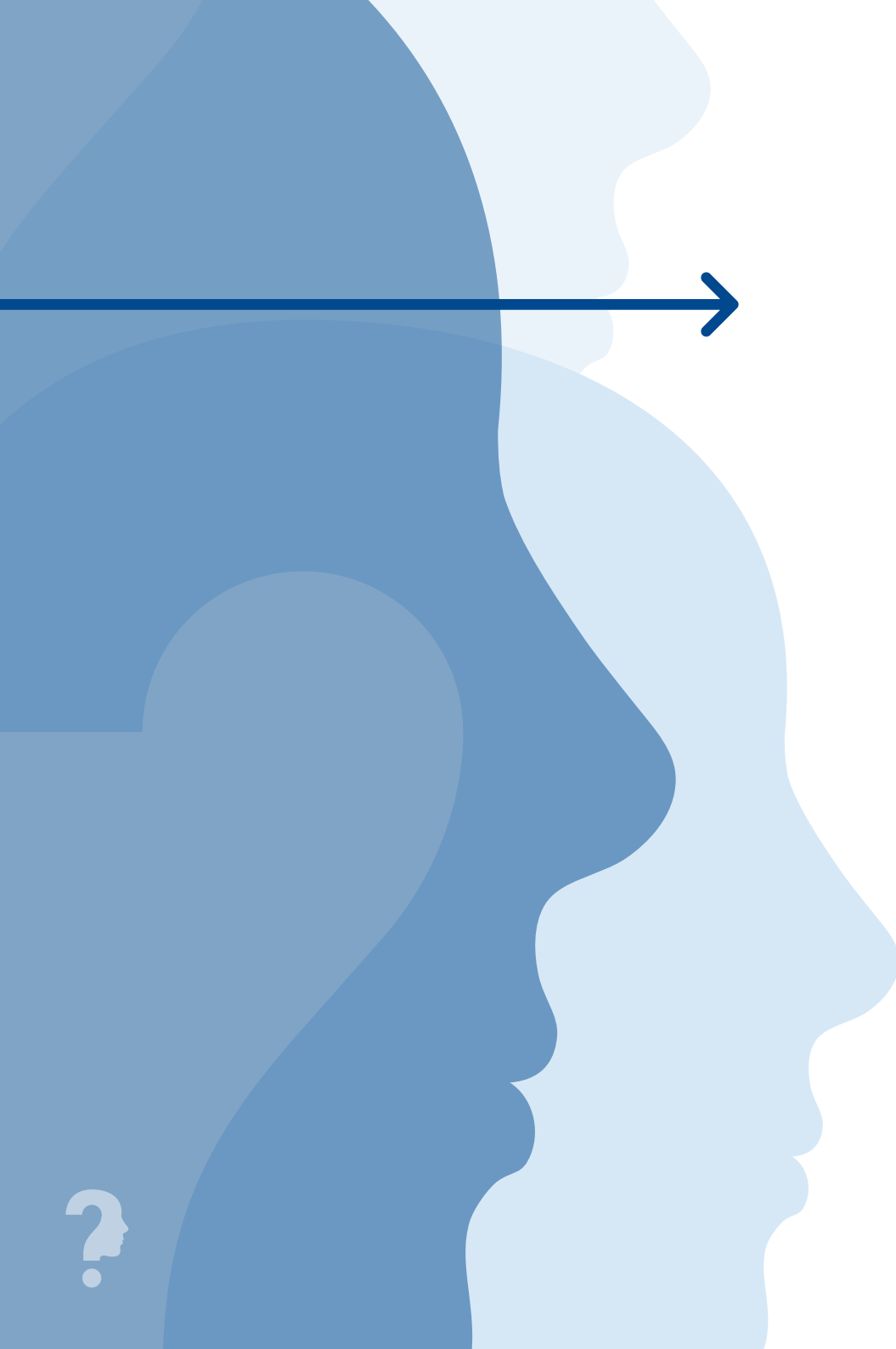
#### A lasting legacy?

Questions were raised regarding the next steps for the programme: “I’d like to know what makes a success now? Are we going to continue doing this? Are we going to make it a grad thing? Are we going to bring in different charities and just keep it going on a rolling basis? I’d like to know what’s next” [Buddy].

All were keen to continue the scheme, and would recommend it to other companies, but with a few caveats. First, they felt that there should be clear and realistic expectations for the outcomes of the programme (“Make it clear about what positions there are or aren’t available” [Buddy]) and that follow-on opportunities should be in place: “Well, personally I think the bank should only take people on if they actually think there is a possibility that they could offer a position to them at the end” [Buddy]. Second, buddies welcomed a more inclusive approach towards all DB recruitment: “I think labels can be quite patronising, personally. There shouldn’t be a necessity to have a certain process to allow certain talented individuals to get a role. That being said, if the generic process doesn’t cater for all candidates, shall we say, then you’ve immediately excluded certain talented individuals. So by fine-tuning that on-boarding process, which will be expensive, but the net benefit will be candidates of untapped talent will be given the opportunities that they deserve”.

#### SUMMARY

- Team members and buddies were positive about the internship programme, reporting far-reaching benefits to the interns, the staff at DB and the company more broadly. Some had developed long-lasting relationships with the interns and report that they gained personally from the interactions they had.
- They spoke of feeling overly concerned with providing support, which meant that they felt that they either provided too much (when it was not needed or wanted) or that the support that was offered was not well coordinated.
- Both team members and buddies highlighted a number of challenges related to anxiety, communication styles, and social and sensory aspects of the work environment.
- They were keen to see the internship rolled out more broadly but emphasised that training of all staff was necessary to ensure that any challenges could be addressed more easily and effectively, and that the expectations (for them and the intern) of the programme were clear.



## 4. Conclusions and recommendations

Autistic adults, just like non-autistic people, want to be valued and valuable members of communities. Yet too many of them are unemployed or underemployed, finding it difficult to obtain and sustain employment. The recent surge in initiatives to employ autistic people – from large-scale corporations like Microsoft, SAP and Vodafone<sup>28</sup> to small companies that employ almost exclusively autistic people – clearly acknowledge the potentially untapped and unique potential of autistic people. There is much to be celebrated in these initiatives. Yet the dearth of research evaluating the experiences of those who participate in the initiatives means that we simply do not know the most effective ways of getting autistic people into jobs and keeping them there.

The purpose of this report has been to understand the experiences of the people involved in one such initiative at Deutsche Bank UK.

On the whole, our participants reported they found the internship to be a success – for the interns themselves, for those working with them, and for the company more broadly – and went beyond many participants' expectations.

The process, however, was not necessarily straightforward for all of those involved, all of the time. Participants also identified, with remarkable agreement, a number of challenges that they encountered throughout the duration of the internship.





## 4. Conclusions and recommendations

We conclude our report, therefore, by highlighting four main recommendations, which emanate from our findings.

### 1. Be clear and always be committed

All groups highlighted the importance of providing clear expectations about the programme from the outset and sticking to those expectations throughout the programme.

All those involved need to know whether there is a possibility of a more permanent job at the end. Likewise, the purpose of the scheme should be explicit: is it to establish whether the interns can adhere to the rules and standards of the office, or is it to create a bespoke pathway that facilitates their inclusion?

Similarly, those interacting with the interns should be clear in their use of language and sincere in what they offer – say what you mean and mean what you say. Wherever possible, promises should be kept, deadlines met, and offers fulfilled.

### 2. Treat people as individuals

Autism varies widely from person to person – even in individuals who are clever and articulate, like the interns described herein. With this in mind, it is important to avoid making assumptions about those with the condition. As the saying goes: “If you’ve met one person on the autism spectrum, you’ve met one person on the autism spectrum”.

These differences between individuals were clear in this study. For example, some interns preferred to disclose their diagnosis to colleagues, while others did not. Similarly, some felt anxious about the social aspects of the role, while others embraced networking opportunities and enjoyed spending time with colleagues. Rather than using prior knowledge or relying on commonly held stereotypes of autism, outcomes were best when managers or colleagues asked the intern how they would like to approach work-related or broader issues.

Managers and colleagues should seek to recognise the distinctive strengths and interests of the autistic interns as well as the difficulties they may face, and tailor their management style and interactions accordingly. As one hiring manager said, “Everyone has strengths and weaknesses. You need to work out what the strengths are of your intern and what the weaknesses are and find the right way of working with them”.

### 3. Provide widespread training on autism

Many of those we spoke to suggested that there should be more widespread training on working with autistic employees specifically, and that this training should be given to all those who will interact with the interns (i.e. all team members, staff in Human Resources) rather than limited to hiring managers and buddies. Attending the training appeared to be associated with better experiences, and an understanding of the genuineness of difficulties associated with the condition. This training should, however, also stress the individual differences seen in those on the spectrum. This may help colleagues avoid making assumptions based on stereotypes.

In addition, a need was raised for ongoing professional support for managers during the internship. This could take the form of a helpline or a regular (fortnightly or monthly) meeting with a job coach with expertise of autism to allow managers or colleagues to seek guidance, for example, when faced with a challenging situation. This request echoes research findings that suggest that supported employment (where employees and employers receive on-the-job coaching and training) promotes positive outcomes for autistic people.<sup>21</sup>

### 4. Create a point-person for autistic interns and their managers

Many of those involved in the internship – from the interns themselves to hiring managers, buddies and team members – spoke about the difficulty in communicating concerns, especially when potential disagreements between interns and managers emerged. Many reported uncertainty about when potential difficulties should be raised, and with whom.

As such, we believe that future cohorts would benefit from the establishment of a neutral point-person, known to and respected by all involved, who could be tasked with facilitating discussion between different parties in the event of disagreement and could also be available as a source of advice on the seriousness, or otherwise, of issues as they arise. This point-person could be a DB employee not otherwise involved in the scheme but provided with the necessary training and support from external agencies.

## Conclusion

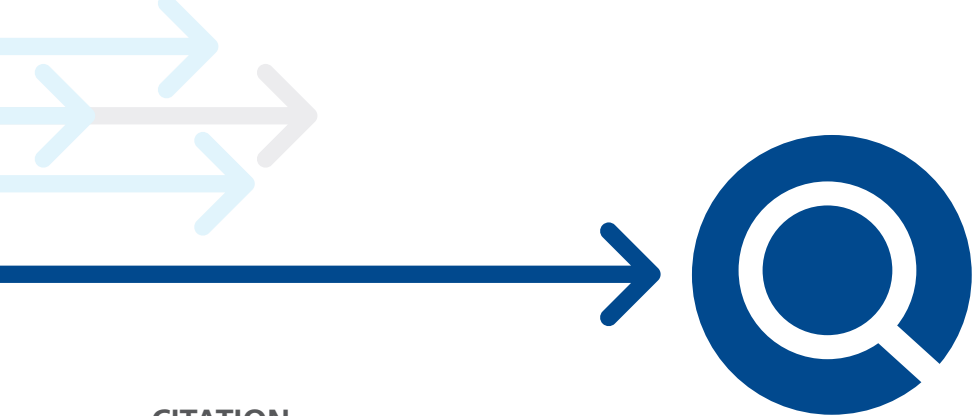
Deutsche Bank’s autistic graduate internship programme is already a very promising strategy to turn around autistic people’s exclusion from the labour market. The findings in our report suggest that its promise will be even more effectively realised by ensuring staff communicate their expectations in a clear and committed way, that everyone at the Bank has a proper understanding of the potential difficulties that autistic employees might experience, and by providing staff with access to the right training and ongoing support they will require to get the best out of autistic interns. With these amendments in place, the Deutsche Bank programme could well become a beacon of good practice for other employers across the world.



## 5. About us

The UCL Institute of Education, University College London, is both the largest and the leading research and teaching institution into education theory and practice in the UK and internationally.

It houses the Centre for Research in Autism and Education (CRAE), a unique centre focused on helping to enhance the lives of autistic people and their families ([crae.ioe.ac.uk](http://crae.ioe.ac.uk)) through (1) conducting ground-breaking scientific and applied research to enhance knowledge about evidence-based interventions, education and outcomes for autistic children, young people and adults, and (2) working with professionals on the ground and with those directly impacted by autism to promote awareness, and acceptance, of autism.



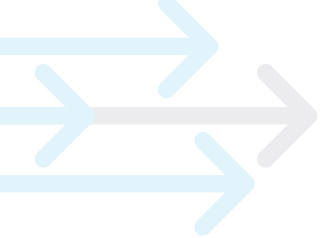
## CITATION

Remington, A. & Pellicano, E. (2017). "Sometimes you just need someone to take a chance on you": An Internship Programme for Autistic Graduates at Deutsche Bank, UK. London, UK: University College London.

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