

## Creating space for everyone



Robyn:

Hello. My name is Robyn Steward. I'm a member of the core team at Heart n Soul at The Hub. I'm also the lead of the Music Jams. When I first started coming to Heart n Soul at The Hub when I first started working, I always used to introduce myself as an autistic person, but I quickly realised I don't need to do that, because I can just be me.

Sarah:

Hello, I'm Sarah. I'm the associate director of Heart n Soul at The Hub. I really enjoyed listening to what the members of the team have been saying about their experience of working at The Hub.

Robyn:

It was lovely. It was really nice to hear everybody talk about their experience. The one that for me was really emotional was hearing Sam talk, because it seemed like through being at The Hub, he had learned that it's okay to say, "Can we turn the lights down?" or to go and work in a room if the room he's in is too loud. To know that it's no problem to have different sensory experiences, it was just so nice to hear, because so many autistic people like me and Sam have such negative experiences in work. And so for me, it was just really lovely that Sam had had a really positive experience.

I liked the fact that there was no judgment. So in the meeting... I actually find it difficult to sit still. I spent many meetings, in fact, most of the meetings, sat on the floor and I think most people would think I wasn't listening. I absolutely was listening, and occasionally I'd pop my hand up and I was taking part, but I just found that I needed to move around a lot and do stuff.

Sarah:

There was another bit in what Sam was saying, which David also said, that I was really happy to hear, which they were talking about how once they'd started their jobs, then it became obvious that they were

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really good at doing stuff like David at doing voice recordings and Sam with his artwork, and that the job has changed so that they could focus on that. And I've always thought that employers do things back to front. They write these job descriptions, which are very, very specific and there's a huge list of requirements, and it always starts off with excellent interpersonal and communication skills, right? So they're designing these job descriptions that very, very few people can realistically do. Right? So they're automatically excluding a lot of people from the workplace rather than saying, "We really would like a lot of different people in our workplace, so why don't we just have a somewhat more flexible recruitment process, get people in and then be willing to be flexible and build around their skills?" Because before people start, you don't know everything about them.

And I do think that employers really do have to decide, do they want a diverse workforce or not? And if they do, then they really have to rethink their whole recruitment process and how flexible they are with people.

We very deliberately offered roles with reduced hours in discussion with the people who were going to be doing those roles, and the flexibility around working structures is very, very important, I think, including what times of day people work. An example of that would be to avoid traveling in the rush hour, and to also accommodate other things that are happening in people's lives, like maybe support at home, for example. So yeah, there's quite a lot of detail around employment structures, which becomes very important.

Robyn:

No one here wishes that anybody was anybody else. We're glad that each person is who they are, and we don't want them to change in any way. Yeah. We really value them for who they are, and I think that that's really important because I think that so much of your life as somebody with a learning disability or autistic person is in a way

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decided by society, because society has these values. And like you pointed out, Sarah, that in job specifications, excellent interpersonal skills and communication, well, I mean, like you say, that isn't everybody and it excludes a lot of people.

Heart n Soul values all skills equally. It doesn't put one skill above another. I think the only thing that maybe is top is being kind to each other, but I think that anybody can be kind. So, I think that that's an inclusive one.

Heart n Soul is the first time I've ever had a job where people haven't expected me to read and write loads of stuff. We had accessible agendas that had pictures and emojis. We all drew an emoji and that was something when someone started, they drew how pictorially they'd like to represent themselves. And we didn't do minutes, because that's not accessible, and we took lots of breaks.

Sarah:

Sometimes I think employers don't want to take the extra effort, because producing accessible agendas, for example, and communicating with each individual in a way that is going to work for them, means that you have to communicate the same thing in different ways. So, you might write it for someone, you might phone someone, et cetera, et cetera. And I think employers think, "Oh, this is going to be really time-consuming and we can't afford to do it because we're so busy that it will get in the way of us being fantastic." And I do question that, actually, because we're all different when it comes to communication, and there is this assumption that we're all the same. And if all the communications are built around that assumption that everybody's the same, then there's going to be loads of people who are not understanding stuff properly or don't feel included properly. And if people don't feel included, valued, understood, then they're not going to be happy at work and therefore their work's not going to be good. So

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I think it's quite short-term-ist when employers have that hesitation. I mean, I think at Heart n Soul, it's always been worth it.

Robyn:

The thing about reading and writing for me is that it takes a long time and it's tiring and I'm not really sure it's that accurate. And it just seems, like you were saying, Sarah, like a waste of my skills. I have communication skills. Well, they aren't reading and writing. And so it would be better if everybody just used the skills that I had and didn't wish that I was someone else.

So, we had these things called principles, that I called rules, and it was on a poster in the glassroom, and we used to be able to see it every day. During the application, I think we all worked together to create some rules about how we were going to work together so that we would be, so that everyone would be welcome.

And the principles, it's called *How Will Everyone Work Together In The Hub?*

"There will be disabled and non-disabled people in everything we do."

"People with learning disabilities and autism will be at the heart of ideas, decisions and sharing." That's important.

"We will believe and trust in everyone we work with." I think that's important because if you believe someone can take part, if you truly believe that, then you get equality, but if you never give someone the chance to say something or do something, how will they ever know that they can do it?

"We will learn from each other, and we'll change things as we learn."

"We will share as much as we can with other people."

"We will do things very differently in many different ways."

"We will bring love and hope to everything."

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"We will connect with all sorts of people we know and don't know yet."  
Yeah, we definitely connect with a lot of new people.

"We will use clear language." That's important.

And this is the one I really like best. "We will be kind and have fun." But yeah, we've thought about these principles before we moved to The Hub, and it was a really important thing to do.

Sarah:

It was a big learning thing, I think, about how important it is that everybody's on the same page as human beings before you set out on a big project.