

Implementing a Neurodiversity program

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Autism Facts

- Autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by impaired social interaction, impaired verbal and non-verbal communication, and restricted and repetitive behavior.
- 1 in 42 males and 1 in 189 females are on the spectrum¹
- The Australian employment participation rate is 42% for people with autism compared to the disability participation rate of 53%²
- Up to 80% have additional mental health concerns – anxiety/depression most common³
- The risk of suicide or suicidal thoughts may be up to nine times higher in people with autism⁴
- Employment churns rates are approximately 66% after 26 weeks



1 Christensen et al. 2016

2 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). (2014). 4428.0: Autism in Australia, 2012 [Press release].

3. Hofvander et al. 2009

4. Hirvikoski et al. 2016

The Journey for DXC

- The Dandelion Program was established 4 years ago by DXC, formally HPE in partnership with Department of Human Services
- When we initially started the program there was very little evidence based information around employing people with autism. Our due diligence investigations with other organisations showed that where tried, failure of sustainment was the greatest challenge. They were correct.
- The key is that it is more than just providing a job... It is about giving the individuals the tools, skills and proper work experience to define and build a career.
- Approximately 12 months into the program we realised there was a lot more complexity involved to create sustainability. Areas to tackle were identified as:
 - Mental health issues; something we did not know until later is that 80% of people on the spectrum have at least one comorbidity (anxiety, depression, sleeping disorders) and they are nine times higher to have suicidal thoughts
 - Managers being fearful of having performance management discussions
 - Executive functioning problems
 - Lack of life (adaptive) skills
 - Continuous education of the work environment about autism and mental health issues
- We realised we needed more help to develop a programmatic approach to dealing with all these issues if we are truly going to change participation rates for people on the spectrum. We identified and involved a variety of partners in the program to assist including Cornell University, Harvard Business School, Ivey Business School, La Trobe University, University of Queensland, Autism CRC, University of Haifa and Ono Academic College (Israel)



The Dandelion Program

- The vision was to create a sustainable program that would increase the workforce participation rate of people on the Autism Spectrum
- The Dandelion Program consists of two streams – internships and employment
- The Dandelion employment program is a three year program focussed on building careers and the skills of people on the spectrum; similar to a graduate program
- The Dandelion Program now has 58 people and 14 work experience participants working in the areas of cybersecurity, data analytics and software testing for the Australian Federal Government Department of Human Services, Department of Defence and Department of Border Protection and we have shared our experiences with the autism community by open sourcing the learnings with La Trobe and Cornell University
- ANZ Bank is now the first corporate client

"This program is unique because it attacks the problem of employment for people with an ASD, not simply by pushing harder the peg into the square hole, but instead by addressing the supports needed on both ends..."

Professor Cheryl Dissanayake, Director, Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre

Benefits of the model – La Trobe University

Personal

- Job retention is high when compared to other ASD employment programs; some transitioning out of the program early and into full time unsupported employment
- Recruitment process and support system considered critical to workplace success
- Participants:
 - develop a “sense of purpose and meaning in life”, previously unobtainable opportunities (e.g., purchasing a house)
 - opportunities to socialise, feel “part of the wider workforce”
 - better prepared to apply for unsupported jobs, build experience/work history necessary to be competitive in job market

Organisation

- Co-workers “proud” their organisation is involved in the Dandelion Employment Program, see diversity as important and relevant, program is a “go to” when talking about positive aspects of work
- Quality of work and performance of trainees reported to be excellent; new innovations transferable to broader workforce
- Managers learn new skills (e.g., improved communication) transferable to other work environments

Economic

- For every 100 individuals* participating in the 3-year Dandelion Employment Program, it is estimated that the program:
 - generates \$2,826,600 in tax benefits
 - savings of \$3,219,900 in welfare payments
 - \$600,000 reduction in employment service access
 - resulting in **potential for over \$6 million benefit to the government over 3 years****

*Assuming previously unemployed, receiving welfare or disability pensions.

**Figure does not factor in benefits from decreased health care costs, decreased use of other support services, nor general economic benefit from increased productivity and activating a previous unutilised section of the labour market

Some Words From Our Team Members

“The job provides a purpose ... you're looking forward to getting up in the morning, to going to work ... it is challenging yes, sometimes stressful ... but in the end I know that I've done good.”

Dandelion Program Trainee

"What is important isn't the money, it's giving something back to society that's important. I can get by on a little bit of money, I'm ok, that's not important. Without a job, I feel like I'm a drain on society... I feel like I'm not giving anything back, I feel it's my duty – it's the right thing to do... we have an understanding of how society works, even if we don't fit in. Logically we understand how it works, this is something we do understand; even if we don't understand people's emotions, we do understand how society functions”

Dandelion Program Candidate

“I'm a great believer that with knowledge comes understanding, and therefore acceptance will hopefully follow. If you educate people about autism, and you expose them to people with autism who are very, very skilled and lovely people to be with, eventually you break down those stereotypes and negative stigma that has been attached to the label of autism.”

Cathryn Masters, Autism Spectrum Consultant

Challenges of employing people with Autism

- Mental health issues e.g. anxiety, depression, sleep disorders, PTSD
- Managing more than one disability
- Executive functioning skills
- Life / adaptive skills such as financial awareness, nutrition
- Untrained managers do not have enough skills to manage people with autism
- Regular management training for the co-workers and managers due to organisation change

Key Learnings from the research & operations

What we have learnt from longitudinal research and input from leading experts at La Trobe University and Cornell University.

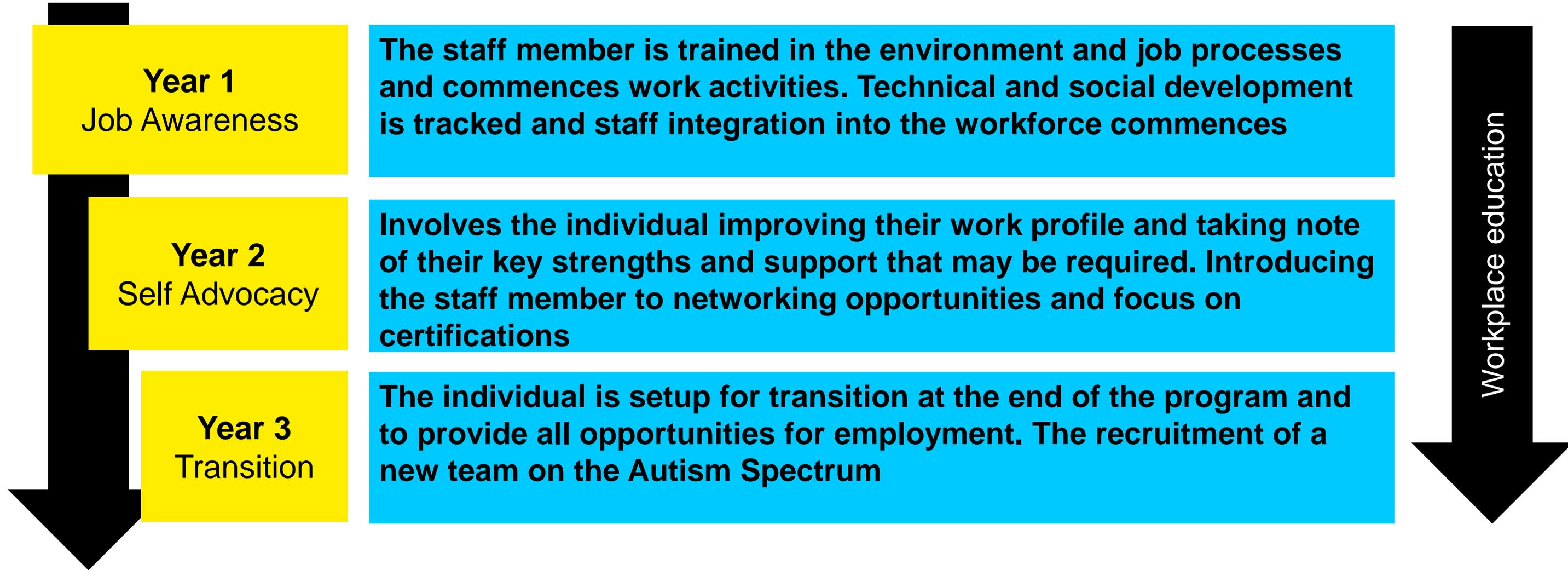
Key elements to the success:

- Organisational change and training for general workplace and co-workers
- Shared experience as part of recruitment and on boarding as it creates friendships thus decreases suicidal thoughts due to lower levels of loneliness
- Sustainment support for the individuals (people, process & tools)

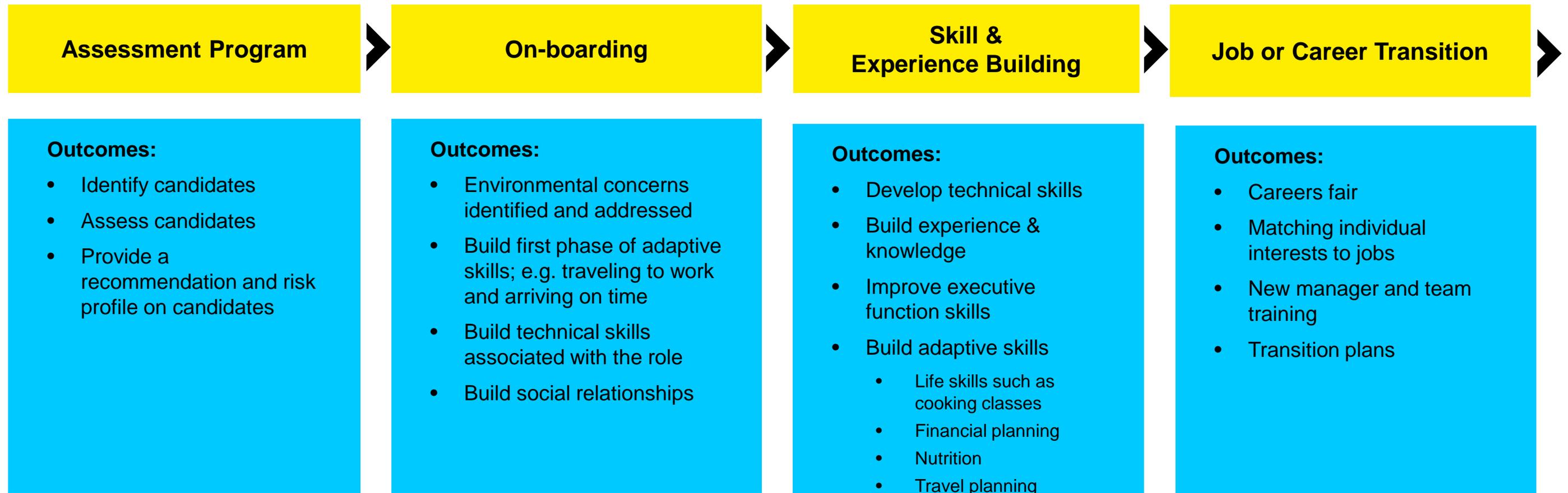
Key learnings:

- Autism awareness training needs to be reinforced, due to staff turn over. Face-to-face training does not reach everyone
- Improved integration services – communication and executive education
- You are not only dealing with and managing autism but other mental health disorders at the same time
- Identify talent and building pipeline to meet demand (neurodiversity hub)

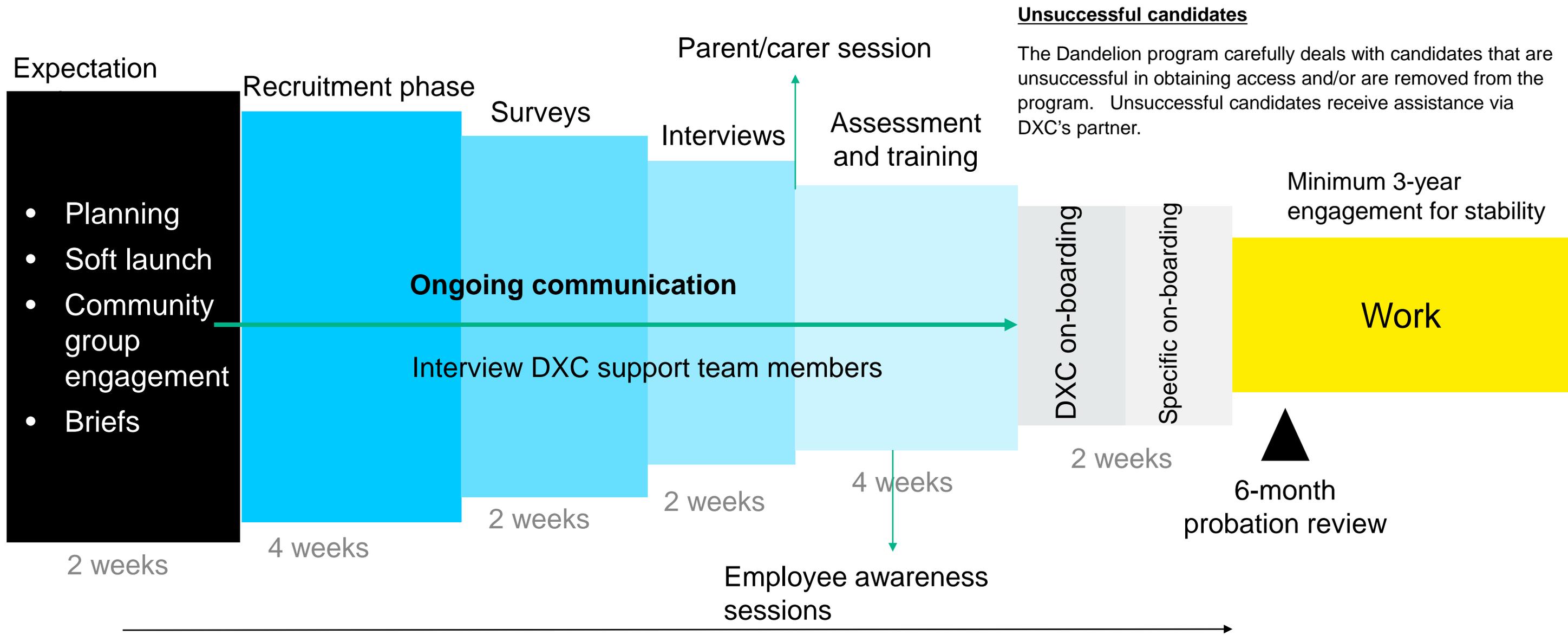
Dandelion Program Structure



Dandelion Employment Program Overview



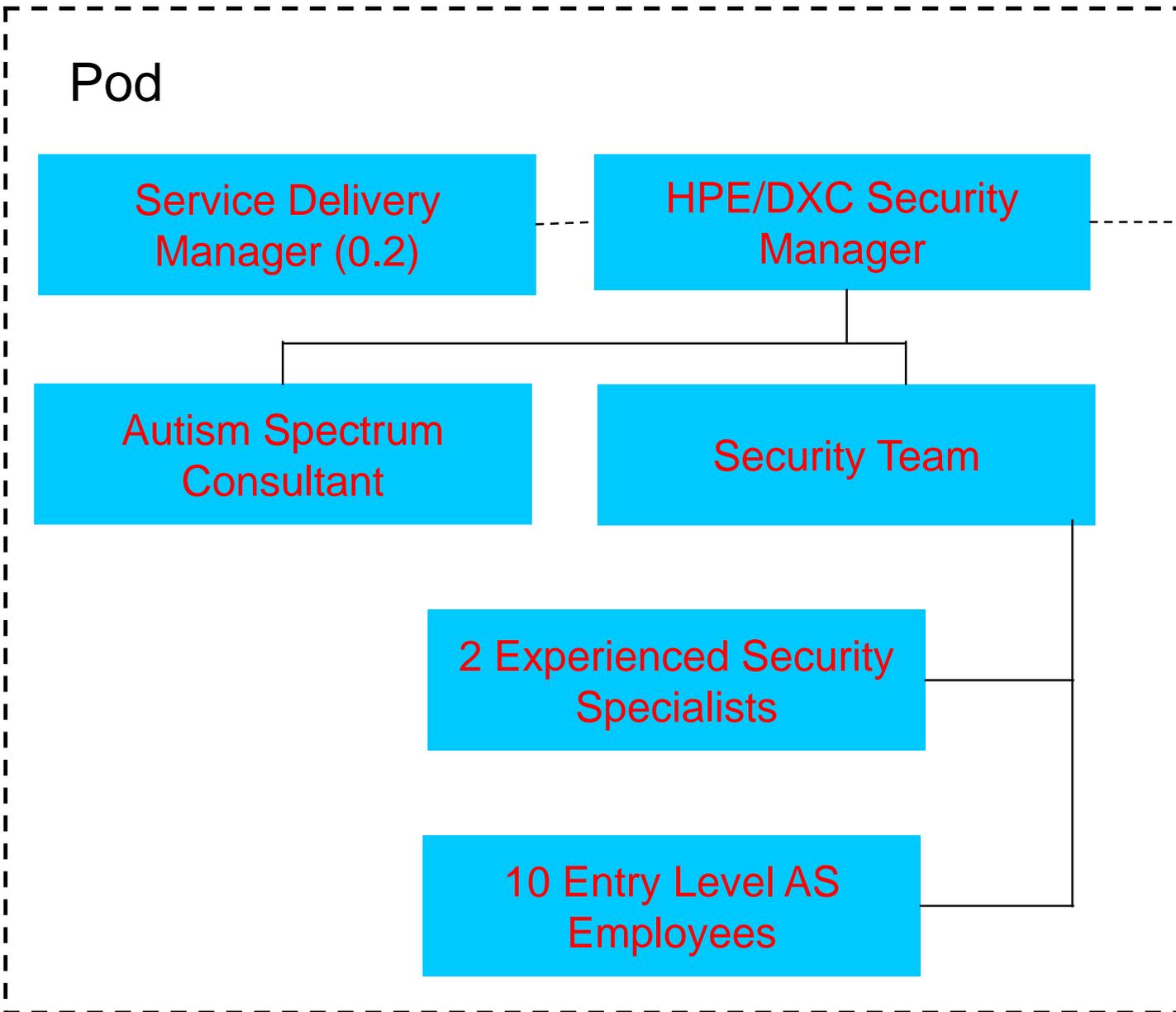
Dandelion Employment Program – Recruitment Roadmap



4 months

DXC Proprietary and Confidential

Operating Model “pod” With Clients



Client Interface

Pod is a self-contained support unit, focussing on supporting the autism employees and existing workforce.

Goals of the pod are:

- Accelerate work place integration and implement work strategies
- Create shared experiences with people on spectrum
- Accelerate workplace productivity

Model:

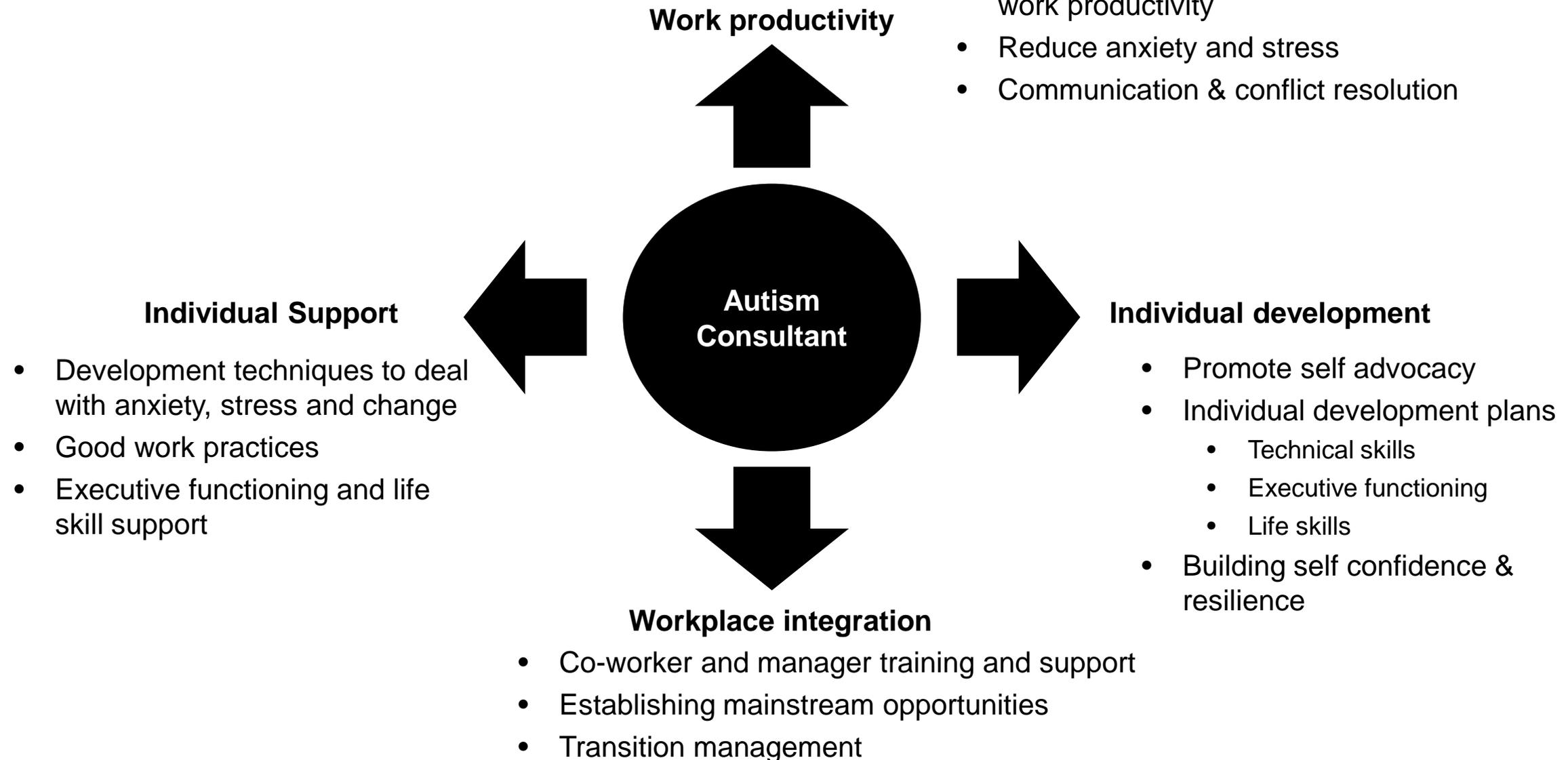
- HPE/DXC has all its AS employees as client facing
- The HPE/DXC manager along with the client determine work packages and scheduling work
- Full-time Autism Spectrum Consultant

Autism Consultant role

Goals of the pod are:

- Accelerate work place integration and implement work strategies
- Accelerate workplace productivity
- Accelerate Mainstream employment

Note: We are focusing on individuals that need support



Enhancements to the program & operating model

- Having longitudinal research has enabled us to determine what program components help define success and weakness
- Implementation of an autism specific work performance management tool from Israel to help managers with performance management discussions, training and planning
- Development of manager training courses specifically related to managing people with autism
- Development of a programmatic approach to improve outcomes for individuals and assist them gaining the skills to build a career
- Additional focus on:
 - Mental health
 - Executive Functioning skills
 - Adaptive / life skills
- E-Training tool “Uptimize” to improve integration and workplace education; used by Microsoft and JP Morgan Chase
- Transition plans to help AS trainees to improve integration within the workforce
- Relationship with largest national provider disability support services

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Key Resources

- Cornell University: Institute for disability and employment (open sourced our material)

<http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/dandelionprogram/>

- www.dandelionprogram.com

- Dandelion program on YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SBFY9ggEli0>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HhfMianm3zs>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WGrED-hMbtQ&t=5s>