DEBBIE HINDLE: Let's meet Kate Halpin from Specialisterne Australia. Kate is going to highlight how their recruitment method removes barriers and showcases the benefits employers have discovered integrating neurodiversity into their workplace. Kate's presentation is on Best Practice Model for Employment Support Services: Creating Sustainable Career Pathways for Autistic Talent. Thank you, Kate, and welcome.

KATE HALPIN: Thank you so much for such a lovely introduction, Debbie. I'm so honoured to be here today, particularly on International Day of People with Disability as well, and for me personally, it's something certainly very close to my heart and definitely something I'm very passionate about. So, it will actually provide a challenge for me today trying to keep to the 20 minutes because if anyone knows me well, once I get on to something and start talking about something I'm passionate about, it's quite difficult to slow me up but I will do my very best to keep within time today. I really do appreciate you being here. As Debbie mentioned, today, I'm going to be speaking about a best practice model for employment services and discussing in a little bit further detail about the Specialisterne method and why we find that this is quite effective in creating a sustainable pathway for autistic talent. So, for those of you that aren't familiar with Specialisterne, Specialisterne branch within Australia was established back in 2015 and we do have a fairly ambitious goal, which is to enable 12,000 meaningful careers for individuals on the autism spectrum by 2030. If you think that's a fairly ambitious goal, well, our overarching Specialisterne foundation, internationally, we have a combined goal of one million careers, which is really, really exciting and something we're all very passionate about and all the separate chapters of Specialisterne come together working towards that goal. So, Specialisterne is a not-for-profit organisation and we are dedicated to helping employers understand, value and include the unique capabilities of individuals on the autism spectrum. The Australian branch, as I said, was established back in 2015 but within quite a short timeframe, so only around five years, we already have had quite a big impact within the Australian market. You can see at the bottom of the slide just a small snapshot of some of the organisations that we're currently engaged with and doing some really, really exciting work with. The original first chapter of Specialisterne was actually founded in Denmark. You might be wondering what Specialisterne actually means but it translates to “the specialists,” and we do believe we're specialists within this field. We're also accredited with actually starting what's now known as the Autism at Work or Autism Advantage movements as well. So, why am I actually here today, you might be wondering? We've obviously got a problem. The unemployment rate within the autism cohort at the moment is quite large and, unfortunately, is growing. So, at the moment we have approximately 1 in 59 individuals on the autism spectrum within Australia. That equates to about 270,000 people within our population. As we perhaps are aware, autistic individuals have significant skills that would be valuable to any industry. However, in Australia, only 40 per cent of individuals on the spectrum are currently employed. This is a population of willing and able individuals who can excel in any role if given the correct support, knowledge and understanding. In particularly, here, I want to highlight that third circle where it says here "overeducated and underemployed,” and we do have a huge cohort, particularly, perhaps some of you sitting in today, we do find a lot of candidates that come through our program have got multiple degrees, not just that they completed those degrees but they've often excelled in their study as well but because of those traditional recruitment barriers they just can't find themselves a job. If they are able to find a job, unfortunately, it's something that doesn't necessarily allow them to actually showcase the skills and all that time and energy they've put into their studies, it isn't meaningful employment. You might recall what I mentioned before that Specialisterne is working towards those 12,000 roles for individuals on the spectrum within Australia, that real key word there is "meaningful careers". We don't normally engage with an organisation for casual roles, it needs to be at least a 12-month minimum contract because we want to set these individuals up for success and for that long-term career as well. So, if we look at, for example, the Disability Employment Service case load at the moment, it does equate to about seven per cent of that sector that they have individuals on the spectrum and, again, often struggling to find these individuals work that actually does allow them to showcase their skills and, again, that meaningful work as well. And looking at some of those stats in a little bit more detail, of that 41 per cent of individuals successfully placed into employment, only three per cent of those individuals that are placed via the DES system actually make it to that 26 per cent benchmark. If we compare that, in comparison, Specialisterne at present has a 96 per cent success rate using our particular model, which is based over a 12-month period. So, quite a big difference there, not just the time in which we're measuring it but that long-term success. And, as I said earlier, Specialisterne has within Australia only been around for about five years but in that time, our success rates always manage to stay between 94 to 96 per cent. Why that perhaps is the case is because the way in which we assess candidates, yes, it does take a little bit longer or a lot longer than perhaps a traditional recruitment process but by the time we're finished our program, we genuinely understand in a lot of detail the skills and the strengths of the individuals who come through our program and we have a lot of faith that we're matching them into the right role. And on the flip side, we work very, very closely with the employer, often at least a year in advance of when the program actually commences, to make sure that we fit the piece of that capacity building piece, that education piece to make sure that they're, I guess, implementing our program for the right reasons and we want to make sure that we can educate them so, eventually, they can actually do this on their own so that it is just standard business practice for them to create this pipeline for autistic talent. So, in today's presentation, I'm going to explore how our patient, practical approach works, the steps we take to train and match candidates into meaningful roles and the successes that we've had working with employers to integrate neurodiversity within the workplace. It's hoped that Specialisterne's Best Practice Model can assist employment services in understanding and assisting autistic job seekers to obtain long-term and sustainable employment outcomes. With a better understanding of this population, coupled with innovative strategies and tools, service providers will be more effectively able to find suitable work for this population of individuals and may become, in turn, a preferred provider for autistic job seekers. But at the moment, unfortunately, we are faced with quite significant challenges and barriers at the moment for individuals who are trying to find work. So, some of those in just a brief snapshot would include a disengaged talent pool, underemployed and over qualified cohort. Unfortunately, some of the challenges are the traditional recruitment processes, which we will go through in a little bit more detail on the next slide. Then they start to feel sick of attending interviews and being measured for social skills and cultural fit, often increased anxiety as a result of actually going through the recruitment process and often they're viewed as disabled. But if we look at a strengths model, on the flip side, those placed via our supported program often outperform those without. We often see a really high level of engagement with staff. Staff that come through our program put their hand up quite early on and say, "I want to be involved in this program". We never like it when someone is tapped on the shoulder and said, "Surprise, you're going to be involved in this program,” we want managers that right from the start see the value in having a neurodiverse workforce and accessing autistic talent. The other really exciting side from this strengths-based model is we often see a higher productivity, low turnover, quite a full range of roles, and although, I guess, stereotypically we know a lot of individuals on the spectrum do enjoy and often look towards STEM roles, we know it's a stereotype and Specialisterne is quite passionate, particularly in the last 12 months, about challenging this a little bit more. And once employers are comfortable with us and perhaps have done repeat programs, we're now challenging them to look at other roles within their organisation where there might be a high turnover, there might be certain skills required for those roles in which we, again, stereotypically perhaps see individuals on the spectrum excel and we are getting a lot of success. So, we're now starting to actually move away from STEM and realising that because it is a spectrum, individuals can excel in such a broad range of roles, which is really exciting. So, I mentioned before that there are some traditional - there are some recruitment barriers in the traditional recruitment process. For individuals on the spectrum who are looking for a job, before they even get to the exciting or nerve racking part of getting to an interview, they've got to make it there first. For a lot of individuals on the spectrum, they're quite rigid and quite literal in their thinking. If they pick up a job advertisement and they read through what's required and those essential criteria, they may not even apply just based on the language in some of that, based on the language and jargon in those job advertisements as well. If something says it's essential and you must have really strong communication skills, we know, again that, stereotypically, for many individuals on the spectrum, they might be quite honest and say, "You know what, communication isn't my strength." Whilst they are still very able to communicate and willing both verbally and in a written format, they perhaps wouldn't say that their communication is to that excellent level and, as a result, they may not even apply. We often see job advertisements containing confusing jargon and terminology, stipulating unnecessary qualifications, requiring exceptional communication skills and team work skills. They often offer limited transparency on the actual role itself. And if someone is fortunate enough to get to that interview stage, it does rely on rapport building and, again, for many individuals on the spectrum, that's not necessarily a situation where they feel very comfortable. That need to make small talk, perhaps put your hand out, shake the hiring manager's hand, making eye contact, for a lot of individuals that's actually not, I guess, an environment in which they feel very comfortable and may not necessarily thrive and put their best selves forward. We see these constant barriers. We are also aware for many individuals on the spectrum, their résumé may not necessarily reflect their skills. They may have a university degree, for example, but have never been able to find work for several years after completing that degree and perhaps they've had casual jobs here or there and start to get quite a patchy résumé as a result. Again, we think from the perspective of a hiring manager who is getting absolutely inundated with applications, they get quick at reviewing them and going, “Yes, no, yes, no,” as they come through and often these individuals, again, don't even stand a chance. So, what are we going to do about it? We have here the Specialisterne systemic approach. Specialisterne’s Enterprise Model uses a two-pronged approach focusing on both business and neurodiverse candidates to enable and harness their talents to pursue meaningful and successful careers where they can thrive and add value. If we take a look at this graph, what I really want to point out is the fact that we often take organisations from that apprehension stage that you can see in the left-hand corner, right up to that appreciation and inclusion stage and it is a journey. As I mentioned earlier, often when we first engage with an organisation, it might be at least a year before we actually get to that next stage of actually conducting a training and assessment program and going through the steps to actually source autistic talent. We find that the most significant barriers that autistic individuals experience in pursuing open market employment opportunities, again, is coming back to this traditional recruitment process and something has got to change. We're also aware that, for a lot of employers, they do have preconceived and unconscious biases as well and, again, that just creates yet another barrier that these individuals face when they're trying to find work. So, how do we actually shift employers' mindsets? Again, the really big key piece here is that ongoing enablement, that capacity building piece for employers. We want them to genuinely believe in why they're coming to us and why they're going through our program and what that merit and final value is of accessing autistic talent. I particularly like this slide because, you know, often, I do hear, I guess, remarks, throw-away statements like, “That particular individual is quite rude.” You know, “They're always very direct and I don't like the way in which they answer questions or respond to me.” But if we change the way we look at that and actually look at it from a strengths-based approach, many individuals on the spectrum, yes, they can be quite direct but they're being very honest. If you've asked them a question, they are going to give you an honest answer. I think that's actually the beauty. I particularly like working with individuals on the spectrum and particularly from a, say, quality and continuous quality improvement side, how wonder full to have people who come into an organisation and see it through their own unique lens and provide you with that feedback. Often, particularly when we're new, we're too frightened to be honest and if we're asked, “What do you think,” we'll say, "Yes, it's great." Often when working with someone on the spectrum, they are going to see it through this unique point of view, this out of the box thinking and they're often going to bring some really new, creative and innovative ideas to life as well. Similar, if someone is really pedantic and perhaps they take a long time when reviewing something or working on something, on the flip side, let’s look at it as that individual being detail orientated. Again, how fantastic to have someone that has that keen eye, that attention to detail as well. There's so many jobs that could correlate to as well. Again, if we work with employers closely and we do that education piece, we can work with them to start to, I guess, demystify working with individuals on the spectrum to start to break away from some of those myths and those misconceptions. We work with the entire organisation from the top down to actually educate them, so it's not just the direct group involved in the hiring process, but from the top down, we want those employees to come through our training and awareness piece as well. We will be quite honest. We will discuss what some of those particular challenges might look like and provide strategies to assist as well. We work with the hiring manager and the individuals to create employment support plans and we also provide ongoing coaching and mentoring, not just for the actual individual coming into the role, but particularly for the manager, again, making sure they're aware how to support individuals who are neurodiverse. So, the exciting part, what does our approach actually look like? We obviously have this very alternate practical approach to the interview and what's been exciting in this COVID world is that, traditionally, we did have a set way, a classroom-based way in which we did this but COVID came in and ruined all our plans and it made us pause and actually reflect on our processes why we do things the way we do them. We've been able to pivot and all of 2020, we've run our programs online and had some really remarkable results because the essence of what we do remains the same and that is allowing these candidates to showcase their skills in a practical way and we're assessing their skills that are only relevant to the job at hand. We've been able to really engage with the hiring manager as well and get them really involved and to hear about their teams and hear about the culture within their team because we know that's such an important element as well. Like anything, someone perhaps can do the job, but unless we've got that cultural fit right as well, then it's never going to be a success. We have four very clear, distinct stages. So, Stage 1 is identifying the roles and understanding that workplace, which is really, really important. As I said, sometimes, that can take up to 12 months and to make sure that we're identifying the right roles as well. Then we move through to that sourcing the candidate stage. So, I talked earlier that, really, a lot of those résumés, for example, that applicants put forward, they're really not necessary. What we do is we completely remove the résumé process and when candidates apply for our program. We only have three set criteria: (1) they do have an official diagnosis of being on the autism spectrum; (2) that they're over 18 years of age; and (3) the majority of the organisations we work with do require the individual to be an Australian resident or permanent citizen as well. Apart from that, we're not necessarily looking for qualifications and specific skills. We often find that a lot of individuals that come through our program are completely unaware that the amazing skills they have don't come naturally to the average neurotechnical individual because they've always just done that naturally. Or if they've got a really strong interest in a certain area, they spend so much time and energy learning about that particular area and don't realise again that they actually are expert subject matters within that piece of - you know, with that piece of equipment or with that particular task that they love doing. You know, individuals that enjoy ethical hacking because, why not? That's their interest. That's their passion. They're the types of candidates we want to draw out. So, we remove that résumé and instead the candidates will upload into our database and they will answer questions that allow us to slowly start to extract some of that information. We're getting really high hit rates now. The most recent program I ran, we had over 100 applications with Westpac and just such a strong calibre of candidates out there too, which shows us that the need is there, that we do have this continuous new cohort of individuals seeking work who are highly talented. It made our job very hard because we only had eight roles available for that particular program and we had this huge, huge need within the market here to find work within this space. Once we've actually gone through that sourcing the candidate stage, we move on to that training and assessment stage. So, we can now, as I said, either do that as a classroom-based program or we can run that program online but we're really specifically tailoring the assessments around the roles that are available. If we have eight roles, the candidates don't necessarily have to go through all the assessments for each role, they can pick and choose the assessments that are relevant to the roles they're interested in or if they're open and willing, they might try and go through all of those roles just to have as much chance as possible in this process. Even during this stage, we continue to work with the employer, continue to build their capacity and their enablement as well and really, as I said, involving the hiring managers throughout that program daily in all of these activities as well. And then we get to Stage 4, the exciting part, but it's not actually the end, whereas, this is really only the beginning. What we do from Stage 4 is start that on-boarding process. Once those candidates are selected and they're offered their roles, we will start working with the candidates one to one to develop those employment support plans. They're a really honest reflection of each individual's strengths but also we break it down within a workplace environment, thinking about their preferred method of communication. We think about how they process information. A huge piece here is that the hiring managers that are involved as well, often, they're quite good at what they do and quite naturally they do a lot of the, I guess, strategies we discussed because they're just good hiring managers. What I mean by that is, a lot of the strategies we suggest cost absolutely nothing but it's just taking the time to realise that each individual within their team does have a different learning style, has a preference for communication. A really simple example I often use is that I don't always pick up my phone and don't always want to have a lengthy chat on the phone or have a spontaneous chat on the phone, I feel much more confident communicating with my friends via text at a time that suits me or emailing. Whereas, my husband, on the flip side, will always pick up the phone and just have a call and chat straight away. We're all different. It's the same within the workplace. You might have someone who is always happy in a pre-COVID world, if you're in an office environment, to stand up and walk over to someone and have a chat. Other people might only be sitting a few seats away but would much rather send that person an email. We are all completely different from that perspective and it's just about taking the time to actually appreciate that and make small tweaks and changes to ensure those individuals on-boarding into your team feel supported right from day one. Now, once we've done that, we turn that into a tailored training piece specific for that individual so that it's not generic at all and we come back in again and we work very closely with the hiring manager and that direct team to educate them and to go right through that training piece as well. And from day one, for the next 12 months, we provide what we call ongoing enablement support. That piece is crucial and that's why we do manage to maintain that 94 to 96 per cent, because we're there along the way. And it's not hand-holding. At the very beginning, we're there to make sure that we set the individuals up to thrive but we know these candidates can thrive. We know because they've come through our program. We've seen what they're capable of. We've seen how far we can push them. Where that support is so crucial is actually on the flip side for the managers. We put a lot of emphasis on making sure those managers feel supported, that they know they can come to us, talk through anything that might come up along the way as well and we go through that with them along with the individual for that 12-month duration. And that's one-on-one mentoring, coaching-type sessions. Gradually, as we get towards the 12 months stage, it does fade out. By the end of the 12 months, the team feels confident to support this individual for long-term success. What's even more exciting is we are starting to measure that long-term success. So, that 94 to 96 per cent is based at the end of 12 months but we find the majority of our employees are still employed three, four, five years down the track now, but they're getting to that five-year stage and they actually often come back and speak at future programs with that employer as well to talk about their journey and show where they're at now. I think that gives the candidates a lot of hope. As I said at the very beginning, it's about meaningful, long-term career pathways for these individuals as well. By setting up this ecosystem of support, we ensure, as I said, that everyone feels supported, right down to the individual and through to the, you know, the wider organisation as well. It might be connecting them back with a DES. It might be, as I said, the ongoing enablement support with Specialisterne. It's setting them up with their own cohort that have come through the program as well so they can have lunch and learn sessions and get together and chat. It's connecting them with the EAP within the organisation if required and the HR. We also have a buddy and mentor program as well. So, there's this huge ecosystem of support that all plays such a crucial role in the success for these individuals and we know it works. As I said, it comes back to that 96 per cent success rate at the moment but we just need organisations to realise they need to move away from those traditional recruitment processes and to start to think about how they can fairly assess talent in order to make sure they really are getting the right talent for the right role. We know if we do source autistic talent for the right role, we see some really remarkable things. There you go. I finished two minutes early. Question time. Thank you.

DEBBIE HINDLE: You are amazing, Kate, well done. We've certainly put the challenge out for a lot of people to fit a lot in in a very succinct time so you're up to the challenge. Thank you very much for that, Kate. We do have some questions that have come in. We do have two minutes. We might just hit you with one or two of those and then if you're happy to stay afterwards to continue answering some of those questions, that would be really good.

KATE HALPIN: Love to.

DEBBIE HINDLE: I think one of the new catch words for me is “ecosystem of support,” I do love that. That’s really, really good. There was a question that came in, I think it was in relation to the Westpac scenario that you gave where you had so many great students apply for the position but you only had eight positions that were available. So, what happens to those that were not successful in receiving a position?

KATE HALPIN: Fantastic question. We often find - the first part of that component, we obviously had 100 applications. So, what I didn't mention in the interests of time is the way in which we start to go through those applications to find who is suitable is we get it down to about 50 per cent and we invite that 50 per cent through to what we call preassessment workshops. Again, right from there, we start to assess the individual's talents in a one-day workshop. Again, it's a full one day. That removes, say, the phone screening process, traditional process. Unfortunately, the candidates that didn't make it to that stage, well, we've now got their details in our system and we just encourage them to continue to apply for future programs. For those candidates that come through our preselection workshop, it is similar to a certain extent but because they've come through there, they sometimes don't necessarily have to go through that preassessment stage for other programs, particularly if we start to know where their skills and strengths lie. But, ultimately, in short, once we capture that, you know, the candidate's information in our database then we are now also starting to proactively work with organisations to help them source what we call preassessed talent and that's really exciting. So, unfortunately, for the Westpac program, we ended up having 15 candidates come through the proper, full training and assessment program, and there were eight roles available, but what happened every single time without a doubt is the hiring managers go, "Oh, God, how do we make our decision, all of those candidates can do this job?” We're actually currently in discussions with hiring managers from that program trying to get some additional funding and roles because they see firsthand the talent that these individuals have. So, we try and do that. We try and market them as preassessed talent and we keep in contact with these individuals as well. We're in a really exciting situation because businesses are now starting to see that accessing autistic talent is actually going to give them a business edge. It's no longer about ticking a box and doing the right thing. Whilst that's still great and really important to have that representation, they're actually going, "We can't fill these roles at the moment. How do we start to look outside the box? Where is a huge talent pool of untapped resources?" We know we have this within this autism space. So, more and more employers are now coming to us, making our job easier. You know, when I first started eight years ago, I was proactively going out to them, quite literally door knocking and picking up the phone. Now, these organisations are coming to us. I am hopeful that anyone that comes through our program will hopefully get an opportunity in a repeat program and we see that every time. Just in the most recent program, someone had gone through once and not been successful but is now fortunate enough to have a job. I'm aware we have a long way to go and I wish we could do more but the really positive thing is we're seeing a shift, we’re seeing a change in terms of moving forward. As I said, 12,000 careers within Australia, we're going to do it. We've got 10 years and I feel really excited we are on the path to that journey.

DEBBIE HINDLE: I have full confidence you will get there too, Kate. Thank you very much for a great presentation. I think there are more questions. If you can get to the chat box, that will be good. Wouldn't it be wonderful - you know, we've showed during COVID that we can change systems and policies and things. Wouldn't it be good to change for everybody this whole recruitment system, you know?

KATE HALPIN: It's time. That's right. It affects a lot more than just the , I guess, autistic cohort.

DEBBIE HINDLE: It certainly does. Kate, thank you very much. Thanks for joining us.

KATE HALPIN: Really appreciate it. Thank you, everyone, for listening.