

What does it feel like to be heard?

It means I can be me.

What does it feel like to have a different way of thinking about and seeing the world? What unique talents does that bring? What does it feel like when the rest of world can't or won't adjust to allow you to be your whole self?

Cavita Chapman talks to **Barbara Molony-Oates**, outgoing Co-chair of the Royal Surrey Staff Disability and Wellness Network, about what it feels like to live with dyslexia, autism, and ADHD, going through the recruitment process, and what changes we can make to support colleagues living with disability.

Barbara agreed to talk to me about her experiences. She works as a Public Involvement Manager for the Health Research Authority and has a breadth of experience including working in the banking sector, the NHS, and in the community. Barbara has two grown-up daughters and two dogs. The dogs like to join in on virtual meetings. Barbara enjoys walking, running and generally being outdoors. Barbara has a master's degree in physics, and a post-graduate diploma in radiotherapy. Barbara lives with dyslexia, ADHD, autism and chronic fatigue syndrome. Her autism and ADHD were diagnosed at 46.

Disability History Month Feature Article



Tell us a little bit about your story and recruitment.

There were two or three jobs that I was interested in. I applied for one. And I really felt that I had been a fool. I didn't feel that the interviewers got to experience the real me. A dream job came up: advocating for others and conducting research. I asked for the interview questions in advance. The Panel said 'no. They wanted to see how I coped being put on the spot.' I went for the interview. I didn't get the job.

And then the same job came up for another NHS organisation. I asked for the interview questions again. I received the questions and they also asked if there was anything else they could do to make this easier for me. I thought 'oh my goodness! I want to work for these people!' There was no challenge. No asking why. They wanted to know what else they could do to help. At the interview, I was able to me. It was transformative for me. I felt I could do my best. That's what it was like, being heard.

Talk us through that feeling of self-esteem, being disabled, and some customising the experience for you.

As an autistic person, I feel like I have to tell you everything, a tendency to over-answer questions. I feel anxious and want to say everything in answer to the first question. Knowing the framework of the interview, I was able to present myself more coherently.



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What is stopping us from giving advantage to disabled people?

HR departments say giving the questions in advance is not fair. They want to see how candidates react under pressure. In the interview where I was successful, they created a level-playing field – everyone was given the questions in advance. I've been on a Panel where I was thinking that I was on the Panel to make it more diverse, but it turned out actually I was there to check whether candidates had a good EDI understanding. The person I would have chosen was bubbly and super-enthusiastic about the role, but the candidate was rejected with the feedback that 'they were too keen.' This made me feel that this panel would also reject me, as I have been described as 'super keen'.

Let's talk about employing people because they look like and sound like us.

In a previous interview, the Panel talking to me were calm, reserved, soft spoken. I had the feeling I was too 'bouncy' for them. I am very visible and outspoken. I got the impression they didn't want me because I didn't fit. But that's exactly why they needed me – they needed the difference, to challenge the status quo.



// I want to work for someone who's compassionate, kind, and caring. //

If a disabled person has to work three times as hard for an interview, where do they get their resilience from? How can an organisation help? Help me to help you.

As a dyslexic, with ADHD and autism, it can take me twice as long to read something, ages to construct sentences, just a huge amount of energy and effort. This makes me very selective. I apply only for jobs I really, really want and where I have the skills and experience. When you get an application from me, I have checked that I met the criteria. I really want to work for you. It doesn't feel very nice if an organisation has not taken my disability into consideration.

The reasoning behind not sharing interview questions for example being 'we want to catch you out'. I spend my life being caught out. Parking meters catch me out because I struggle to read them properly. Everything catches me out. I really don't want my employer to be catching me out. That just seems so nasty, and I don't want to work for someone who's nasty: I want to work for someone who's compassionate, kind, and caring.

If I'm an employer, what are the four things I can do?

First, when I've applied to work for you, and I've ticked the disability box, and when you ask what help I need, please think about your reply before you say 'no'. There's a reason why I have asked for the adjustment.

Second, think about how you could customise the interview. You could have your EDI or Disability lead on the Panel, or someone from your staff disability network.

Third, ask again if there's any help I need for the interview. This helps everyone bring their whole selves to the interview.

Fourth, if you know nothing about my disability, find out. Contact support organisations for my condition.

If you would like more information about this interview, please email cavita.chapman@nhs.net.



I apply only for jobs I really, really want and where I have the skills and experience.

