



TEAM COACH Program for Senate Select Committee on Autism



Date: 24/07/2020

To: The Senate Select Committee on Autism, Parliament of Australia

Introduction

It is with great delight and respect that we share the following information about the TEAM COACH Program, which has received federal funding to develop a training program to advance the opportunities for people with autism to enter employment.

As statistics show, people with autism often remain unemployed, despite having skills and abilities that can richly contribute to and aid in the development of business, industry, and the wider socio-economic world. The TEAM COACH Program has been set up to address this issue.

TEAM COACH was conceived by Danijela Vrkic and Lorcan Murphy.

Danijela opened the award-winning social enterprise **Krofne**, 4 years ago. Krofne make donuts which are for sale across the ACT in pop-up shops at major shopping venues or by delivery. What is special about Krofne is that 50% of all the staff come from a neuro-diverse background. Some staff have autism, others, such as Danijela's son Anthony, have down syndrome. In fact, a lack of employment opportunity for Anthony, motivated Danijela to open the business. Ordinarily Krofne has 12-16 employees with autism or an intellectual disability. While the business, like many others, has been affected by the Covid-19 situation, Krofne staff are all keen to get back to work as soon as possible. This is because being employed has become central to the lives of all the people who work there.

Besides running a busy social enterprise Danijela has lobbied the NDIS and DSS as part of continuing to advocate for more support for disability employment. While many people with autism can go to work and do so independently, others need one-on-one attention, as the Krofne experience has shown. It may be that some people with autism need to initially be accompanied by a support worker, and then, with the right training and guidance can advance to attending work independently. For this reason, continued NDIS engagement is crucial. As relationships with work change, so people's NDIS plans need to be revisited and revised. Clear communication across the board is required. If this does not happen, with rigour, people can be left without the correct provisions and unemployed as a result (with DSP remaining as one of the only credible alternatives).



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Danijela's passion and motivation was the genesis of the TEAM COACH program. Later she was joined and supported on this journey by Lorcan Murphy who, after working in Executive Management for over 28 years, founded WHITMUR Advisors. WHITMUR is currently engaged in restructuring the Commissioning and Procurement processes within the Primary Health Care Network in the ACT's Capital Health Network. Lorcan has long been a committed advocate for people with a disability seeking meaningful and maintainable employment. Together Danijela and Lorcan sought support and funding for the TEAM COACH initiative.

Background to TEAM COACH

Most employers in private enterprise want to aspire to ensure they give persons with Autism every opportunity to be meaningfully employed. However, statistically persons with Autism still struggle to achieve this outcome.

There are three key stakeholders in this process:

- The employer organisation
- The incumbent employees within the organisation (team)
- The person with autism hereinafter known as the 'client employee'

Evidence suggests that a lack of joined up thinking and the failure to address the key needs of all three Stakeholders in the process is a primary reason why employment placements fail.

People with autism are no different to any other members of our community, they wish to be valued, they wish to contribute, they wish to leave their 'legacy' regardless of its size, on their community. They want to bring to their skills and talents to the job market, like the majority do.

However, for employers there are fears both real and perceived which act as a barrier to successfully employing people with autism. Concerns exist around the requirement for additional supervision and its associated costs, loss of productivity by incumbent staff, and the challenge of catering for the physical needs of the client employee.

There is no lack of effort or good intention in addressing the challenges posed by employing people with autism. Often however, it is the over reliance on good will and good intention that results in a poor outcome. The primary reason that other programs fail, is the fact that they tend to over-compensate for people with autism, and thus, from the outset, dilute the very desire for community contribution. Recent interactions as part of initial TEAM COACH consultations have further verified these factors.



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TEAM COACH Super Objective: A Proposed Solution

This new training course is designed to give pre-selected employers and employees within an organisation or department intensive training.

The TEAM COACH Program will thus consist of two separate, but complementary courses focusing on:

- training employers and their staff in the opportunities and adaptations required when employing people with autism and;
- potential employees with autism seeking opportunities to work, guided by their skills and interests

Ethos and Approach

We are developing a ground up, sustainable approach that is clearly **Client-Employee (CE)** centred, which enables the inclusion of people with autism into the workforce. We are not training **Employers/Employees (EE)** to become support workers, but engaged advocates, who peer educate their own teams into becoming more autism-confident.

In effect, the M in TEAM, is a mode of mentorship that includes; mentoring on autism specifically via this programme, mentoring on autism for all workplace team members (via training participants returning to work and being peer educators), while also engaging with the mentoring of an autistic colleague(s) in aiding their integration to the workplace, towards independence and maintainable employment.

Both courses will have clear assessment guidelines for **recruitment** and **intake**. This is to ensure the right people end up on the right course, and that their progress is supported to aid sustainability. Training is two tiered for people with autism; those who can attend training independently, and those who require a support worker with them during the learning. Specifically, the intake process will focus on surfacing skills and interests. On the employer/employee side, intake will focus on foundational aptitude and positive attitude towards advocacy and peer education, and skills related to supervisory duties.

Where other courses may focus specifically on skills and industries that seem aligned to common assumption and expectations about people with autism, such as IT and accounting, this training aims to focus on a foundational work-based skills modules for CEs first, which is then directed to focus on different industries based on participants interests, as well as their skills and capabilities.



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Due to the Covid-19 scenario, the proposed TEAM COACH focus on the Hospitality industry is under review, and since other industries and public service departments have begun to reach out to participate.

This training is being developed with a specific focus on autism but also remains outward looking. As we build the structure of the training, we are also thinking through how it can be customized to appeal and support a variety of people with different disabilities in the future.

Attached below is a simple diagram illustrating the five-step process that TEAM COACH is currently advocating for and developing. Each step has its own complexity. At the same time, good practices and lesson learned are being shared through the consultation process currently underway. These contributions are helping to ensure that we have a 'fit for purpose' training to pilot, and that we are not reinventing the wheel. The innovation here, is the implementation of this more comprehensive approach, with its clear aim and objective to enable people with autism and their employers, to establish meaningful work-based relationships, which support maintainable employment for everyone involved. It is our proposition that teams who successfully incorporate the talents and skills of neuro-diverse people into everyday work culture, may well develop further skills and creative capabilities such as; strategic thinking, empathic adaptive communication styles, and alternative approaches to decision-making and project development, for example.

To test the outcomes of the program an evaluation tool will be used. This will be designed to capture the experience of onboarding and integration of new staff with autism. This tool will be accompanied by a social impact measuring device, applied to measure shifts and changes in work-based culture.

The draft TEAM COACH five-step Disability Employment Training Framework follows below. This framework is currently under development and will be available for review at a later date. We welcome questions and feedback.

Danijela Vrkic - Krofne

Lorcan Murphy – Whitmur Advisors

Dr Matt Yoxall – Consultant



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TEAM Coach: Disability Employment Training Framework

