EMPLOYABLE ME

MEET SOME OF AUSTRALIA’S MOST EXTRAORDINARY JOB SEEKERS

EPISODE ONE SCREENER LINK: https://vimeo.com/334572418
PASSWORD: Please
overview.

IT’S HARD ENOUGH FINDING A JOB NOWADAYS, BUT WHEN YOU HAVE A DISABILITY IT CAN BE ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE.

Employable Me follows people with Neuro diverse conditions such as Autism, OCD and Tourette Syndrome as they search for meaningful employment.

This uplifting, warm and insightful series draws on experts to uncover people’s hidden skills and to match jobseekers to roles that can harness their strengths.

We all deserve a role in society. That’s what this show is about: striving to belong and play your part. The series looks beyond first impressions to reveal there’s always more than meets the eye.

The series follows nine participants as their job searches unfold. From the fun loving Marty, who just wants people to treat him the same as other people regardless of his Fragile X Syndrome, to the socially withdrawn Tim, who suffers extreme anxiety every time he leaves his home. As a result, he’s never had a job.

We meet Kayla, a 21-year old woman burdened with a complex and rare form of Tourette Syndrome where she suffers uncontrollable movement tics and profane swearing outbursts. Despite these challenges, she is determined to find an employer who will give her a chance.

Participants are warm, funny and generously open. Each story is told from their own perspective. Neuro-psych testing by experts substantiates their skill sets, revealing an astounding cognitive brilliance in some. The job searching results in some truly surprising results.
Tuesday 3 April, 8.30pm on ABC and ABC iView

In the first episode of Employable Me, cameras follow three young people who aim to prove that having a neurological condition, such as Tourette’s or autism, shouldn’t make them unemployable.

Experts draw on science to uncover the hidden skills of neurodiverse conditions and the results will certainly challenge misconceptions about disability. For example, with a quirky and lovable nature Rohan’s autism is apparent, but his neuro-psych testing stops everyone in their tracks with what it reveals.

Tim is also on the Autism Spectrum, which is as wide and varied as the participants of the series are individuals. In contrast to Rohan’s engaging personality and sense of humor, Tim has such extreme social anxiety and sensitivities associated with his Autism, he cannot leave the house alone. At age 28 he has never had a job and yet he has extraordinary talents.

We also met Kayla who suffers the rarest form of Tourette’s Syndrome, demonstrated by her jerking, repetitive body movements and gestures are challenging enough. But it is her uncontrolled outbursts of swearing and inappropriate obscenities, that make searching for a job so challenging. A musician at heart, Kayla is desperate to find someone to give her a chance. Kayla’s bravery and determination is revealed.
Tuesday 10 April, 8.30pm on ABC and ABC iView

In the second episode of **Employable Me** we meet three young people who represent the extraordinary breadth of the autism spectrum.

Jonathan is determined to be an accountant. He confidently throws his hat in to the ring with so called ‘neuro-typicals’ to compete for highly sought after cadetships amongst the global financial companies. He hopes his affinity for numbers and his ‘weapons grade autism’ will put him ahead of the pack. In preparation, he has perfected the art of the interview using persuasive ‘power words’ and dressing in colours to invoke the feeling of success. With a copy of the Financial Review ever-present under his arm, Jonathan is striving for the top.

Krystyna’s autism represents a different set of the traits. It is common for people with autism to be obsessive about particular things and Krystyna is utterly and completely obsessed with geography. Name any place in the world and she’ll be able to instantly give you it’s latitude, longitude, capital and weather patterns. The problem for her and her family is what to do with her extreme skill set.

Ben has also been dealt the obsessive trait commonly associated with autism and his overwhelming need for order, structure and rules dominates his life and infiltrates every aspect of his job hunting. Some of his obsessions result in his very entertaining compulsion to dress as his favourite film and TV characters. We follow him as he attempts to put the positive and useful aspects of his condition forward to potential employers who might utilise those skills, leading to his first paid job.
Tuesday 17 April, 8.30pm on ABC and ABC iView.

In the final of three-part series *Employable Me* we meet Marty, Jess and Cain. All are searching for meaningful long-term employment and looking to find their role in society.

Marty has Fragile-X, a genetically inherited intellectual disability which gives him an emotional proclivity that can sometimes complicate his workplace relationships. With his determined job coach Susan at his side, he hits the pavement hoping to find an employer who will give him a chance. His booming, infectious laugh is his calling card.

Jessica is an unforgettable character. Her love of Japanese anime and American cartoons influence her way of speaking. Clearly she is skilled in the area of Information technology and when she undergoes neuro-psych assessment at the University of Sydney, Brain and Mind Institute, her abilities shine. Buoyed by the confirmation of her skills she wows her devoted parents by pushing on and selling herself to employers, targeting in particular a company that targets neuro-diverse people for their unique talents.

It’s hard to imagine Cain’s struggle when we first meet him. He comes across as a well-adjusted young man, but the reality is his self-esteem is rock bottom. Non-verbal until the age of four, Cain suffered terribly at school because of his autism. Other children bullied him to the point where he withdrew into isolation and depression. He found a creative outlet in film review and now he aspires to be the next David Stratton. Cain pulls together the self-assurance to chase down his dream with some delightful and unexpected consequences.
As a director, the most interesting projects to me not only offer the potential to tell stories that are meaningful, but provide the opportunity to bring insight, humour, pathos, and ultimately a connection between the audience and the people on screen.

When we started the process of looking for participants for the documentary our remit was simple, seek out people with neuro-diverse conditions who want a job but are struggling to find one. We began to make calls, and we started to hear the same story over and over. People we spoke to really wanted to work, but weren’t being given a chance. They felt that their disability was something employers couldn’t see beyond, and were being rejected over and over again.

I have always felt that the sense of purpose a job brings is underappreciated. At times when I find myself out of work I can feel lost, useless, often depressed. I wondered what it must be like for our participants to deal with not only the lack of a sense of purpose, but that constant rejection.

As we got to know people more we realised that for many of them they have had to deal with rejection most of their lives. Today they are being rejected when trying to get into the workforce, but as children they were rejected by their peers, unable to socialise ‘normally’ they were bullied, teased, shamed for being ‘different’. Most of our participants had very few friends growing up, some had none at all. The impact that can have on people is profound.

Yet here they are, allowing their struggles to find employment to be filmed and broadcast nationally. It was a brave thing to do, and hopefully by being a part of this series they will help raise awareness and understanding. I want to thank all of them and their families for letting us in to their lives, they are the reason this was such a satisfying experience for me. Getting to know each and every one of them was an absolute pleasure.

We ended up filming the stories of nine participants, all of them very different people with their own unique personalities. What I think they all have in common is humility, a respect for others, a real lack of malice or spite, even though they have been ‘through the ringer’ so to speak. In simple terms, I hope this series gives our subjects a voice and allows the audience to get to know them as people, not as labels. Hopefully employers out there will start to realise the value of diversity in the workplace, and see that beyond certain differences there can be great talents and gifts. But more importantly, I hope for a broader understanding and acceptance of people who are ‘different’ to the norm.
How was consent sought from people with these disabilities?

In 2014 Northern Pictures carefully considered the legal and ethical issues surrounding the consent by people perceived as vulnerable to being filmed and included in television productions in the context of an ABC documentary on mental health, Changing Minds.

This previous, unprecedented experience left Northern Pictures well placed to develop a consent process for Employable Me that took into account the specific characteristics and disabilities of its participants.

To help us manage the consent and ensure duty of care, certain practices were adopted.

Participants’ experiences of Employable Me would be greatly influenced by the quality of their relationships with Northern Pictures’ production team. Senior members of the team had received a NSW Premier’s Award for Public Service for their work with vulnerable people on Changing Minds and were nominated for a Human Rights Award. All other members of the production team have been selected specifically for their empathetic manner and interest in disability in the workplace.

The majority of participants in Employable Me have neuro-diverse conditions such as autism and Tourette Syndrome. These conditions do not affect participants’ ability to represent themselves legally. They have full insight and live with the dignity of making their own decisions.

Some participants may have an intellectual disability but operate and live in society independently or with family or partners. We used the same release document for everyone – both participants and their supporters. We want participants to know and feel at the outset they are not being singled out or patronised because of their disability by being asked to sign a different release.

Even after a participant had given Northern Pictures their release and consented to being involved, they were not filmed at any time without their express verbal permission. Each day of filming was in consultation with them and dependent on their ongoing agreement.

At our request, ASPECT (Autism Australia) and the Tourette Syndrome Association of Australia helped provide specialist advice on how we manage our relationships with participants.

Northern Pictures also engaged two clinical psychologists as experts to work with us both on screen as part of the program and throughout the production process. They assessed and consulted with participants about their workplace and personal experiences and condition on camera. If the participants had any concerns about the program or any other aspect of their lives, the clinical psychologists extended an open offer to participants to provide support outside of filming for the program.

Northern Pictures’ involvement with participants and their supporters does not end after filming. We have maintained contact with them throughout post-production of Employable Me and will continue to do so, up to and following the initial broadcast of the program on the ABC.
Does someone with autism have the capacity to consent?

Autism is not an intellectual disability.

We worked on an understanding that having autism, Tourette Syndrome or Fragile X does not mean a person should be denied the right to make their own decisions. Many people live in the community with neurodiverse conditions and make many significant and legal decisions every day.

We considered the term ‘dignity of risk’, a term used to describe the right of individuals to choose to take some risk in engaging in decisions about their own life experiences without the involvement and/or intervention from authorities, clinicians, service providers and even family members. Dignity of risk as a term was first championed by advocates for people with physical disabilities, where a person should maintain the right to make their own decisions whether it was considered right or wrong by others.

The participants of Employable Me live independently with the rights and dignity of making decisions for themselves. To ensure there were no misunderstandings in regard to agreeing to participate the producers had regular, open and detailed conversations with participants at the time of consent and ongoing. Though all participants are over the age of 18, the production team were also in constant communication with their families explaining and consulting in regard to filming.

Did you help participants get jobs?

The need to capture story steps and story progression within our production time frames meant we had to work collaboratively with the participants and disability employment agencies to research work opportunities for our participants. The extra hands on deck may have been the reason some potential employers were open to meeting candidates and for others it may have been a reason they were reluctant and may have hindered their prospects.

We, of course, needed to contact all workplaces ahead of time in regard to filming permission, in doing so, it was never spoken or implied by potential employers that they were only interviewing or providing work experience because of perceived benefits to them to be part of the documentary.

Many of the organisations we had contact with and are in the final series have specific autism hiring programs and significant diversity and inclusion policies.

To summarise, we did hit the phones, search employment sites and make calls ahead of participants making contact, but we did not have any undue influence around outcomes or processes.
What hurdles do people with disabilities need to overcome to find employment?

Barriers essentially are internal or external:

**Internal barriers**—broadly include a lack of confidence, an impoverishment of experience (you don’t know whether you’ll like something you’ve never tried!), and fear around the unknown.

In particular, for people with autism, the condition means they have difficulties in interview settings and with social interaction which means it is hard for them to be able to put their best foot forward and illustrate their skill set.

**External barriers**—Biggest barrier is fear on the part of employers – what if it goes wrong? What if I have to counsel or terminate the employee? Is the person going to be a liability? Are they safe, are they dangerous? What will other staff members think?

Generally, there is a lack of awareness and understanding around the needs of disabled employees, and reluctance to accommodate changes in order to allow the hidden skills and abilities of neuro-divergent people to flourish.

There is also a lack of understanding regarding the range of presentations or span of the autism spectrum. No two people are alike and labels create unfair misconceptions.

Have the cast had ongoing genuine employment opportunities?

The participants have ongoing relationships with the employers featured in the series.

We can confirm three of the participants are still employed in the work they found during filming. Two have completed paid internships and have ongoing opportunities with the companies they trained with. Two others have returned to studying whilst doing work experience placements. Another is doing work experience on an ongoing basis. Only one remains unemployed, but we’re hopeful things will change for him soon. No doubt this series will create new prospects for them all as well.