

# TRANSCRIPT

## FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into services for people with autism spectrum disorder**

Melbourne — 10 October 2016

#### Members

Ms Maree Edwards — Chair

Ms Cindy McLeish — Deputy Chair

Ms Chris Couzens

Mr Paul Edbrooke

Mr Bernie Finn

Ms Emma Kealy

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Executive officer: Dr Greg Gardiner

#### Witnesses

Mr John Craven, chair, and

Mr Jason White, employment services manager, Specialisterne Australia.

**The CHAIR** — Welcome to these public hearings, Mr John Craven, chair, and Mr Jason White, employment services manager, from Specialisterne Australia. Thank you for attending here today. All evidence at this hearing taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the Constitution Act 1975 and is subject to the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003 and other relevant legislation. Any comments you make outside the hearing will not be afforded such privilege. It is a contempt of Parliament to provide false evidence. Recording of the proceedings will occur today, and you will be sent a proof copy of the transcript and be able to make factual or grammatical corrections if necessary.

We have allocated half an hour for your presentation. We would like to ask you to be mindful that the committee would like to ask questions, so if you could keep your presentation to 15 minutes, that would be great. Thank you.

### **Visual presentation.**

**Mr CRAVEN** — Thanks, and thanks for giving us some time to present to you some of our thoughts and our experience so far in this sector. To introduce myself, I am John Craven. I am the chairman of Specialisterne Australia. I am also a member of the global board of the Specialisterne Foundation, which is a Danish-based organisation, which is our parent body and the whole owner of the Australian organisation.

Jason White is one of our two employment services managers. He actually delivers the real programs, has 10 years experience in delivering employment services in the sector specifically of autism, as does our other employment services manager, Jay Hobbs, who is based in Brisbane. We also have one further staff member, who is currently project managing the development of a web-based service for autism employment, which is supported at the moment by Salesforce.com — a grant we received from them — and we are doing that in conjunction with the Olga Tennison Centre out at La Trobe University and the Autism CRC in Brisbane.

I am sure you have been through and read what we have. I wanted to present a few things and just bring alive a little bit about who we are. We are sort of a new phenomenon here, although we have been around in the world a little while. I would like to explain that experience. Importantly I would like to call on Jason to give you a little bit of insight into how our program runs and what we are trying to do, what we are trying to achieve and to a degree what we are achieving so far, so you can understand how this works. Then thirdly, we will take the opportunity to present what we think are the challenges that we face in delivering what we want to deliver and some thoughts about how, particularly from a government policy and a government point of view, you may be able to help us and support us in what we are on about.

Very briefly, ‘specialisterne’ is a word that means ‘the specialist’. It is a Danish word. We were formed in Denmark in about 2003 by a gentleman called Thorkil Sonne, who continues to be our global chairman. Thorkil discovered that his son had autism in 2003, and he and his wife — much as the last presentation — said, ‘What’s going to happen when Lars grows up?’. So Thorkil founded an organisation that initially employed people with autism in technology jobs. That has expanded to a global foundation: in 2008 it became the Specialisterne Foundation. We are operating in about 10 or 12 countries now around the world: in the US, in Australia, in Canada, also across Europe and in South America, and we have various operations that are delivering the program that we are going to talk about.

The analogy is the dandelion. The dandelion is seen as a weed in your garden, but it is perhaps one of the most valuable herbs. So that is our mission, if you like, to have autistic people seen as valuable in the community and valuable to employers, and to provide them with the support that they need to be nurtured to be able to deliver. So we have a very positive program in what we are trying to do. In fact our global goal is a million jobs, our Australian goal is 12 000 jobs. We are early in the journey. By the end of this year — which is 18 months after we started here — we will have created 100 jobs, and we have only had 1 person fall out of the program in 18 months. So it has been very successful so far, and in the world we are over 5000 jobs now and growing, but it is a long way to a million.

The UN have very kindly supported what we do. In fact two years ago, in 2015, they supported our goal for a million jobs during Autism Week, and Ban Ki-moon at that stage made in his presentation the same commitment — that companies who signed up to the global charter of the United Nations would support this cause and this aim. So we are very pleased to have some powerful friends who see the value in what we are doing.

The autism advantage is what we are about. We have talked about it in our submission, but our fundamental view is that in fact autistic people have a magnificent contribution to make, particularly in an evolving workplace that requires innovation, flexibility and development. We are backed by research that has been done at Harvard University and in other places that finds that this ability to manage what are called the outliers is a very valuable thing for any organisation to do, to learn how to make a diverse workforce.

One of our global clients, SAP, the software company from Germany, have embraced this now for three or four years. In fact, interestingly, their aim is that by the year 2020 the program that they deliver with us will disappear, because it will be normal practice. It will be just normal practice to employ people who have diverse skills and to make the workplace accommodating to them.

Various reports recently — the last one was the *Economist*, that one was in April this year, and again it pointed to the massive opportunity and the waste of a very talented workforce that is happening. The unemployment rate amongst autistic people is massive in every country in the world, and unreasonably massive, and we are on about fixing that. That is what our program is.

To cut to our approach, and you will see there in the dark blue our principles. I felt it was important just to say this: this is where we come from. We at Specialisterne have no reason to be except to accommodate people with autism and to encourage employers to employ them for the rest of their lives. We are not a short-term program. We do not employ people ourselves. We do not employ autistic people and onsell them; we are not a sales agency. We are not even an employment agency. We are really on about helping employers to understand how they are going to take advantage of this and helping them to develop a program which will be sustainable for the rest of their life.

In fact it is an important thing, sustainability, that I would underline in here, in that we have quite interventionist programs at the start — when we start a program and hire people and bring them on. We also intervene with the employer to train them on how to deliver to that employee a lifelong workplace. So our aim is not to be the service provider working day to day ourselves, with Jason and Jay and our small team doing the work.

We want to train as many people in the community to be able to deliver that either within the employer or with other service organisations, and a little later on I will mention organisations like ICAN, which are just fantastic. I know them extremely well. They are an ideal example of what we need, and we want to support them to be as successful as they can be, because they run the programs that will help people for the rest of their lives. We want to get out of the way and get on to the next thousand people and the next thousand people, to be a catalyst for making this happen.

But maybe just to turn over to Jason briefly, this describes the challenges that we are trying to address and it also lays out our program. I have sort of asked Jason to give you a couple of examples of what we have been doing recently in Australia.

**Mr WHITE** — Great. Thanks, John and the committee. So in 2009 I started managing Victoria's only specialist service, Alpha Autism disability and employment service, and I had heard about Thorkil visiting for the Asia Pacific Autism Conference. He presented there. I remember my first couple of months in that role just receiving phone calls from parents across the country saying, 'What's this about — "software testing opportunities for our kids in Australia for people on the spectrum"?''. I said, 'I've got no idea. It's a quirky little name, but I don't really know how to pronounce it'. But I did a bit of investigating and found out that there was this global program happening that was employing numbers of autistic people in the corporate world. I thought, 'How wonderful is this?', because at the moment our challenge as an employment service provider is convincing employers to take one person on, whereas this organisation seems to be having some great success in placing large numbers of people in quite technical roles.

At that point in time, back in 2009, I thought we are so far away from that now. Fast-forward to this year when I have come on board with the organisation, the first thing I wanted to know was what was in the program that made it work? What was the magic, and how do they do it?

What do we do? Firstly, we offer unique opportunities for employment for people on the spectrum. That is something that they are just simply not afforded up until this point. Those opportunities never existed. If you look at the current DES model, it is probably not sophisticated enough a model to approach the corporate world to actually tap into those roles.

We are specialists. The way in which we assess candidates is, first of all, we put the information out there, we put the jobs ads out there, not unlike the current recruitment process does. We advertise the roles, but we do not do it passively. We headhunt organisations that are linked in with the autistic community, and we try and get those jobs advertised out to the widest market possible.

What we have found is if we look at the types of people that are applying for our opportunities, they are not just recent graduates. If you look at the last program that we ran in Canberra where we were looking for data analytics candidates, they were Canberra-based roles working for Hewlett Packard Enterprise. We had 56 applicants in total when we closed off the job ad, from all over Australia and from overseas. That is because these opportunities simply do not exist, so we knew that this was a very unique offering and certainly the interest came from a very, very wide geographic map.

On the types of people that ended up applying for those roles, a quarter of the applicants were in the DES community at the moment — actively in the DES community. One of the first ones was actually ultimately employed. He had been in the DES world for 10 years and had not worked during that time, yet he had a double degree prior to that — so two degrees and then a massive period of unemployment where he was literally doing nothing. There were a couple of volunteer roles, but outside of that there was no paid employment, no meaningful employment for this individual.

Because of this program we are able to offer a platform for individuals like him to come and demonstrate his capacity to do tasks associated with these roles. The employer has a certain criteria they are looking for for individuals to be able to demonstrate their capacity to fulfil these roles. We provided the platform for these individuals to come in and actually demonstrate what they are capable of doing.

We understand that there are challenges for autistic people. When you look at the traditional recruitment process or job interview process, it is right there in that 30-minute meeting they have with that employer that they have got to try and manage all these challenges and then still be able to sell themselves to an employer. It just does not work, so these people largely miss out on opportunities to actually become employed, even though they may have the skills and the prerequisites to qualify themselves to go for these roles.

With our process, firstly we preselect our candidates for an assessment program. The assessment program is where the magic happens, where we are really able to have these individuals showcase their talents. But before that we short-list a group of candidates to come and attend the workshop. In that workshop we are basically giving a chance to assess them over a day where they can come in. We use the Lego Mindstorms robotics kits. We find that is a good tool for us to be able to assess an individual's capacity to learn something that is different and put together the robotics kits. So we are looking at their motor skills and at their capacity to be able to follow instructions for something that is quite foreign to them.

So when we are talking about them coming into a new role for an employer, they are obviously learning new skills. This is something that is foreign, and we are able to get a good lens on how they can demonstrate their capacity to learn new skills.

At the end of the workshop we short-list again a group of candidates that we would invite to attend an assessment period, which can go anywhere from two to four weeks. Over that time again we are having these candidates demonstrate their capacity not only to demonstrate their ability to do skills related to the tasks required for the roles but also we are getting them to demonstrate their capacity to work a full day's work. For a lot of these individuals, they have not done any activity where they are required to apply themselves over 7½ hours a day. So over the assessment period we are actually getting them to demonstrate what their capacity to work is over a week or two weeks, whichever the assessment period is.

**Mr CRAVEN** — In brief, you see that is the program. We say it is a patient approach to understanding the real skills of the person and their capabilities and to let them demonstrate that. Interestingly some people at the end of two or three weeks have said, 'This isn't for me'. Some of them have been asked, for example, 'Well, why did you?' — 'My parents wanted me to do it, and I wanted to make everyone happy, but really what I want to do is something else', and it has made them aware of their skills. Others of course have just taken to it like a duck to water, and it is amazing to see the change it makes to their lives.

In the interests of time, very quickly, we have lots of global clients, so there are household names there of people we work with. But down the list of the Australian clients since the beginning of last year, which is when

we commenced, Hewlett Packard Enterprise has been our trailblazer here. They came up with the idea, they brought it and then we set up Specialisterne to deliver in Australia. They have had a program that has so far serviced the Department of Human Services in Canberra, the Department of Defence and now The Department of Immigration and Border Protection. Across those, by the end of this year we will have hired 55 people. They are all working in Brisbane, Adelaide and Canberra. You can see some of the happy smiling faces down on the bottom right.

Interestingly you might say then we have moved on and we are introducing it to our global clients, like SAP, and that is good. We have just introduced some really interesting roles there in project management and other areas, not traditional STEM skills. But we are moving on now into very exciting programs. One is SunPork, which commenced last week. We are actually creating jobs in agriculture for SunPork, and they are going to be employed on SunPork farms in Queensland and in South Australia, initially as a trial with some support from the pork industry and some support from the South Australian state government, which also wanted to provide seed money. We are doing that with the Autism CRC in Brisbane to technically develop the approach. Interestingly, no robots in that one; we have actually developed a whole new approach to introducing people to farm work.

With Temple Grandin, who you have probably heard of, we consulted with her when she was out last, and we were very excited by her responses to how successful this program will be.

Weir Minerals is a mining services organisation. They are global — they are out of Scotland and based in Australia in Sydney. Again, Jay has just commenced a program with them which will employ 8 to 10 people in a variety of roles in a minor engineering capacity — again, not IT as such but in different sorts of roles. So we make the point that, despite the fact we started with IT and some people see Specialisterne as equated to doing software testing, we see the opportunity right across the board, and we are finding these clients.

All of these clients self-funded the program. It is all self-funded. We charge a fee to the employer for our services. The general cost is about the same as it would be to employ anybody. It is about 10 per cent of the first year's wage, and that is not very different. Frankly, that is what most say — 'Boy! I thought it would be a lot more than that' — and for that we can provide this program the way we deliver it.

Let me skip Matthew's story. You have a link to it. It is SAP Canada. It brings alive the opportunity, I think, but you can see that in the links that we have provided.

The challenges: as I said, we have created 100 jobs, and that is a good start, but we have an appetite for a lot more than that, and we want to go for 12 000 in Australia, so we want to make a really big impact. What are the challenges that we face? First of all, of course, we have to create awareness amongst employers, and I say large and small. It works well for large employers, because now they all have diversity programs. All you have to do is convince them that this is a proper diversity and needs to be handled accordingly, and generally they are coming around. All four banks at the moment are talking to us about a program for next year, and many of the large organisations can fit this in. But what about the small companies which might be even better accommodated and we get better bang out of this? We have got to work with them, large and small, to encourage them and have them understand. Often they do not understand. The first thing I often get from an employer is, 'Look, yes, we could probably fit someone in. We have got sort of a need on the front desk for a couple of hours a week, and there are some envelopes to be stuffed'. Now, I am being a bit extreme but not too extreme. So a lot of the time they do not get their head around the fact that we are actually talking about an advantage for you.

Weir, fabulously supported by their global COO, who is also in charge of the innovation program, said, 'This is about my innovation program. This is not about doing a nice job for the community and doing good things; it is about improving the workforce'. SunPork also intend to advertise on the logo that they produce better pork because they have better, more empathetic animal husbandry going on from better skilled and more qualified people than the rest of the industry. So it is a positive thing.

We need to enable people with ASD to also understand that they can work, because some have sort of lost the faith. We have to have some programs a little bit like early intervention, and we are running some internship programs now. We also have a grant from Telematics to run some one-week training programs for people at university so they understand the opportunity, and so on it goes down the list of different challenges that are there, looking at not just technology but encouraging the establishment of support networks and really training

the rest of the industry to really know everything. We have no reason to keep our thing to ourselves; in fact we have a policy of open access to our IP so that it can be shared with anyone. Our only concern is quality control because we have had experiences as we have grown of getting into, shall we say, the wrong hands and being misused and the outcome not being good, and of course that reflects badly on the whole movement. So the outcomes must be sustainable and positive for all involved, the employer and the employee.

The opportunities, just to capture them — they are on our last page — really I have just summarised them here. There are funding opportunities. We could be helped. There could be a little bit of funding to help grease the rails, I think particularly for small employers, where it is a bit of an ask to get themselves up for the first program. There could be some help there. The talent pipeline development perhaps could do with a bit of funding, and potentially NDIS could even fit in here a little, but remember that some of our people do not qualify for NDIS support, because they are seen to be too high functioning in a disability sense. And there are research grants, because we have to keep coming up with new ways to do this better as we move into new areas.

The Victorian State Government could become an employer of choice for autistic talent — I would really like to see that happen. Just put up the hand like Microsoft and SAP and others have done and say, ‘We are going to have 5 per cent, 2 per cent, 1 per cent’ — whatever it is — ‘employed and have a program running’, and they will be employed. This is not a cost item; this is just making the jobs available. We have had discussions or are in discussions with the Department of Health and Human Services, they have agreed to take people and we are working on how that is going to work. The big problem they first struck was, and I say this — I am in this room — is that they said, ‘But how are we going to get the dollars for these positions?’. That should be no question; just do it. Just make the positions available, which is what our commercial customers have done. We hire 100 people or 1000 people a year. We can put 10 into this program and just say it is done, and then we can run the program together.

Aggregating programs is another good idea; small departments could come together and could take two each, and we could run a single program to get a pool of people who could work in different places. That is another great idea, again, to spread the opportunities around, and that could be done. It just needs a bit of a catalyst to let the government do that — to come together and say, ‘We’re going to have a program’. It is a bit like a graduate recruitment program. That is the easiest way I can say it. Just think of it that way. We have got graduate recruitment programs; why do we not have autistic recruitment programs? We all know how they work. They are put on a fast track, they are put through and shown different places to work, they have a good outcome and there is a little support wrapped around them to make sure they are successful.

Tender requirements is another idea where you certainly could use your muscle. The Department of Defence have talked about this. They have done the programs themselves now within their suppliers into Defence, and I think that has not happened yet, but we think that would be a great idea — that you could just require people to do it. You are actually not requiring them to do anything negative; it is a fantastic opening for them if they just need the encouragement to go ahead and do it.

The sector itself you have heard all about. It is fragmented. Where do we go? We have had trouble. We could not get a list of people who were available who were autistic. We could not get a single consolidated list. We started in Adelaide. Part of the reason we are working on the employment portal and putting this thing together is so we will have one place where people can register for jobs, but of course they will not register with a resume; we have got all sorts of new techniques that will let them register in a way that is conducive to showing their skills.

Of course community awareness across the board — I think the ‘disability’ tag is the worst thing that comes with autism. It is not a disability service, in fact. There are some fantastic opportunities here. Obviously at low-functioning ends and so on there are some certain different characteristics that perhaps are not matched to employment, but there are thousands if not millions in the world who are very much being underutilised in regard to employment, and when they are utilised their life takes on a whole new meaning.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much, John, and thank you also, Jason. It was very interesting reading what you have been able to achieve so far internationally. It is quite remarkable. I have a couple of questions. I am very pleased to see that you have respect at the top of your list, and the reason I refer to that is that many people with autism who are on the spectrum are very vulnerable, of course, and many of them also have comorbidities. I guess there is always the question around employment and the potential for exploitation, so I am just wondering: what does your organisation do to ensure that the employers are actually caring for, respecting and

making sure that there is no exploitation of people who are employed who are on the spectrum? The second question that kind of goes along with that is gender diversity. I noticed that in some of your pictures there was one woman and a lot of fellas. Do you have gender targets, or do you just employ people as they come? Do they just sort of register, irrespective of gender? Are employers thinking about gender?

**Mr CRAVEN** — Let me pick up the first one, potentially. Absolutely, and thinking about our roots, which is Thorkil, with his autistic son, you can see how fundamental is respect and ensuring that there is no exploitation. It is fundamental to our business. How that starts is we actually select employers for our program. We have turned down some people who did not seem to quite get it, particularly, as I mentioned, ‘Yes, we’ve got a few jobs. We can fit someone in. They will be all right. They can just sit on the side, and we hope they’ll go okay. We should have three’.

First of all, right at the start, we actually go in to the employer. We usually start at the highest level; it usually starts with the CEO or the COO or at least the head of human resources, and we talk to them about why they are doing the program and maybe give them some education. Actually we often have to go through the six-month period of running some presentations before the penny drops and they know what they are on about. So that is an important starting point: to make sure that the organisation is on board.

We then craft a program that ensures adequate support and that involves them picking it up. I will get Jason to mention our buddy program just very briefly as one example of how we do that, but they have to buy into support. They cannot come on the program and just say, ‘I just want three people, and there will be no support’, so we really work hard with that.

Thirdly, we actually do deliver a lot of training and so on, particularly in the kick-off stages, to make sure the employer is properly educated, both as the manager and as the individual, and we also look at their employment practices, like their policies, and suggest where changes need to be made to be more accommodating — for example, particularly because there might be periods of time where some of the autistic employees are dealing with other things in their life make-up and they need a little time off. There cannot be ‘two strikes and you’re out if you don’t turn up for work’ and so on. And they start to understand that. The very interesting thing we usually find in all the things we point out needing is that someone not far into it usually says, ‘I don’t think we’ve got any employees who don’t want the same thing’, and that is in the way they are being looked after.

Fourthly, we ensure that for the long haul there is a program in place that really looks after them, but we continue on. We sell a service that is an ongoing support service where we actually have a helpline. We go and visit. We go monthly and quarterly to visit the individuals. We have also engaged La Trobe University in the programs we have done so far with HPE to review the outcomes with both the families and the individuals to give us feedback on how it is working, so we are very concerned about that whole, entire solution. The last thing I would say is we are in the business at the moment of effectively accrediting for the service providers and making sure they are happy, and we are getting them to deliver alongside us, so hopefully they can do it. But we will only let them do it once we think they abide by the principles.

Just briefly, the buddy program, Jason, would be of interest.

**Mr WHITE** — Yes. I think the workplace mentor and buddy programs are something that we strongly push with all of our corporate partners at the moment, and it is working really, really well. I think the support that we cannot always provide is picked up by the mentors and buddies. So we basically have the employer sort of canvass their co-workers and then ask people to put their hand up to volunteer to be either a workplace mentor or a buddy.

The workplace mentor is someone that would be working in close quarters with the autistic talent. So the autistic employees can come to them for help with anything that is workplace related. Then you have got a buddy, who would be a separate person. It does not even have to be a co-worker; it can be someone working from a different department. But they are tasked with really helping the person become inducted into, I guess, the corporate culture of the organisation, you know, and assisting.

So during that first week or two they will meet with them every lunchtime. They will show them around the proximity of the building and different places they can go for lunch. They will make sure that there are no issues with transport and getting to work for the first few weeks just so that they are all comfortably getting on. But

that certainly is probably one of the stronger points to our ongoing support model — getting that buddy and mentor program established early on.

**Mr CRAVEN** — In the SunPork example in agriculture, we are actually going to be rurally based. SunPork have undertaken to provide housing and support in the housing for those who need it, who are unable to live at home or who would be precluded if they had to live in the town.

**The CHAIR** — And so with the gender breakdown — —

**Mr CRAVEN** — Yes, gender.

**The CHAIR** — The reason I ask is that IT seems to be a male-dominated field anyway —

**Mr CRAVEN** — It is, yes.

**The CHAIR** — for whatever reason. My favourite show is *The Code* on the ABC, and I am sure lots of people have watched that, but it is a really interesting breakdown that there seems to be more men and young males interested in IT than women. But is there a turning around of that? Is there some way that that can be changed?

**Mr CRAVEN** — There is. We have so far found a lot more males than females who are autistic applying for the jobs we have had. One thing we are hopeful of is that as we go into other areas, and perhaps because there are creative areas and so on as well, the proportion might be higher. We are actually thinking we might get quite a lot into the agricultural program because there is a lot of affinity with animals.

So looking at global research, in fact one of the issues has been that there has been a bit of an imbalance in males and females in autism. We have been mainly responding just to what we get in. We have not set any diversity targets yet. Perhaps the next layer will be to try that. We have certainly been very positive in creating a more diverse group, and the group we had in Canberra for the Department of Defence, which were cybersecurity jobs, that was — how many did we — —

**Mr WHITE** — It was a third — a third were female who were selected.

**Mr CRAVEN** — Yes. So that is our most recent one, and we had a better cohort there of people.

**The CHAIR** — It is good, because one of the things that the committee has been hearing is the lack of attention being given to particularly young girls and women who are on the spectrum. So it is not just at that employment level; it is actually throughout their whole lives.

**Mr CRAVEN** — Yes.

**The CHAIR** — Diagnosis and then early intervention. It seems to be different for girls from what it is for boys.

**Mr CRAVEN** — Yes.

**Ms McLEISH** — I will be quick. You mentioned the autistic talent workshops. Could you just drill down a little bit more about how often you have those or how many you have had all around the country, because the programs you talked about for employment opportunities tend to be not so much Victoria or Melbourne based. I am just kind of interested in the numbers that attend and how long they go for.

**Mr WHITE** — We have not rolled it out as yet. Our first one we are hoping to roll out in the last week of December with two more that will be happening over January and February in the new year.

**Mr CRAVEN** — And they will be in country Victoria.

**Ms McLEISH** — How long do they go?

**Mr WHITE** — They are week-long sessions.

**Ms McLEISH** — So 9 to 5?

**Mr WHITE** — Yes, around 9 to 5 for a whole week. Again it is basically week one of our assessment program where we will invite students in and people from the wider community. They will come in and they will basically sit out the first week of the assessment program, where again it is using the Lego Mindstorms robotics kits and sort of testing their capacity to do the building and then the programming of the robots.

**Ms McLEISH** — How will you recruit to these workshops?

**Mr WHITE** — It will be through Amaze, it will be through Aspergers Victoria, it will be through the unis directly and through just a lot of community groups.

**Mr CRAVEN** — We also have an ambition of actually effectively prequalifying the pipeline, so we hope that these one-weeks could eventually — with a bit more access to funds, because someone has got to pay for the program — have people who are almost job ready and, when they are going through university, could go through. And we hope they would come out and say to an employer, ‘I’ve got a Specialisterne accreditation here, so I am ready to go’. We actually even have spoken at high school level of potentially doing the same thing with last-year high school students, and then when they go to university, they can say, ‘I’ve got a Specialisterne accreditation. I am ready for an entry. You know, I am okay’, and they do not get knocked back because they may not have done all of the prerequisites for a normal university entry.

**Mr FINN** — The reaction of employers when you first approach them, what has that been like? I mean, where do you begin? Is it cold-calling? How do you go about broaching the subject?

**Mr CRAVEN** — It has been a bit of cold-calling, calling in favours and friends and talking about it. Actually probably the best thing is out at night: ‘What are you doing now?’, and you say, ‘Well, doing this thing’ — ‘Oh, tell me more about that. Wow! Boy, I heard about that!’. Now of course when they read it in the *Economist* or somewhere like that and see it around, it is getting a bit of acknowledgement.

So we are often being approached by people who have heard a bit about it but do not quite understand it, so they say, ‘Can you tell us about it?’. So for one of the banks — or two of the Melbourne-based banks — it was exactly that: they had heard about it or someone had. In fact usually an advocate with a child or a relative on the spectrum who has brought it to management’s attention and been advocating is the way it gets up.

And then when we present the thing, I think they are sitting there thinking, ‘This’ll be about, you know, we’ve got to come up with three jobs and we’ve got to put a couple of people in, and I suppose we could afford it. You know, it’s in our public relations’. We bounce in and start talking about transforming your workforce, and then usually the higher up the people are, they say, ‘Whoa, I get that. This is really different. This is something’. Then they say, ‘Wouldn’t that make a difference to our whole workforce? Wouldn’t they really like this if they felt they were doing this and integrating with new skills and so on’. Yes. So it sort of takes off. It almost sells itself after that, and in fact in person one of our current clients, the CEO for Asia-Pacific, just said, ‘The price is fine. It’s worth every cent, so just do it’.

**Mr FINN** — I was just going to ask: there must be some particular industries that would benefit enormously from having the skills of people with autism?

**Mr CRAVEN** — Absolutely. I mean, obviously around the technical skills. Take the cybersecurity, and there is one looking us in the face. The biggest lack in the world is cybersecurity people. We have just run a program where we have hired 10 for the Department of Defence for cybersecurity jobs in Canberra. Part of that program is because they could not hire enough people, and of course when they do hire them at the moment from a normal neurotypical group, they stay about six months and then go and take a high-paid job at Google or somewhere, whereas they find the loyalty of the autistic characteristic is amazing, so if they are happy and comfortable, that is all they want. So there are those areas where there is a shortage of talent, and this is just a whole new area we have not even tapped into if you want to be really mercenary, in a way, about that, in that we are standing looking after the people and not taking advantage of them. But really also there are other areas, like in the creative areas; there are massive opportunities amongst those in creative industries and so on.

Really the only thing we try and generally avoid is where it involves a lot of up-front personal presentation in a very unstructured environment. It needs a degree of structure, even with the most high-functioning people. But we are digging out people who are coming on to this whose skills are unbelievable. The top performer of the

Department of Defence — he did the psychometric testing. We used some psychometric testing to check on what their skills are. That psychometric battery of tests had never had such a high score from an individual.

**Mr FINN** — So you are seeing employers now who have actually seen the economic benefit of employing someone with autism.

**Mr CRAVEN** — Yes. In fact we have done and we are doing economic benefit cases, and so we help with the employer. Actually one of the early jobs we have to do is write the business case that they can put up to their boss to get the funding, and one of the banks just told us last week that they have funding for a program next year. It has been put into their business plan.

**Mr FINN** — Wonderful. Thank you.

**Ms COUZENS** — Thank you, and thanks for your presentation today. In your submission you talked about existing disability employment services having a limited understanding of the needs of people with ASD. How do you overcome that? Do you think training is required for other organisations to gain a better understanding of what the needs are?

**Mr CRAVEN** — Yes, but I will let Jay talk about that because Jay has worked on both sides of the spectrum with us and with disability service providers. Our view is that we do have to introduce them to our methods, and there are three or four now in Australia who we are working with and we are subcontracting to them initially so they can learn our ways and be trained. They are working on the Weir example, and they will be working on SunPork. They will invest time on training up their own people so they can deliver it themselves. They need to be hands-on introduced to the idea of what can be done, and then we give them access to all of our methods and so on. Jay, your experience in that sector?

**Mr WHITE** — At a very broad level there is no prerequisite for an individual's training prior to becoming a DES employee. You could come from any background and not have any previous disability experience and you could easily be employed as a caseworker or consultant for a DES agency. There is the spectrum itself and the capacity of individuals that work in the DES system. You have got people at one end that may be in the system for a long time and have a lot of knowledge about working with people with autism and Asperger's syndrome. Then you might have someone who is very, very green that has had very little exposure to people with disabilities at all, yet they may have 4 or 5 people on their caseload of 30 or 40 people that they need to see once a fortnight face to face and try and effectively assist them with getting work. There is a lot that needs to be done in that sector in order for it to be even remotely effective to service people with autism.

I heard a story the other day. Even those candidates who go through our program that are not successful, we still work with the unsuccessful candidates thereon to try to help them with other opportunities. I was speaking with a parent of an unsuccessful candidate from Canberra, but she said her daughter was just introduced to an agency in Canberra and during the first meeting the consultant met with the candidate, had no understanding of autism and berated this young lady because she would not look her in the eye when she met with her for the first meeting. There was absolutely no understanding whatsoever. And that was the first meeting. So this young girl now is so fearful about going back there for a second appointment. The last thing she is thinking is that that consultant is in any way going to be effective in terms of helping her to advance. This is the problem. There is just such little understanding.

**Ms COUZENS** — You talked a lot about getting high-functioning people with autism into employment. Are they the only group you focus on, or is it at a whole range of different levels?

**Mr CRAVEN** — There is no doubt globally that we have sort of taken, shall we say, a low-hanging fruit approach with no funding backing us up. We have had to bootstrap this up. We have taken the areas where we can make an impact with people, because there are people right across the spectrum who need help and we have got to start somewhere. But, for example, with the animal husbandry, we are really not looking for necessarily high-functioning academic people. The main criteria there is going to be their affinity with animals and their ability to read animals and work with animals. As Temple would say, she can talk to the animals. She can just look them in the eye and know what is going on, and that is what she said you are going to get from these candidates. Our whole program does not use Lego Mindstorms robots at all; it actually uses the buddying scheme and we take them out to the farms daily. They go out and experience and do tasks, and that way we see

how they are going to be doing the work. So we are hopeful as we expand this that we can go into other areas which will let others be able to be employed.

**Ms COUZENS** — Thank you.

**Mr EDBROOKE** — Just a very quick one before we finish up: is Specialisterne a not-for-profit organisation?

**Mr CRAVEN** — Yes, it is, and we are registered with the ACNC as a Charity, endorsed as a deductible gift recipient and endorsed for charity tax concessions in Australia. And globally we are entirely not for profit. We have run a model in some countries historically where we tried some franchising, and we have pulled that entirely back now, and the Australian model is the new model where it is wholly owned by the foundation. I am a member of the board. We now have Specialisterne US as the controlling body there. Our job here when we are done with Australia will be to go to New Zealand and Asia as well. We have just said, ‘Give us a year or two to get some roots down here and get running’. Our first year has run from having a zero bank balance — having not much — back to zero, so we live from hand to mouth at the moment, but we are getting great support with a good pipeline of opportunities. That will mean the thing is very sustainable.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much, John, and thank you very much, Jason. The committee is very over time, but we do appreciate what we have heard from you today. Good luck with the target 12 000.

**Mr CRAVEN** — Thank you.

**Mr WHITE** — Thanks very much.

**Witnesses withdrew.**