



Autism CRC - new group of skilled workers to bring home the bacon

Customer Story

Adults on the autism spectrum prove well suited to jobs in livestock husbandry.



Adults on the autism spectrum have many skills and traits that make them ideal animal care workers.

It makes perfect sense yet it took the courage of a leader in Australia's pork industry and the Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism (Autism CRC) to create world-first employment opportunities for autistic adults.

Adults on the autism spectrum are often unemployed, under-employed and socially disadvantaged. Yet, many such adults possess unique empathy for animals, can be very focussed on tasks with great attention to detail, and many thrive on repetitive tasks – of which there are many with pig care.

Autism and Agriculture – Diverse People, Exceptional Care is an initiative by SunPork Farms and Autism CRC to employ people on the spectrum, in fulltime jobs, and create careers for them.

SunPork Farms is a wholly Australian-owned integrated pork production enterprise based on more than 40 years of family farming traditions.

Prof Robert van Barneveld, CEO and Managing Director of the Sunpork Group, has long been involved in autism service provision and research. He knows the diverse skills and attributes of autistic adults and believes this pilot program will prove these individuals are well suited to animal-care industries.

“Our ultimate goal is to quantify the success of the program, employ more adults on the spectrum in our business, and then offer our insights and experience to other livestock sectors who may also benefit from a more diverse workforce.”

“The Autism and Agriculture pilot program has the potential to enhance the human resources capability of the agricultural industry both in Australia and internationally.”

PROF ROBERT VAN BARNEVELD, CEO & MANAGING DIRECTOR, SUNPORK GROUP

SunPork Farms has offered fulltime positions to seven autistic adults in their Queensland piggeries. The program's customised recruitment process is aiming to find four more autistic employees for the company's South Australian piggeries. All new autistic employees are paid a full,

unsubsidised wage by SunPork Farms for the jobs they perform.

The procedure for recruiting people on the spectrum is entirely practical. It's a hands-on start with a two-day workshop and a two-week paid training program, to see who is suited. There are no interviews or resumes required – which is often a barrier for adults on the spectrum. These cause stress for people who are otherwise well suited to the job.

Autism and Agriculture project leader Dr Kirsty Richards said the project has shifted the paradigm for employee recruitment and selection.

“We’re providing people with opportunities to show us, rather than tell us, their abilities to care for our livestock, develop new skills and work safely.”

DR KIRSTY RICHARDS, PROJECT LEADER,
AUTISM AND AGRICULTURE

“To see our new employees gain confidence and earn satisfaction from their work is extremely rewarding for the entire SunPork Farms team. Watching them transform as individuals, form their first friendships and become part of our team has been life-changing.”

Dr Richards said the success of this program should challenge business more widely to look at traditional recruitment, training and support to better accommodate a diverse workforce.

Prof Robert van Barneveld said skills or traits highly desired in employees, such as great attention to detail, are often inbuilt in autistic people. He sees no reason why the 1000-plus strong workforce of the SunPork Group won't include many more people on the spectrum.

Trainees of the program at one of SunPork Farms' Queensland piggeries included David Grose and Daniel Slavin. They are now employees and love their work.



Feeding time in the piggery is serious business, and fun, for those in the Autism CRC project.

“Tiring, hot but great fun,” David told Channel Ten television, through a beaming smile.

“Opportunities like these are really hard to come by for people with autism,” Daniel added, who at 19 years of age, moved from his Melbourne home to take up the gig with SunPork.

The program was initiated by SunPork Farms and the Autism CRC, and has been supported by the CRC for High Integrity Australian Pork (Pork CRC), the South Australian Government and Specialisterne Australia – which helps with employment.

Pork CRC and the SA Government contributed \$150,000 towards the initiative.

“It’s the most exciting project we’ve been involved with and I congratulate Autism CRC and SunPork Farms for coming up with something so innovative.”

DR ROGER CAMPBELL, CEO, PORK CRC

Dr Campbell said Pork CRC-supported science and research and development has demonstrated the very real link between good stockmanship and productivity.

Dr Richards said the CRC Programme has provided the platform for Autism CRC to collaborate with industry, government and other CRCs.

“This ensures that innovative projects requiring expertise from a range of sectors – such as Autism and Agriculture, are successful and deliver tangible outcomes allowing all individuals to participate fully in society,” Dr Richards said.

Visit [Autism CRC](#) or [SunPork Farms](#).

Since 2013 the CRC for Living with Autism has been awarded a total of \$31 million in CRC Programme funding.

Since 2011 the CRC for High Integrity Australian Pork has been awarded a total of \$19.86 million in CRC Programme funding.

The Cooperative Research Centres (CRC) Programme

The CRC Programme is a competitive, merit-based grants programme that supports industry led collaborations between industry, researchers and the community. The CRC Programme aims to improve the competitiveness, productivity and sustainability of Australian industries through fostering high quality research that solves industry-identified problems. The programme encourages and facilitates small and medium enterprise participation in collaborative research.

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