



INDIVIDUAL: Kate Beattie (left) and Louise Sheehy say businesses need to broaden their view of autism. **Photo:** Gabriel Oliveira

Call to give autism skills a chance

Autism advocates want businesses to rethink their notions of individuals on the spectrum.

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KATE Beattie has an intimate view of the challenges facing people with autism.

The head of marketing at Perth consultant Harrier Group is mother to nine-year-old Archer, one of more than 230,000 Australians diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum.

"He spends his days waiting to be told off for not listening, trying to concentrate on his teacher, remembering to listen out for cars, and trying to engage in conversation without getting distracted and appearing rude," Ms Beattie told *Business News*.

"It is mentally and physically exhausting."

Taking their lead from the US,

Australian businesses are beginning to include autism at work programs to help develop opportunities and appropriate environments for people with autism.

Despite this, Ms Beattie is concerned these programs are targeting overly specific skillsets in the area of STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics).

"While I agree that there are people on the spectrum that will be talented engineers, cyber-security specialists, developers, risk analysts and statisticians, there are many others that won't – or that don't want to be," she said.

"A friend told me recently that these programs make him feel like he's 'even failing at having autism' and he's not alone; many people believe that there is a broad and diverse spectrum of

people and abilities being overlooked."

While praising neuro-diversity programs offered by companies such as IBM, Westpac and ANZ, she believes these opportunities should be available in a wider variety of roles.

Up to 44 per cent of children diagnosed with autism had average or above average capabilities, Ms Beattie said, but an unemployment rate of 32 per cent – more than six times that of people without a disability – was partly caused by a lack of understanding.

"Imagine desperately wanting to make friends at work but feeling worried that colleagues might misunderstand your communication style," she said.

"Maybe your new open plan office is completely overwhelming,

“An individual with autism, once they're engaged with a particular subject matter, can add a lot to any industry

– Louise Sheehy

making you anxious and withdrawn.

"I'd like to see more focus on understanding how people with neurological differences relate and respond to the world around them and to recognise this as a natural variation in how humans think."

Autism West chief executive Louise Sheehy told *Business News* the organisation was work-

ing with businesses to include neuro-diversity as part of their diversity policy, with a focus on understanding how a broader range of individuals with autism might think.

"We (recently) had an interesting panel with a couple of young people in the IT industry, as well as an artist," Ms Sheehy said.

"They had a very animated discussion around pattern rec-

ognition – that's probably why there's a predisposition towards technology.

"But an individual with autism, once they're engaged with a particular subject matter, can add a lot to any industry."

The not-for-profit organisation holds regular employment forums, and Ms Sheehy said the process of including neurologically diverse people within a company was not as difficult or arduous as many believed.

She noted the example of an employment push for neuro-diversity within some major US companies, where it was estimated the average cost to accommodate an individual with autism was \$US500 (\$710).

"The issue lies with awareness, because autism awareness is the equivalent of a wheelchair ramp for someone who has a physical disability," Ms Sheehy said.

"For the employers and fellow workers to be aware of what may impact an individual is key because, in order for anyone to function successfully, they have to be in a comfortable space."

Diversity policy, autism awareness training, and recruitment were vital areas that could produce an immediate impact, she said.

Because the definition of autism was inclusive of a huge range of individual strengths and weaknesses, these measures were also applicable to any industry, and any business.

"Our guys, when they focus, they focus extremely well, and are very task orientated," Ms Sheehy said.

"That maps out into lots of different areas, not just STEM.

"It has to be individual, because what works for one person might not necessarily work for another person."

Ms Beattie is hopeful that, as her son gets older, many of these hurdles to work will be removed.

"People with autism have interests as varied and as valuable as any other group in society," she said.

"I'm confident that whoever employs Archer in the future will be thrilled with his creativity, big picture thinking and desire to always do better," she said.

"I just hope that it's in an industry and role of his choosing and not one that has been prescribed based on stereotypical skills and attributes imposed on him by others."



SECTOR SHIFT: Natalie Jenkins (centre), pictured with Nicola Forrest (left) and Claire Watson, says diversity has become a crucial strategy for Black Swan. **Photo:** Rebecca Mansell

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BLACK Swan State Theatre Company is seeking to connect with corporate partners through a comprehensive push for diversity.

A brief glance through the organisation's 2019 season reveals a wide range of productions that showcase gender, race and abilities.

Executive director Natalie Jenkins told *Business News* the move allowed productions to accurately reflect the Western Australian community.

"You attract diversity and parity when you have that mindset in place, even if it's not outwardly stated," she said.

"But now it is outwardly stated for us, and we have KPIs around gender parity, inclusivity and diversity.

"There is definitely a spotlight on it in terms of business operation.

"There's been a massive shift in the sector ... hopefully in five or 10

years' time we're not even talking about this being a strategy anymore – it is just the way things are.

"But at the moment it's a key strategy for us, it's completely embedded across our strategic plan."

The organisation recently received the Perdaman Workplace Diversity Excellence award at the Australian Institute of Management WA's Pinnacle Awards, and actor Julia Hales, whose performance in *You Know We Belong Together* details her personal experience of living with Down Syndrome, won a *Business News* 40under40 award.

Black Swan has for some years measured the presence of women across the organisation, from backstage crew to creatives and leadership, but is now focusing on broadening this measurement beyond gender.

Increased diversity has had a wider impact, as the number of first-time audience members in 2018 grew by 18 per cent, particularly for the productions of *Skylab*, which featured an

all-Aboriginal cast, and *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, featuring Aboriginal actor Kelton Pell in a traditionally Caucasian role.

Ms Jenkins said the diversity strategy was being directly reflected in interactions with corporate partners, many of which recognised close links to their own diversity goals.

"I don't know any of our major partners that don't talk about the fact that they see this alignment," she said.

"So many conversations I've had over the last 12 months or so with our partners have been about them really understanding what we're doing, really engaging, and seeing the link back into their businesses.

"It's like we're living and breathing the strategies that they're also bringing into their workplaces."

An example, she said, was principal partner Rio Tinto, which had an inclusivity strategy running across the company.

Ms Jenkins had communicated with various Rio Tinto

executives, who had all deeply connected to the aims of Black Swan, she said.

The presence of three female leaders had been a key point of connection.

Black Swan was the only major performing arts company in Australia to have full female leadership, Ms Jenkins said, including artistic director Claire Watson, board chair Nicola Forrest, and herself.

This influence had filtered down through the organisation from board level, she said.

"Our previous chair, Mark Barnaba, was absolutely supportive of gender equality, but also family stuff as well," she said.

"All of us – executives and two artistic directors (past and present) – have come into the role with children, so there's a lot to be said about what the company does practically to support that.

"It can be quite a detractor, particularly in these roles, which are big roles."