Hi, everyone. My name's Jeanette Purkis. I'm going to talk today about employment and autism.

What would qualify me to do such a thing? Well, that would be because I'm a person on the autism spectrum. I was diagnosed with Asperger's in 1994.

I'm also a bit of an experienced employee. I've been in the workforce on and off since about 1992, and at the moment I've been working for the Australian Public Service here in Canberra for eight years, which is very exciting.

Employment is a very important part of my life, as it hopefully for most people, but I do a few other things in my life as well, and those include writing books - I'm an author. I've written a few different things and contributed to some others. I do a lot of advocacy work in the autism world - public speaking and that kind of thing.

So, for me, people with autism being able to get a meaningful, you know, suitably paid and suitably good conditions job is very important. And I have quite a high-level job in the public service, but for a lot of people on the autism spectrum, they either can't get a job at all due to things like anxiety and discrimination and lack of confidence and all of those things, or when they do get a job, it's often not commensurate with their skill level, so you get people working, um...working in jobs that don't match their qualifications.

You get someone with a master's degree or a PhD working in the supermarket - which is fine, if people want to work in the supermarket, but a lot of the time, people don't. So people with autism can face some significant issues in work.

Discrimination and bullying is obviously an issue. Anxiety. Paranoia, social paranoia. "Is my boss angry with me?" And just catastrophising around those sorts of things. Communication difficulties. Not fitting in. Not feeling they belong. So, these are all issues that people can face in the workplace.
And also things like discrimination in recruitment, which is impossible to prove most of the time, and difficulties gaining advancement and promotion.

But it's not all bad. People with autism do work in every single industry. We are represented everywhere. We are also often known... if people do give us a go, we're known as great employees. We're people that actually do a good job.

There's some sort of innate soft skills that we have, sort of, already installed, so to speak - so, things like attention to detail. At work, I am known as the gun proof-reader. You know? If you need something to go up to the CEO in a hurry, give it to Jeanette - she'll proofread it, it will be good.

Uh, we also are very determined and focused. We often don't take unnecessary sick days or get drunk or anything like that, which is also true of employees with disability more generally.

Um...we're passionate, you know? If you get a young man who loves trains and lives and breathes trains and he gets a job in the railways, he will be a fantastic, engaged, enthusiastic employee, and that enthusiasm will rub off on his colleagues, so that is a great thing - that level of passion and enthusiasm around our work.

People with autism also come equipped with a great deal of respect for diversity a lot of the time.

If you spend your entire school career being picked on for being different, chances are you're not going to pick on other people for being different, and diversity in the workplace is really important.

So, those are some sort of skills that we bring, and if employers give us a go, they're often very, very pleasantly... well, not even surprised, but it's a good thing to employ people on the spectrum.

So my mission in life at the moment is to help the employment situation for people on the spectrum because, I mean, statistically, the participation rate for the entire population in employment is around 62%, I think.

The participation rate for people with autism spectrum conditions is about 35%, so less than...almost half the rate of the general population in employment, which is absolutely appalling.

And we want to work, you know? It's very unusual that someone doesn't want a job.

So it's really important to put in those interventions to make it easier, and particularly around school-to-work transitions and education-to-work transitions for young people.

So, I'll just finish with a...with a bit of a book plug, but it is relevant. So, in 2013, I wrote a book called ‘The Wonderful World Of Work’. And, um...here it is. It's a book for teenagers and young people on the autism spectrum to help prepare them for employment and get them ready to get a job and give them some skills to do well in that job when the time comes.

So, that's really important, getting those interventions and trusting that people on the spectrum can work and will probably be excellent employees.

So, thank you for listening to what I have to say, and, um...I hope you enjoy the rest of the course.

Thank you.