AMPC
AUSTRALIAN MEAT PROCESSOR CORPORATION

Enhancing the food production workforce with Neuro-Inclusion Stage 1 (part A)

PUBLIC

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1.0 Abstract

This final report summarises the design and delivery of Stage 1 (Part A) of the Enhancing the Food Production Workforce – with Neuro-Inclusion Employment Pilot. The project was undertaken to help address workforce shortages in Australia's red meat processing sector by developing an inclusive, evidence-informed employment model that attracts, supports, and retains autistic job seekers.

Developed in partnership between industry and Team Cohesion, and informed by autistic lived experience and sector expertise, Stage 1 focused on consultation, co-design, and resource development. The project team worked collaboratively with AMPC, autism-sector specialists, and autistic consultants to review best practice, engage industry stakeholders, and develop practical tools and training materials. These were tested, refined, and prepared for release through the AMPC Knowledge Hub (access here: AMPC Knowledge Hub).

Stage 1 produced a comprehensive suite of accessible resources, including executive and manager training, general workforce awareness materials, guidance for inclusive recruitment and onboarding, and foundational materials for autistic employees. It also established the concept for a Neurodiversity Community Liaison Officer (NCLO) role, designed to strengthen connections between industry and the autism community and provide specialist guidance during implementation. The pilot provides immediate benefits to the red meat processing industry by supporting more stable, diverse, and capable workforces.

It also lays the foundation for Stage 2 implementation and evaluation, offering a scalable framework that can be adapted across agriculture and manufacturing to promote long-term inclusion, productivity, and workforce sustainability.

2.0 Executive summary

The *Enhancing the Food Production Workforce – with Neuro-Inclusion Employment Pilot* was undertaken to address ongoing workforce shortages in Australia's red meat processing sector by creating an inclusive employment model that supports autistic job seekers. Many autistic people face barriers in recruitment and workplace participation despite possessing skills well suited to the industry. The project targeted red meat processing businesses and the broader agricultural sector, aiming to build confidence and capacity for inclusive employment. Results from this project will inform practical industry initiatives and workforce strategies that promote diversity, inclusion, and long-term resilience for levy payers and their operations.

The project aimed to:

- develop an evidence-informed, neurodiversity-affirming employment model for the food production workforce;
- design and co-create practical tools and training resources to enable inclusive recruitment, onboarding, and retention; and
- build organisational capability across leadership, HR, and line management.

All objectives were achieved, with resources developed, reviewed, and prepared for implementation.

The project applied a co-design approach, engaging autistic consultants, industry partners, and autism sector experts. Consultation meetings, resource development workshops, and peer reviews were undertaken to ensure accuracy, accessibility, and relevance. Materials were tested, refined, and prepared for the AMPC Knowledge Hub.

Approximately fifty accessible training and education materials were produced, including executive and manager training, general workforce awareness sessions, and inclusive recruitment guidance. Stakeholders demonstrated strong engagement, confirming both the need and the readiness for inclusive employment across the sector.

All final Stage 1 resources are now available through the AMPC Careers Portal, ensuring ongoing access and use across the red meat processing and wider food production sectors.

A key outcome of Stage 1 was also the development of the Neurodiversity Community Liaison Officer (NCLO) concept, designed to provide specialist guidance and strengthen links between industry and the autism community during implementation.

The project provides immediate tools to help businesses attract and retain skilled autistic employees, improving workplace culture, safety, and retention. The resulting model offers a scalable framework that can be applied across food production and other manufacturing sectors, supporting levy payers through stronger, more sustainable workforces.

It is recommended that Stage 2 focus on implementing and evaluating the pilot in participating workplaces, gathering feedback to refine tools and approaches. Ongoing collaboration with autistic people and industry partners will be essential to support continuous improvement and long-term adoption across the sector.

3.0 Introduction

Australia's red meat processing sector faces persistent and well-documented workforce shortages. At the same time, many autistic Australians remain underemployed or unemployed despite having skills and attributes well suited to these environments. According to Amaze (2019), the unemployment rate for autistic people in Australia is approximately 34%, one of the highest among disability groups. This gap represents both a social and economic challenge for industry and an opportunity to strengthen workforce capacity through inclusion.

The central question guiding this project was: *How can the red meat processing and broader food production industries create sustainable, neuro-inclusive employment opportunities for autistic people while meeting their critical labour needs?* The project sought to design a practical, evidence-informed model that removes barriers to participation, equips employers with tools and training, and improves employment outcomes for autistic job seekers.

The target audience for this work includes industry leaders, HR teams, supervisors, and workplace trainers, as well as autistic job seekers and autism-sector partners. The project outcomes will be used to inform future recruitment, training, and inclusion initiatives across the sector, offering direct value to levy payers by building more stable and capable workforces.

This project is the first of its kind in Australia's food production sector to integrate lived experience, clinical insight, and industry collaboration into a co-designed model. It complements earlier initiatives such as the Sunpork and Autism CRC's *Autism and Agriculture* project, extending their scope by developing a scalable, evidence-informed framework and digital resource suite for ongoing use through the AMPC Knowledge Hub. The approach aligns with the *National Autism Strategy 2025–2031* and draws on international and Australian research demonstrating the key factors that enable sustainable employment for autistic people, including structured onboarding, workplace support, and leadership commitment (Dreaver et al., 2020; Thorpe et al., 2023; Krzeminska et al., 2019). Together, these insights reinforce the project's focus on practical, inclusive strategies that improve workforce participation and strengthen industry capability.

4.0 Project objectives

The project aims to build capability and inclusion within Australia's red-meat processing sector by identifying barriers and developing opportunities and strategies to support neurodiverse employment. Specifically, the objectives were to:

- oversee and inform project design in partnership with AMPC, drawing on specialist expertise in neurodiversity employment;
- conduct stakeholder consultation across industry, government, and autism-sector representatives to inform project design and outputs;
- develop a comprehensive report for DAFF outlining barriers, opportunities, and strategies for neuro-inclusive employment in red-meat processing;
- produce a desktop case study exploring how emerging technologies, such as shadow robotics, can enhance inclusion and support workforce diversity

All objectives were achieved through consultation, co-design, and the creation of more than forty accessible resources that support inclusive recruitment, onboarding, and

5.0 Methodology

Consultation for the project was extensive and multi-layered, undertaken through a range of engagement activities across the red meat processing and broader food production sectors. Insights were gathered at the AMPC Innovation Summit; through targeted discussions with red meat processing employers; and in dedicated working group meetings.

Broader input was sought from overarching industry bodies, state-based autism agencies, autism employment specialists, and representatives from other successfully implemented autism employment programs across Australia. This diverse consultation approach ensured that the project was grounded in practical industry experience while being informed by contemporary inclusion practices and lived experience perspectives.

The project employed a co-design methodology spanning research synthesis, stakeholder consultation, iterative content development, and practical testing. Key activities included: targeted meetings with industry and government; engagement with autism peak bodies and inclusion specialists; lived-experience co-authoring and review; and demonstration of draft materials through a working group and at an industry innovation showcase. Materials underwent multiple review cycles by clinicians and autistic advisors to ensure accuracy, relevance, and accessibility, including simple-English adaptations for culturally and linguistically diverse workforces.

A key consideration during Stage 1 was the proposed establishment of a Neurodiversity Community Liaison Officer (NCLO) role, developed in consultation with AMPC, industry and government and Autism Queensland. The NCLO position was designed to strengthen connections between industry and the autism community, providing specialist guidance, lived experience insights, and implementation support to

participating workplaces. While the role was not operationalised during Stage 1, the proposal forms an important foundation for future pilot phases to ensure sustainable, community-informed delivery

A staged resource pipeline was used to draft, test and finalise materials for upload to an online learning portal via the AMPC Knowledge Hub. An expression of interest process recruited autistic voices for short videos to embed authentic perspectives into training content.

6.0 Results

All resources underwent validation by clinical, industry, and lived-experience reviewers before being finalised and approved for upload to the AMPC Knowledge Hub. Positive feedback from employer demonstrations and the AMPC Innovation Showcase confirmed the readiness and value of these materials for industry-wide adoption. The completion of Stage 1 marks a significant milestone in the delivery of a full library of executive, manager, and employee resources designed to build awareness, capability, and inclusion across the food production workforce. The complete Stage 1 resource library has been finalised and made available on the AMPC Knowledge Hub for industry-wide access and implementation.

Stakeholder engagement confirmed strong interest in inclusive recruitment and onboarding, alongside a need for sustained support frameworks that build confidence for managers and teams. The project consolidated a comprehensive suite of resources and confirmed their usability through demonstrations and feedback. Major results included:

- finalisation of a Stage 1 onboarding guide and more than fifty resources covering executive buy-in, manager capability, general awareness, inclusive recruitment, and practical supports for autistic employees;
- preparation of lived-experience videos to complement training and awareness materials;
- establishment of a working group structure to guide implementation, promote knowledge sharing, and surface real-world challenges and solutions; and
- alignment with national policy directions and sector priorities to support long-term sustainability and scale.

7.0 Discussion

Evidence and consultation highlighted ten factors that consistently underpin successful autism employment initiatives (Dreaver et al., 2020; Thorpe et al., 2023). These include::

- individualised job–person fit

- inclusive recruitment and structured onboarding

- workplace awareness and culture

- predictable workflows and clear expectations

- communication adaptations and regular feedback

- flexible work arrangements

- access to coaching and mentoring

- growth opportunities

- capability building for leaders

- and employee-centred co-design.

These elements informed all content produced in Stage 1.

Planning for a dedicated Neurodiversity Community Liaison Officer (NCLO) role was also initiated during Stage 1, to strengthen connections between industry and the autism community and ensure that implementation in later phases remains guided by lived experience and specialist expertise

Barriers were also identified:

- traditional selection processes may screen out talented candidates

- sensory environments can affect performance

- social expectations and ambiguous instructions can create unnecessary stress

- and without ongoing support, early wins may not be sustained.

The pilot addresses these risks by combining training with practical tools, simple-English guidance for diverse teams, and a feedback mechanism to iteratively improve resources during Stage 2.

Secondary benefits for employers include more consistent communication, clearer work design, and process improvements that benefit the whole workforce - not just autistic employees. These gains contribute to retention, safety and productivity.

8.0 Conclusions

Stage 1 delivered a coherent, evidence-informed foundation for an inclusive employment model within Australia's red meat processing sector. The project successfully achieved its objectives by co-designing, validating, and preparing a suite of practical, accessible resources for deployment through the AMPC Knowledge Hub (access here: AMPC Knowledge Hub). Collaboration between industry, autism-sector partners, and autistic consultants ensured that every element of the model is both credible and grounded in lived experience.

Embedding autistic perspectives throughout design and delivery has strengthened the authenticity, usability, and long-term sustainability of the model. The completion of Stage 1 also established key mechanisms for future implementation, including the development of the Neurodiversity Community Liaison Officer (NCLO) concept to connect industry and community partners during rollout.

With strong sector interest and clear pathways to implementation, the pilot is now well positioned to advance to Stage 2 — focusing on on-site training, employer recruitment pilots, and formal evaluation. These next steps will provide the evidence base to refine and scale the neuro-inclusive employment model across agriculture and manufacturing, supporting a more diverse, capable, and sustainable workforce for the future.

9.0 Recommendations

Following completion of Stage 1, the project now transitions into Stage 2 – Implementation and Evaluation. This next phase will focus on employer engagement, delivery of training, and structured feedback from workplaces. Evaluation activities will be led by ARTD Consultants, in collaboration with autism specialists and other partners, to measure the practical effectiveness, scalability, and long-term impact of the resources developed.

To strengthen the program's sustainability and ensure both employers and autistic employees are adequately supported, it is recommended that AMPC and Team Cohesion partner with a state-based autism agency to deliver the Neurodiversity Community Liaison Officer (NCLO) role. This partnership would ensure the role is backed by a multi-disciplinary team**,** evidence-based practice, and ongoing access to clinical and lived-experience expertise throughout implementation.

These efforts will ensure continuous improvement and sustainability of the neuro-inclusive employment model across the sector.

- Implement with feedback loops. Commence site-based training and pilot recruitment with structured feedback to refine materials and methods.
- Strengthen support frameworks. Establish practical mentoring, coaching and consultation pathways for managers and teams
- Build manager capability. Prioritise manager training on reasonable adjustments, communication and feedback
- Co-design with autistic people. Maintain lived-experience input across implementation, evaluation and iteration. Include lived experience from autistic employees already working in the industry for further authenticity.

- Align to policy and funding. Leverage national strategies and suitable funding mechanisms to sustain the effort.
- Measure and learn. Evaluate outcomes, retention and user experience to inform scale across the sector.

10.0   Project outputs

Stage 1 produced a comprehensive library of more than fifty reviewed and approved resources, developed through co-design with industry partners, autism specialists, and autistic consultants. The collection includes executive and manager training modules, general workforce awareness materials in simple English, inclusive recruitment and onboarding guidance, communication tools, and short, on-the-job skill-development modules for autistic employees. A Stage 1 onboarding guide was finalised to help organisations navigate and implement these resources, with additional workbooks under development to support the skill modules.

All materials were reviewed for accuracy, accessibility, and clarity by clinical, industry, and lived-experience reviewers, with final versions submitted to AMPC for inclusion on the AMPC Knowledge Hub. Supporting videos produced by Think Digital showcase the pilot's purpose, methods, and outcomes, demonstrating the real-world application of neuro-inclusive practices within food production environments.

Stage 1 also established the foundation for the Neurodiversity Community Liaison Officer (NCLO) role, ensuring future implementation is supported by specialist expertise, lived experience and strong links between industry and the autism community.

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