



**AUTISM AND  
AGRICULTURE**  
DIVERSE PEOPLE EXCEPTIONAL CARE

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PROUDLY  
**AUSTRALIAN**  
FARMER OWNED  
AND OPERATED

# Autism and Agriculture

- Autism and Agriculture focusses on employment of autistic adults with a high attention to detail into specialist animal care roles.
- Sixteen candidates placed into full or part-time employment
- Recruitment of autistic adults on-going and a critical part of the business
- Planning to extend opportunities to other parts of the business (ie. beyond animal care)
- Starting to work with like-minded agribusinesses to expand the range of animal care roles and livestock sectors



- SunPork Group of Companies – PIC, SunPork Farms, Swickers, SunPork Fresh Foods (\$0.5 billion revenue; 1,200+ employees)
- Collective 42,500 sows (430,000+ pigs) under management
- 37 farms
- Queensland, New South Wales, South Australia
- SunPork Farms - ~15% Australian pig production





# SunPork Farms





# SunPork Fresh Foods



NEW



NEW

# Purpose

- Optimise animal care
- Recruit dedicated carers with a high attention to detail
- Optimise animal care systems in Australian agriculture by harnessing the strong empathy and unique skills autistic people have – strong affinity with animals, attention to detail, desire for routine, ability to follow direction
- Create career paths for autistic people in animal care – employ their diverse skills and build employment capacity in the sector



# Recruitment

- Traditional recruitment processes challenging
  - Resume
  - Interview
- Unemployed (labour force participation rate 34% vs 54% for people with disabilities)
- Under-employed
- Socially disadvantaged
- Skilled employment difficult to find, hard to retain – despite being capable and motivated
- Workplace understanding and support poor



## 1. Candidates

- Non-confronting/anxiety-provoking
- Best possible opportunity to demonstrate their capabilities, recognising communication and sensory challenges

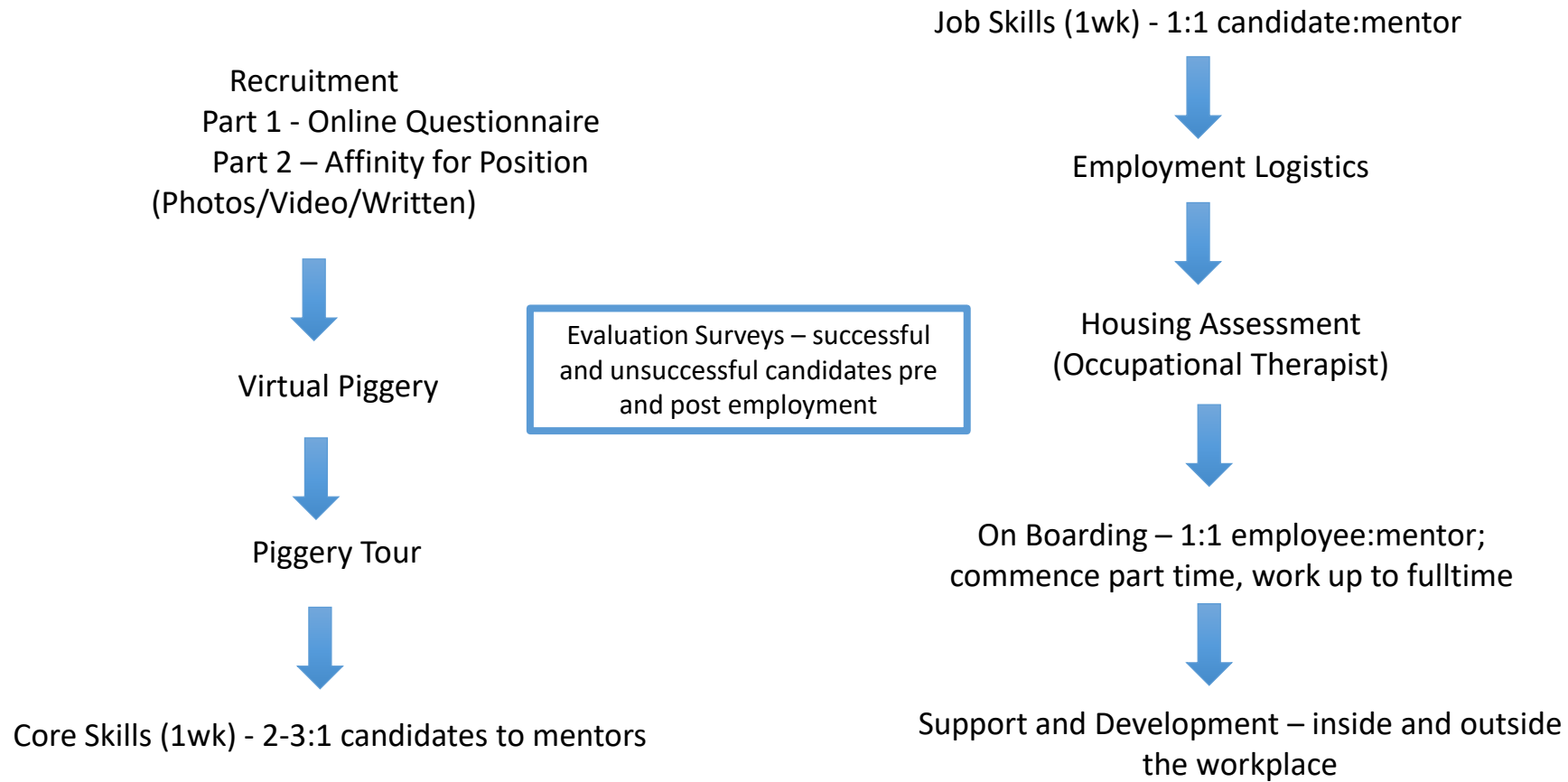
## 2. Existing Employees

- Non-confronting/break down the stereotype
- Awareness
- Engage and involve

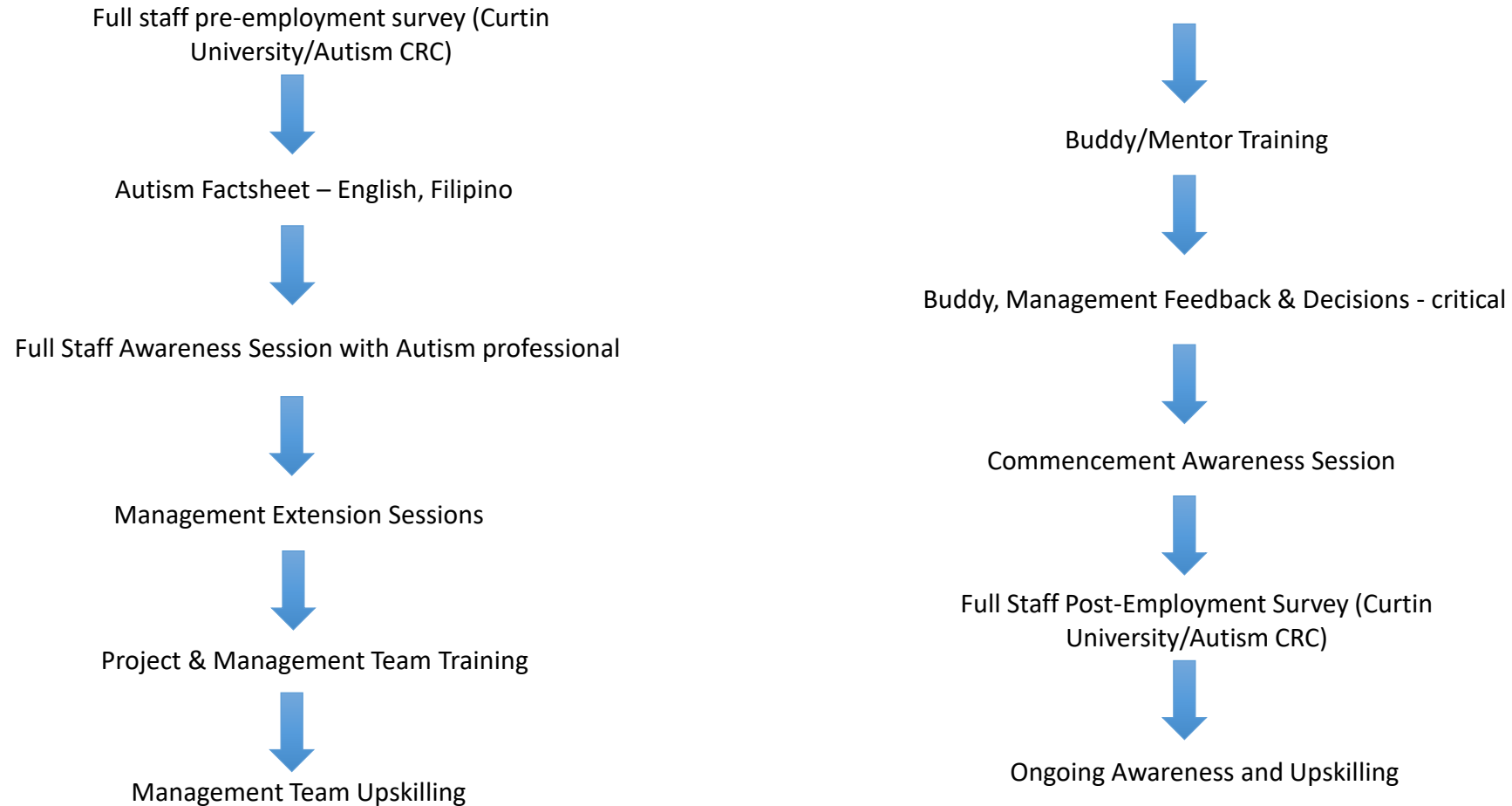




# Recruitment - Candidates

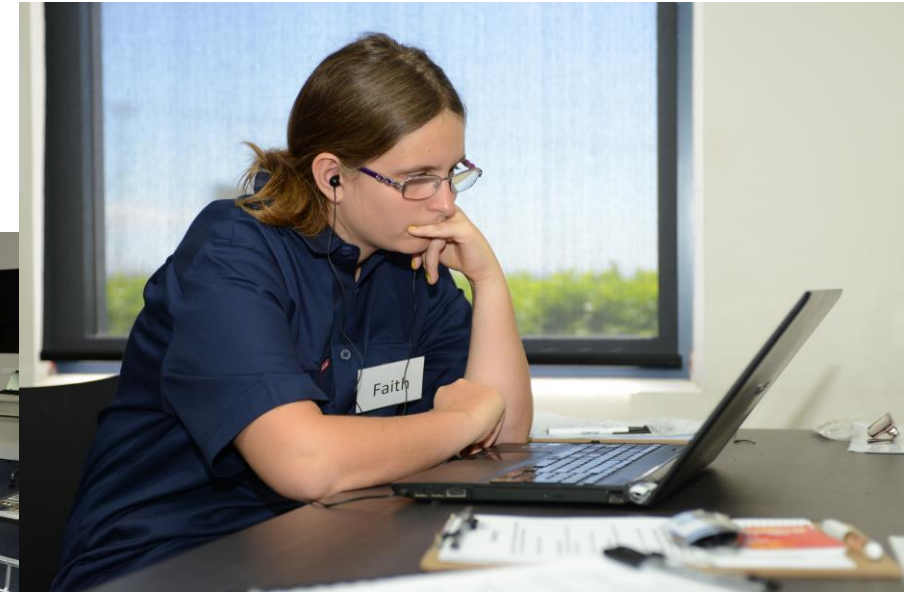


# Recruitment – Existing Employees





# On-Boarding





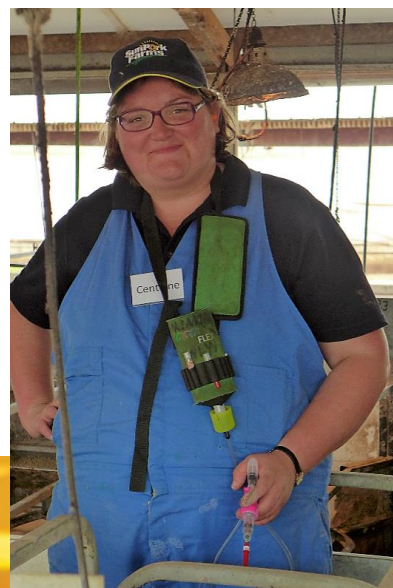
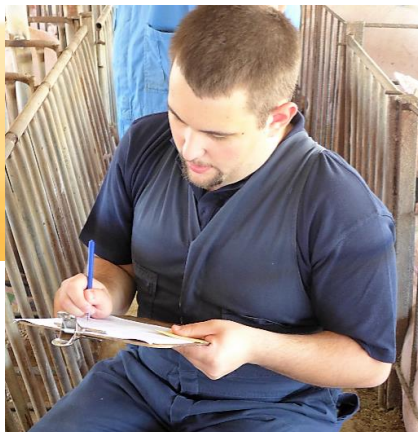
# On-Boarding













# Challenges

- Buy-in/Engagement (Staff)
- Fear of the unknown – concerns/misnomers re autism (Staff and Project Team)
- Grassroots access to autism community
- Privacy and collection of personal information
- Clarity and understanding (Work instructions, biosecurity, OHS and employment documents)
- Sensory sensitivities – smell, light, tactile (eg. clothing)
- Anxiety – understanding, anticipating, preventing
- Living away from home and independent living

# Outcomes - Culture



- Teamwork
- Community awareness and involvement
- Buy in from entire staff at SunPork Farms – immense feeling of satisfaction, new sense of engagement, great sense of achievement and having helped people – some of the strongest antagonists are now our biggest proponents



# Learnings

- **Rethink recruitment** – are resumes and interviews really best practice?
- **Rethink employee preparation** – what information do new employees need? Recognise how stressful the process of commencing a new job is for everyone, not just those on the spectrum.
- **Think carefully about how you train** – are lengthy written protocols really achieving what you want? Does everyone really understand them? Could videos/visual training work better?
- **Be flexible in how you structure work for new employees** – give them a chance to settle in, understand the challenge of a new (or first) workplace. Consider commencing part time.
- **Embrace diversity** – diversity drives innovation. Innovation drives productivity, efficiency and profitability.





# Learnings

- **Pay attention to workplace preparation and readiness** – these programs only work where the momentum of the masses is on your side
- **Mentor 1:1 and integrate new employees into work teams from the first day.** Do not foster a situation where you have a group of “different” employees sitting off to one side.
- **Never forget the importance of ongoing support –**
  - For your new employees – inside and outside the workplace
  - For your mentors – extension, professional development, recognition and reward
  - For your managers
  - For your general workforce

# Learnings



- **Collaborate and Communicate** – these programs do not succeed on the efforts of one person alone. Everyone needs to work together as a team.
- **Encourage input from those “on the ground” and value it** – these are the people at the coalface. Their impressions and feedback are critical.
  - Employees
  - Mentors
  - Supervisors and Unit Managers
- **CONSIDER THIS A CATALYST FOR CHANGE IN BASIC HR AND HOW WE MANAGE PEOPLE.**

# Future Recruitment

- No recruitment “targets”
- Genuine benefits from the program for the candidates, the business and animals in care
- 3-4% of the SunPork workforce will be autistic within the next 18 months (2% currently)
- Fully integrated employees receiving full pay
- Watching brief for 12 months to establish next steps







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# The Final Word...

Autism and Agriculture Channel 10 The Project Segment:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EvUE\\_k9ecLY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EvUE_k9ecLY)

