

Article

What does it mean to be information literate for an autistic librarian in the academic library workplace?

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Abstract

This study centres on the experiences of autistic librarians in academic library workplaces, delving into how they become information literate—an intricate process influenced by social, epistemic, and physical modalities. Through a qualitative approach combining survey responses from 43 participants and detailed interviews with two autistic librarians, the research sheds light on the conscious, active labour often required to interpret social expectations, navigate sensory inputs, and engage with explicit knowledge.

The findings highlight the unique, often hidden, efforts autistic librarians invest in their roles, bringing to the forefront the micro-decisions and strategies they employ daily. This research bridges the fields of IL and neurodiversity, broadening our understanding of workplace inclusivity. By giving voice to autistic librarians and drawing attention to their lived realities, the study invites reflection and action toward creating work environments that not only accommodate but celebrate neurodiverse talents.

Keywords

accessibility; information behaviour; information literacy; neurodiversity; workplace learning

1. Introduction

I am, yeah, twiddling away here. You would never know. I'm like a little swan paddling below. There's the water line and I look very serene above it. And below I'm just going like this [makes frantic paddling motions]. - Participant A

This article explores the autistic experience of the academic library workplace, focusing on how autistic librarians become information literate—a process that may differ significantly from their neurotypical counterparts. Autistic individuals often experience hypo- or hypersensitivity to their environment and face communication challenges, leading to unique workplace experiences. This study gives the autistic librarian the chance to be recognised,

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and celebrated, for the numerous micro-decisions and actions that one may have to take to become information literate, that a neurotypical librarian may not have to partake in. Current literature on information literacy in academic libraries primarily addresses teaching students, while workplace IL often examines various professions without focusing on librarians themselves. A term and field notoriously hard to define, IL is understood to study how one can “gather, use, manage, synthesise and create information and data in an ethical manner” (Society of College, National and University Libraries [SCONUL] Working Group on Information Literacy, 2011, p. 3). Workplace IL focusses on how one can apply these skills in their work environment to “interpret work-related information, share it...and transform it into knowledge...in order to help achieve organisational aims, and to add value to organisational activities” (Coonan et al., 2018, p. 4). Scholars, such as Lloyd (2017), have taken the field further and considered how, in order to do this, one must gather information from three modalities: epistemic, social and physical. Workplace IL specifically examines how these skills are applied in professional environments to achieve organisational goals.

While previous research has focused on assisting autistic library patrons, this study shifts the focus to understanding and supporting autistic librarians. Although individual autistic librarians like Lawrence (2013), Tumlin (2019) and Attar (2021) have shared their experiences, few formal studies have collected data from multiple autistic librarians. By linking the fields of IL and neurodiversity within the academic library workforce, this study aims to “broaden the discourse and allows other voices and other ways of knowing to be heard and represented” (Lloyd, 2005, p. 84). This study hopes to follow Lloyd’s works that “allows us to acknowledge the multiple realities of everyday life, which are enhanced through effective, but diverse, access to information” (Lloyd, 2005, p. 84), by giving voice to autistic librarians and providing insights for making workplaces more accessible. The author, an autistic librarian, brings lived experience to this research, enriching the study with a unique perspective. Given this context, the research questions that underpin this study are:

1. What does workplace IL look like for autistic librarians?
2. How do different information modalities shape workplace IL for autistic librarians?

Throughout this study, identity-first language (e.g., “autistic librarians”) is used to “affirm that the person has value and worth, and that autism is entirely separate from what gives him or her value and worth” (Brown, 2011). This author believes that being autistic is integral to my identity, and therefore prefers not to imply that it is something that can be separated from oneself.

2. Literature Review

In an interview with an autistic librarian, Eng (2017) asked why there is so little literature about the neurodiversity of librarians. This article follows from this question. Despite the wealth of research on workplace IL, the experiences and unique contributions of autistic librarians remain under-represented. This article seeks to address that void by exploring the intersection of neurodiversity and IL in academic library settings.

2.1 IL in the Workplace

A term coined only 50 years ago by Paul Zurkowski in 1974, “information literacy” as a phrase, term, and field, is notoriously hard to define. There are increasingly more definitions that attempt to encapsulate the different facets and meanings behind those two words. The SCONUL (2011) definition highlights the key areas of IL that other organisations, such as the Chartered Institute of Library Information Professionals (CILIP), also place on the value to

think “critically” (Coonan et al., 2018), and find and use information in everyday life, including the workplace. When initially conceptualised by Zurkowski, IL was presented with the view that it concerned the “individual’s capacity to use information tools and sources to solve problems in the workplace” (Sobota, 2023, p. 140). Sobota (2023) described in their critical examination of workplace IL, how the field has moved between research of white-collar and blue-collar professions, namely among “academics and administrative workers in higher education” (p. 140) and Lloyd’s (2005) pioneering research into firefighters, which shall be examined further in this chapter. Interestingly, however, this list does not often contain librarians and the library workplace and the impact of neurodivergence on workplace IL. This article aims to fill this gap by examining how autistic librarians develop IL skills in academic library settings.

One way in which workplace IL is implicated within libraries (yet rarely referred to as such) is through work related to how the individual learnt their workplace environment, including the “process that employees go through to learn about their new jobs and adapt to the roles and cultures of the workplace” (Lisbon & Welsh, 2017, p. 2). This process is called the *onboarding process*, which is how the employees learn the “institutional values, practices, taboos, and other matters of organisational culture, both spoken and unspoken” (Wallace, 2009, p. 171). There is a key element to the onboarding process, highlighted in all the literature found for this literature review: communication.

Communication plays a crucial role in becoming information literate in the workplace. It involves interactions between managers, new employees, and colleagues, as well as understanding explicit and tacit knowledge (Galoozis, 2014). The onboarding process is particularly challenging as new employees must navigate and understand the social intricacies of their workplace to perform effectively, including “the ways information is socially transmitted in her new workplace. If those ways are unnecessarily complicated...it is more difficult for the new person to do their job” (Galoozis, 2014, para. 25).

While social communication is vital to becoming information literate in the workplace, other aspects, including physical communication with the environment, are equally important. Interestingly, in all the mainstream definitions, collated by the Information Literacy Group (n.d.) and including definitions from SCONUL, A New Curriculum for Information Literacy (ANCIL), CILIP, and specific universities, none of the definitions mention the physical component of becoming or being information literate. The emphasis in the definitions is on how the brain receives information and manages it but does not mention that the brain will be receiving physical information from the immediate environment. Lloyd’s (2005) work highlighted the significance of physical communication in becoming information literate, using the example of firefighters to demonstrate how interaction with the environment facilitates learning.

Lloyd (2005) identified three primary sources of information necessary for effective practice and professional development: textual sources (explicit knowledge), social sources (communication with others), and physical and sensory sources (environmental interaction). The physical and sensory information collected by the body is crucial for understanding and navigating the workplace.

Lloyd’s (2017) model suggested that social, epistemic (referred to as textual in Lloyd’s 2005 work), and corporeal (referred to as physical/sensory in Lloyd’s 2005 work) modalities act as sites of knowledge and mediate specific activities related to IL. These modalities help individuals understand their surroundings and roles within the workplace. “Drawing from these modalities allows people to enact their information literacies and shape their

information landscapes which, in turn, act to reference the social site” (Lloyd, 2017, p. 98). These three modalities mirror the themes within the literature referenced in this article that refer to becoming information literate in the workplace. The communication of expectations, rules and boundaries align with the social modality. The explicit knowledge, that which is written down, is the easiest modality to find and reference, and the corporeal (referred to in this study as physical) allows the individual to engage and understand their environment further. This article builds on Lloyd’s research, examining how these modalities may be experienced or intersect differently for autistic individuals in academic library settings.

2.2 Autistic Experience of the Library Workplace

Despite growing resources on the autistic experience in the library sector, “the topic largely remains unexplored” (Anderson, 2021, p. 1), and there is “little written about librarians who are neurodivergent and their professional experiences” (Eng, 2017, para 1). Research typically focuses on autistic patrons rather than autistic library staff. The majority of literature found authored by autistic librarians are blog posts, such as “Perspectives of an Autistic Children’s Librarian” (Spectrum, 2017) or “Libraries are for Everyone! Except if you’re Autistic” (McCulloch, 2021). More formal literature, such as Anderson’s (2018) “Employment and Neurodiverse Librarians”, Tumlin’s (2019) “‘This is a Quiet Library, Except When it’s Not’: On the Lack of Neurodiversity Awareness in Librarianship”, and Lawrence’s (2013) “Loud Hands in the Library: Neurodiversity in LIS Theory and Practice”, are literature reviews. Although these literature reviews are incredibly insightful and extend research presenting individual experiences, other methods of research, such as interviews, are not as prevalent. Dissertations, such as Rebholz’s (2012) “Life in the Uncanny Valley: Workplace Issues for Knowledge Workers on the Autistic Spectrum”, are one example that used qualitative methods to provide the field with data. However, some literature, such as Attar’s (2021) “Autism, Librarianship and their Fit”, give first-person insight into the challenges and the advantages of being autistic in the academic library workplace, and are beginning to make their way into the field. This current article clearly sets out both challenges and strengths and gives a voice to the autistic librarian.

A notable theme in the literature relates to two primary challenges for autistic librarians: social/communication difficulties and physical hypersensitivity. These communication issues can also be described as a “lexical-semantic processing and metalinguistic awareness, which disrupts their capacity to infer underlying meaning of statements and social cues” (Lund, 2018, p. 442). Autistic people report finding social interaction difficult, as shown in the interview by Eng (2017), where the interviewee described issues they have as they “often speak what’s on my mind and have trouble filtering my thoughts. It’s hard for me to adapt to expectations in certain social situations (you don’t say this that way to that person etc) since I tend to act the same way in all situations” (para. 16). This is concurrent with the criteria listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, which states that an individual experiences “persistent deficits in reciprocal social communication and social interaction” (as cited in National Autistic Society, n.d.a, DSM-5 criteria for autism). Autistic librarians report they often struggle with adapting to social expectations and understanding non-verbal cues, impacting their hiring and onboarding processes. This is further compounded by biases and misconceptions about autistic traits, leading to barriers in gaining employment (McCulloch, 2021; UK Department for Work and Pensions, 2024).

Autistic people often face various employment challenges, as demonstrated in a report by the UK Department for Work and Pensions where it found one of the lowest employment rates among disability groups with only 3 in 10 working age autistic people employed. Autistic librarians, such as McCulloch (2021), report experiencing biases towards autistic

people that make it harder to gain employment in the library sector. “Two public library directors complained loudly about how they kept getting applications from... ‘process driven introverts’ with ‘no communication skills’ and that they wouldn’t want to hire someone ‘if they can’t even make eye contact’ with others...” (McCulloch, 2021). These characteristics are reminiscent of autistic characteristics, and mirror the difficulties outlined by other librarians who are autistic.

These public library directors may as well have been waving a sign saying ‘Neurodiverse applicants are not welcome here’... They said out loud that they didn’t want people like me. There is no place for me in their libraries. That I don’t belong here” (McCulloch, 2021).

Physical sensitivities to environmental factors like noise, lighting, and temperature can create additional challenges for autistic librarians, affecting their ability to focus and process new knowledge (Anderson, 2021). Sensory stress can be a significant burden, as described by autistic librarian Spectrum.

Do these activities drain me more than they would a neurotypical person? I imagine that they do. Sometimes, I need to sit in my car for fifteen minutes before I can drive home, as I need to unwind from the day (2017).

While these challenges are significant, many autistic librarians also express positive feelings about their work. They find value and fulfilment in their roles despite the difficulties, highlighting the importance of creating supportive and inclusive work environments. Librarians such as Attar (2021), for example, go as far as to name the “autistic characteristics valued in librarianship” (p. 33). McCulloch (2021) noted some of those positive characteristics, reflecting that “being autistic doesn’t always feel like a superpower, but it enables me to do the work that I do, and maybe even to be good at it. And I definitely have a place here” (para. 19-20).

2.3 Gap in the Research

While articles authored by or advocating for autistic individuals in library workplaces address communication differences and physical environment challenges, they rarely mention “information literacy” explicitly. The literature on IL, as described by Lloyd (2005, 2017) and Agyemang and Wessels (2022), emphasised social understanding, tacit information, and physical environment—all areas where autistic individuals often face struggles. The main areas that individuals will focus on to gather information when learning how to do a new job—social understanding, explicit written information, and physical information taken in by the body—are the same areas that autistic librarians will experience differently. This mirroring, however, has never been addressed in the literature surrounding IL or neurodiversity in the library workplace setting.

3. Methodology

This qualitative study employs an interpretivist paradigm to explore IL among autistic individuals in the academic library workplace. The interpretivist approach acknowledges the complex, multiple realities of individuals, rather than a universal experience (Pickard, 2013). This paradigm is suitable for understanding the diverse experiences of autistic librarians, recognising common themes while maintaining individuality.

The research methods included an initial survey followed by two interviews to delve deeper into themes identified from the survey. The survey allowed participants to respond in their own terms, while interviews provided an opportunity for more in-depth exploration of the topic.

3.1 The Survey

3.1.1. Participants and Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to select participants from the Neurodivergent Library and Information Staff Network (NLISN, n.d.). NLISN is a group of neurodivergent individuals working in the library and information sector. As the network includes different sectors, such as public or school libraries, the recruitment email clearly stated that participants had to work in the academic library sector. The mailing list totalled 90 individuals who are neurodivergent and working in the library sector (at the time of writing), and this contact led to 43 responses; a response rate of 47%.

3.1.2 The Questionnaire

The survey, created using Qualtrics software, included a mix of open-ended and multiple-choice questions to gather comprehensive data (see Appendix). The survey focused on three main sections inspired by Lloyd's (2017) research: Epistemological Learning, Social Understanding, and Physical Impacts on Learning. Each section had a focus on the initial learning of different aspects of one's job, including the onboarding process, and then focussed on the overall experience throughout one's term in their job. This structure allowed for exploration of initial and ongoing experiences of IL among autistic librarians.

The NLISN includes all individuals with neurodivergence, such as ADHD, OCD and dyslexia, and not just autism. To mitigate the potential inclusion of participants with a different neurodivergence, the email accompanying the survey link detailed that it was only for autistic individuals, self-diagnosed or officially diagnosed. Moreover, the first question of the survey was a yes/no question asking if the participant was autistic. A combination of Likert scale questions and questions that invited open-ended responses provided concrete data and personal insights, laying the groundwork for subsequent interviews.

3.2 Interviews

3.2.1 Participants and Sampling

Survey responses were used to select two interviewees (Table 1). Maximum variation sampling was used to select interviewees who explicitly agreed to participate through the survey. Participants were chosen based on their involvement in the NLISN committee, the organising body of the NLISN network, of which the author is part of, ensuring a rapport between the interviewer and interviewees to facilitate more in-depth answers (Pickard, 2013).

Table 1: Interview Participants

	Gender	Job Role	Interview Length
Participant A	Female	Managerial	75 minutes
Participant B	Male	Managerial	30 minutes

3.2.1 Approach

The interviews followed a guided interview format with a checklist to cover all relevant topics while allowing for exploration of interesting points (Pickard, 2013). Draft questions were sent to interviewees 24 hours before the interview to alleviate anxiety and allow for slower

auditory processing. These questions were more specific than the survey questions, as there were significantly less, yet were still open-ended to allow conversation to flow. They also overtly asked the participant to think of specific examples.

4. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the survey and interview transcripts, which consisted of open and focused coding to identify themes (Given, 2008). The first step was to carry out open coding, in which “a close line-by-line reading of the data [is conducted] in a search to find as many ideas and concepts without concern for how they related” (Given, 2008, p. 4). The second step involved more focused coding in which themes that “emerge[d] as more salient, as central to integrating a number of key concepts, and/or of being of interest to a particular topic” (Given, 2008, p. 5) were collated. This step, which consisted of “a more refined and focused analysis, [in which] many concepts were reconceptualised and incorporated into broader, more abstract categories” (Given, 2008, p. 5), produced four themes.

The researcher read the interview transcripts, and added comments to the document to note a summative phrase/theme. A similar process was applied to the survey answers, as the answers were compiled into a document with different sections organised by summative phrase and themes.

4.1 Limitations

Initially, a third participant was going to be interviewed, but the individual was unable to participate, and other potential interviewees did not respond. The inclusion of a third participant aimed to minimise echo-chamber effects and reflect the gender distribution in the library sector, where the majority of the workforce is female (Archives and Records Association & CILIP 2015, p. 1). However, the two interviews conducted yielded a wealth of information, with one participant providing extensive insights. Additional data might have hindered the research due to the short time frame.

Interview participants were chosen from the NLISN committee, whose neurodivergence is publicly acknowledged on the NLISN committee webpage. This selection mitigated the risk of accidentally “outing” participants and ensured that interviewees were aware of how their autism impacts their workplace experience.

4.2 Ethics

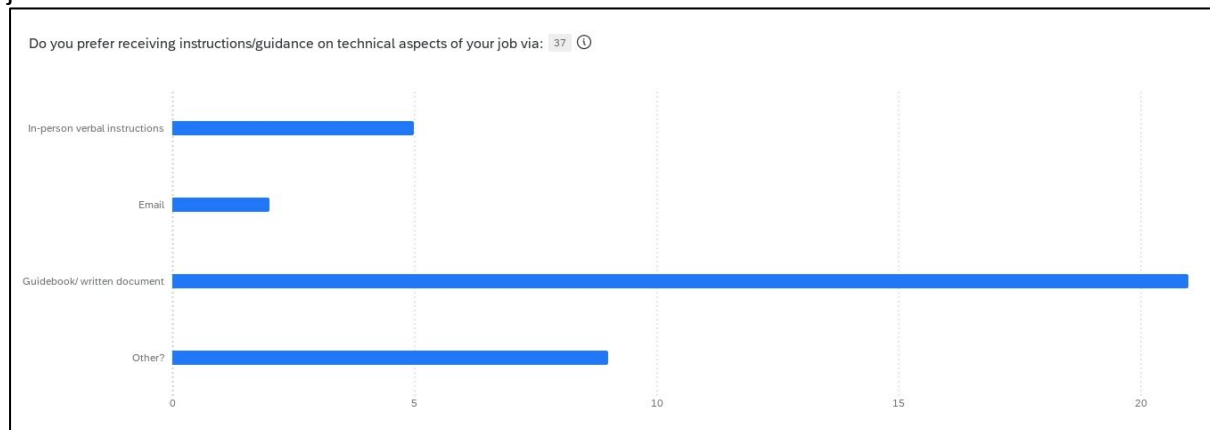
Both interview participants completed consent and information sheets, confirming their answers could be used in this research. Any identifying information was redacted to maintain confidentiality.

5. Findings

5.1 Epistemic: The Written Record

Survey results showed a strong preference for receiving instructions/guidance in written form (Figure 1). This aligns with guidance from organisations like the National Autistic Society (n.d.b), which recommends adjustments such as providing a written summary after giving verbal instructions. Speech is fleeting and challenging to refer back to, whereas written records can be revisited multiple times, aiding those with processing difficulties.

Figure 1 Majority of survey participants prefer to receive guidance on technical aspects of job via written documentation

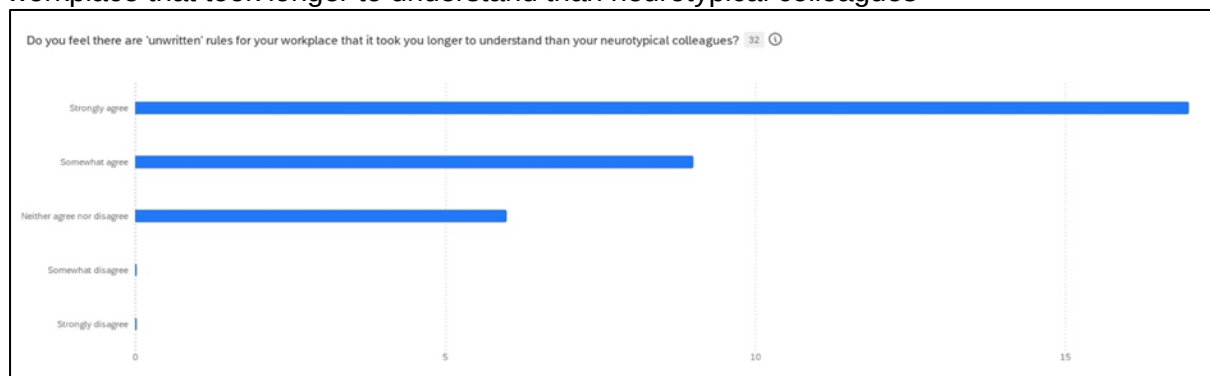


Participant B highlighted the difficulties of relying on verbal meetings, explaining that "you can't go back to it. You don't quite know what it is when [otherwise it would be] easy to have a written record of what was said." For autistic individuals, the epistemic modality—experienced via text—is crucial for becoming information literate in the workplace. Receiving information in written form also allows autistic individuals to process it at their own pace, reducing the pressure to understand and respond immediately. This is particularly important given the additional cognitive load they may experience due to sensory or social challenges. Written records serve as a reliable reference, minimising the risk of misinterpretation and ensuring clarity.

5.2 Social: Hidden Rules of the Workplace

Autism is characterised by social communication and cognition impairments (Rogers & Williams, 2006). Survey and interview results indicated that social nuances and unwritten rules are particularly challenging for autistic individuals (Figure 2). Lloyd (2017) described the social modality as nuanced information formed around unwritten norms. Autistic individuals struggle to identify these nuances, hindering their ability to become information literate.

Figure 2: Most participants strongly agree or agree that there are unwritten rules in the workplace that took longer to understand than neurotypical colleagues



Participants of the survey reported confusion about workplace dynamics and expectations, which are often implicitly understood by neurotypical colleagues. The majority of respondents expressed confusion around what is appropriate to talk about at work, such as

this comment from a survey participant, “there are workplace dynamics/ expectations which people can’t really explain or define clearly- there’s an expectation that I will just know things, or ‘get a vibe’”. The breakdown in communication and difficulty in adapting to social expectations create barriers to IL.

The challenge of understanding hidden rules often leads to feelings of exclusion and frustration. This is emulated in Eng’s (2017) interview of an autistic librarian and writes that the issues they have come against in the library stem from the fact that they “often speak what’s on my mind and have trouble filtering my thoughts. It’s hard for me to adapt to expectations in certain social situations (you don’t say this that way to that person etc) since I tend to act the same way in all situations” (Eng, 2017, para 16). There is an evident trend in autistic people being “told off for speaking my mind...I am not very good at holding my opinions in, which sometimes causes work and social stress” (Survey Participant). The barrier in becoming information literate and gathering information, therefore, may stem from a breakdown in communication.

Autistic individuals may find themselves penalised for not adhering to unspoken norms, despite their best efforts to navigate them. This can impact their confidence and ability to build effective working relationships, further isolating them in the workplace.

5.3 Communication/Translation of Information

A recurring theme from the survey and interviews is the significant effort autistic individuals invest in translating neurotypical communication. One survey participant highlighted the “micro-decisions” involved in choosing the correct method and style of communication, which significantly lengthens the process compared to neurotypical colleagues.

Methods of communication - knowing how to contact someone - do I ask them in person? Email? Teams message? Post it in a Teams channel? Do I need to CC someone in? It’s just one example, but I feel like I’m constantly having to make these ‘micro-decisions’ where just writing an email that would take a NT [Neurotypical] person 5 minutes takes me 5 or 10 times as long (which is also considering not knowing what to say or how to say it professionally)

Interviews with participants revealed that translating information is a daily task, involving interpreting social conventions and navigating small talk, which can blur the lines between professional and personal interactions. “They’ll tell me a load of irrelevant stuff and I’ve got to take that and translate it into a process...[the information is] just buried underneath these social conventions” (Participant A). Therefore, it is difficult for the neurodivergent person to anchor themselves in the conversation as the purpose of the workplace meeting is muddled with the conventional “small talk”. Both interview participants shared this viewpoint, and imparted their preference and method of communicating in meetings and presentations:

I’m autistic and I just get in there and I’m like, this is what you do. But here’s what I did. This is what happened. This is what I think and this is how I know it (Participant A).

It’s very flowery and they’re very, you know...these are strategy and for me it’s often now just get to the point of what you’re trying to say...When I present, it tends to be much shorter, much more concise...Just tell me what you want and we’ll do it (Participant B).

For an autistic person, the main social difficulty is “not understanding what’s behind the words” (Participant B); the meaning gets lost as social conventions continue. The role of librarian as a translator, as described by Kristin Partlo (2015), resonates with autistic individuals who daily translate neurotypical communication. This extra layer of processing and active engagement in translating social cues makes becoming information literate more labour-intensive for autistic individuals compared to their neurotypical peers. Partlo (2015) described that a “More complicated process of re-describing from one system of meaning, value, culture, and experience to another” (p.13) is a service provided by all librarians, as a librarian at a reference desk has the role of “listening to patron’s questions and translating what they say into statements of need or inquiry” (p.13). Participant A used the word “translation” to describe, as Partlo does, the act of interpreting and presenting data to the person in front of them (the patron, or user). The act of becoming information literate, as demonstrated by the literature review of this study and the literature quoted in this chapter, includes understanding the workplace through social communication, and translating the workplace environment. The autistic act of becoming information literate, then, could be argued is more laboured than the neurotypical pursuit, as the processing of the information involves extra steps, such as the act of translating social conventions and communication styles.

5.4: Micro-Decisions/Active Engagement

Unexpectedly, the theme of active engagement and micro-decisions emerged prominently. Autistic individuals often manually learn and follow social rules that neurotypical individuals navigate unconsciously as Participant A described in two separate incidents:

“I’ve learned the rules of this situation. I can do all these things and I’ve learned all these rules, but yet [neurotypicals] don’t. They don’t even realise they’re doing it”
 “I’ve had to learn it manually...neurotypical people are following the social rules that [they’ve] set...you’re not following them because you’re not even thinking. They do it without thinking. It just happens. The amount of effort that I’m putting in to do that, where I find the disability hits me the most is because I’m putting that effort in to get to that level.

This additional effort to understand and adapt to social expectations consumes significant energy and highlights the disparity in becoming information literate between autistic and neurotypical individuals. The necessity for active observation and learning of social discourse underscores the challenges faced by autistic individuals in becoming information literate in the workplace. This active engagement is a continuous process, requiring constant vigilance and adaptation to new social situations and expectations.

5.5 Facial Expressions/Masking

Survey participants highlighted the extra effort involved in managing facial expressions and body language during both online and in-person meetings, as demonstrated in the following comment:

I think it depends on the context of the online meeting: if I have to have my camera on, I will automatically retain less because I am conscious of my facial expressions, etc. and therefore I have less brain space to focus on actually remembering the information. Face to face has the same issue with focusing on appearing focused.

This hyper-awareness leads to reduced cognitive capacity for focusing on the actual content. Lawrence (2013) noted that autistic individuals often engage in "masking" to conform to social expectations and avoid stigma, which contributes to the high rates of unemployment among autistic individuals. The need for constant adjustment and masking can lead to significant stress and burnout.

5.6 Delayed Career Progression/Isolation

Autistic individuals often experience delayed career progression due to social communication challenges and biases favouring neurotypical social skills. Participant B spoke about the perceptions of what success looked like. "And often it's someone who's, you know, really extroverted and really, you know, really good at presentations and good at selling themselves. These are all things that aren't natural to us. And then it's quite unfair really."

Participant A described the "late bloomer" effect due to taking longer to learn social rules. Workplace bullying and social isolation were also common themes, with a significant portion of survey respondents feeling isolated due to difficulties in understanding social relationships and hierarchies.

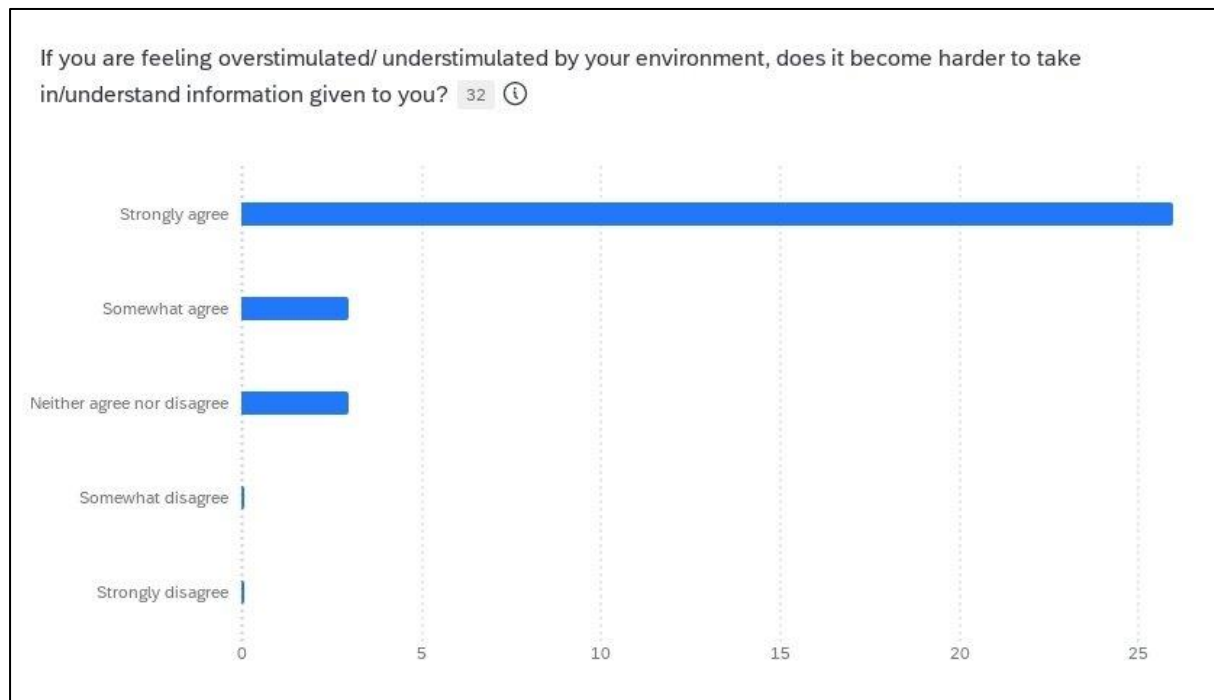
I have been bullied at work...and they're just reacting to me, like not talking to them 'properly' and not building this relationship...You get bullied until you leave, because that's better for them [rather than the employer firing the employee] (Participant A).

Participant A had been a victim of workplace bullying and spoke about the lasting effects of this bullying, stating that "I'll always be on the alert for that happening for the rest of my career". The effects of not becoming information literate and creating the expected "information relationship" between employee and manager, and between colleagues, leads to an isolating effect that was also reported in the survey. 79% of respondents strongly or somewhat agreed that they feel isolated due to not understanding social relationships/hierarchies/communication in the workplace.

5.7 Physical

The survey and interviews revealed a strong correlation between the physical environment and the ability to take in and use information. A strong consensus of survey responses indicated that sensory issues significantly impact information processing for autistic individuals (Figure 3). Participants also reported noise as the most overwhelming consideration, over temperature or smell.

Figure 3: Most participants strongly agree or agree that feeling overstimulated makes it harder to take in/understand information



Participant A, when asked about physical environment, mentioned that they were in an open desk environment, and as such, when co-workers are talking around them, they cannot concentrate. “I am like, hypersensitive to sound...I need to get some work done and all I can hear is something going on in the back”. This highlights how background noise in open-plan offices can be particularly challenging for autistic individuals, affecting their ability to focus and perform tasks efficiently.

When asked what other distractions could affect an autistic person in their environment, the survey answer with the most repetition was “lighting.” This is certainly reflected in the literature when considering how to make an environment more autistic-friendly. For instance, Lawrence (2013) stated “older fluorescent lights, for instance, can cause Autistic patrons (and others who are light sensitive and/or prone to migraines) a great deal of discomfort, and thus should be avoided whenever possible” (p. 105). Similarly, the National Autistic Society’s *Sensory Differences: A Guide for all Audiences*, recommends adjustments such as reducing fluorescent lighting and providing workstations with high walls to block out visual distractions (2020b).

Survey participants described the experience of sensory overwhelm in vivid terms. One participant likened it to pouring cold water over a neurotypical person's head while explaining something and they had to pay attention and also pretend not to notice the water or they would be told off. This analogy captures the intense distraction and discomfort caused by sensory overload. Another participant noted that overstimulation can lead to anger and irritability, further reducing their capacity to process information:

Sometimes I am so overstimulated by noise/lights etc that I feel really angry and irritable and any more talking/information is just more noise and overstimulation I have, on a few occasions had to leave work early for the day because I was so overstimulated that I couldn't think of anything practical I could do...It makes it a lot more difficult to retain information or apply it because my focus is split and often functionally incapable of not paying attention to noise/sensory overwhelm.

The autistic brain often takes in more information from the surrounding environment than a neurotypical one would, which means managing an overwhelming amount of stimuli. This can make the process of becoming information literate in the workplace especially challenging. The hyper- or hypo-sensitivity to environmental factors means that an autistic individual might have to expend significant energy just to filter out irrelevant sensory inputs. Therefore, understanding and accommodating these sensory needs is crucial for supporting autistic librarians in their roles.

5.8 Strategies

Despite these challenges, participants described various strategies to manage sensory overwhelm. “Stimming” or self-stimulating behaviours, such as twiddling objects, using fidget spinners, or walking around, were commonly reported as effective tools for coping with sensory input. The National Autistic Society (2020a) goes into surprisingly little detail when defining stimming and explaining why it occurs, stating “it includes the repetitive use of an object...or repetitive activities involving the senses” (para 2) and the reasons for stimming include enjoyment, increasing or reducing sensory input, and to mitigate stress or anxiety. Stimming can help regulate sensory and emotional overload, allowing individuals to focus better. One survey participant mentioned that “it’s easier to stim in online meetings, so I think that helps me focus more (without realizing it).” Participants A and B each demonstrated different objects they use to stim:

I’ve got a range of things to twiddle with here. I’ve got this, I’ve got a hair bobble, I’ve got a fidget ring on...I am, yeah, twiddling away here. You would never know. I’m like a little swan paddling below. Then there’s the waterline and I look very serene above it (Participant A).

We’re also walking around a bit [it’s] when you feel a bit self-conscious as well. If you keep walking, there’s something [and] we just need to think things through...I’ve got fidget spinners (Participant B).

The swan metaphor illustrates the hidden effort and constant motion beneath a calm exterior, a common experience for autistic individuals striving to manage sensory input while maintaining composure. The necessity of these strategies underscores the extra effort required by autistic individuals to navigate their physical environment. The onus of managing sensory input and mitigating distractions demands a higher level of awareness and continuous adjustment. This reality of the workplace emphasises the importance of creating environments that are more accommodating to sensory sensitivities. Simple adjustments, such as providing quiet spaces, reducing harsh lighting, and allowing the use of sensory aids, can significantly improve the working conditions for autistic librarians.

These strategies highlight the extra measures autistic individuals take to manage their environment and process information. The autistic experience of becoming information literate in the academic library workplace involves a more aware and thorough process, requiring additional effort and conscious strategies to navigate sensory and social challenges.

6. Discussion

6.1 What does workplace IL look like for autistic librarians?

From an outward perspective, the process of becoming information literate for an autistic librarian may appear similar to that of a neurotypical librarian. However, as evidenced by Participant A's opening quote, the autistic experience of becoming information literate is an aware and active process to maintain a "serene" mask and outward appearance in the academic workplace. The findings of this study have revealed a wealth of active, aware processes such as the translation of social communication, which necessitates additional time needed to reflect and translate. Moreover, the processing of not only social information, but the physical information from the surrounding environment such as noise, light, and smells is something that requires extra labour for the autistic librarian to navigate in the academic library workplace. This hidden effort highlights the complexity and depth of the autistic experience, underscoring the need for greater awareness and accommodation in the workplace.

6.2 How do different information modalities shape workplace IL for autistic librarians?

Epistemic

The findings suggest that for an autistic person, the best way of receiving and processing information may be the written word. Having a clear record of the instructions allows the employee to look back upon them without uncertainty. The importance of communication is demonstrated when discussing "explicit and tacit" knowledge (Galoozis, 2014) in the workplace. "Explicit knowledge is able to be 'documented, archived and codified'... Tacit knowledge, on the other hand, is defined as 'know-how contained in the employees' heads' (Galoozis, 2014, para. 9). The challenge of the onboarding process, then, is getting the "know-how" out of the existing employees heads and communicating it to the new employee. Written communication provides a reliable reference that autistic individuals can revisit as needed, reducing the cognitive load associated with processing verbal instructions in real-time.

Social

The social modality of information is the most challenging for autistic individuals in the academic library workplace. The social modality, which involves unwritten norms and conventions, requires more active engagement and effort from autistic individuals. The need to translate social cues, engage in small talk, and mask autistic traits to fit into neurotypical expectations adds an additional layer of complexity to the process of becoming information literate. Forster (2017) maintained that part of examining how individuals become information literate in the workplace is by examining "how do individuals share information between teams" (p. 14) to demonstrate "pre-existing knowledge and understanding" (p. 15). The research conducted here found that autistic individuals have to make many micro-decisions before communicating with their colleagues and team, that they have to actively translate between their own communication style and their neurotypical colleagues. This study found that the effort required to navigate social interactions can lead to feelings of isolation, delayed career progression, and even workplace bullying. The necessity to constantly interpret and adapt to social norms demands significant cognitive resources, which can impact overall job performance and well-being.

Perhaps this is another reason why autistic people are suited to the role of librarianship. They have to translate the neurotypical world around them every day. The autistic act of translation is one where the translator is actively aware that although they are speaking the

same language as the communicator, the meaning and interpretation may be vastly different. When asked what they understood about IL in the workplace, Participant A used the word “translation” to describe, as Partlo (2015) does, the act of interpreting and presenting data to the person in front of them (the patron, or user). The act of becoming information literate, as demonstrated by the literature, includes understanding the workplace through social communication and translating the workplace environment. The autistic act of becoming information literate, then, could be argued is more laboured than the neurotypical pursuit, as the processing of the information involves extra steps, such as the act of translating social conventions and communication styles.

Physical

Researchers, such as Dr. AnneMaree Lloyd, have pioneered the field of IL by investigating how the physical environment can interact with one’s understanding of one’s workplace. This study has found that, for an autistic person, this may be true to an even further degree. The hyper- or hypo-sensitivity that many autistic people experience means that an autistic person may be interacting with their environment, unconsciously or unwillingly, to a higher degree. This further means that physical variations in the environment, such as noise, lights, temperature, and smells, may be distractions for an autistic person. This onslaught of sensory information may have to be “manually” or actively fought through to engage with one’s work and gather, process, and utilise other information presented. Aids can be used, such as fidgets, to allow one to stim, and therefore, process sensory information in a way that means other information can also be gathered, processed, and utilised. Other aids that minimise the sensory input, such as headphones, are widely beneficial as well.

The necessity of these strategies underscores the extra effort required by autistic individuals to navigate their physical environment. The onus of managing sensory input and mitigating distractions demands a higher level of awareness and continuous adjustment. This reality of the workplace emphasises the importance of creating environments that are more accommodating to sensory sensitivities. Simple adjustments, such as providing quiet spaces, reducing harsh lighting, and allowing the use of sensory aids, can significantly improve the working conditions for autistic librarians.

7. Conclusion

This study aimed to explore two central research questions:

1. What does workplace IL look like for autistic librarians?
2. How do different information modalities shape workplace IL for autistic librarians?

To answer these questions, a survey and interviews were conducted to gather a comprehensive understanding of the autistic experience of becoming information literate in the academic library workplace. The findings revealed that autistic librarians process a wealth of sensory and social information, requiring active micro-decisions and translation.

7.1 Wider Implications

Despite librarians often teaching IL, there is little literature on how they learn to do their job within their work environment. This study highlights the unique challenges autistic individuals face in becoming information literate in academic libraries. Lloyd’s work (2005, 2017) identified three modalities—epistemic, social, and physical—that contribute to learning the workplace. These modalities present distinct challenges for autistic individuals.

The preference for written discourse is stronger for autistic librarians due to the increased effort required for social engagement. Additionally, their heightened sensitivity to the physical environment affects their ability to process information. Autistic individuals navigate more sensory input, making their experience of becoming information literate more labour-intensive. This study prompts readers to consider the impact of autism on IL and workplace learning for librarians.

7.2 Areas for Further Study/Recommendations

The field of neurodiverse IL has room for further exploration. Future research could focus on other neurodivergencies, such as ADHD, OCD, or dyspraxia, and the onboarding process for new jobs. Additionally, investigating how IL evolves over time for autistic individuals in different workplace settings could provide deeper insights into their ongoing experiences and challenges.

7.3 Recommendations for Managers and Colleagues of Autistic Librarians

The following recommendations offer guidance for those who work with autistic librarians are based on findings from the study and the literature:

1. **Provide Clear, Concise Guidance Documents:** Offering detailed written instructions and guidelines can help autistic employees understand and refer back to important information.
2. **Allow Extra Processing Time:** Recognise that autistic individuals may need additional time to process and respond to new information and adjust expectations accordingly.
3. **Be Mindful of the Workplace Environment:** Consider sensory factors such as noise levels, lighting, and workspace design. Providing quiet areas and minimising harsh lighting can create a more comfortable and productive environment for autistic employees.
4. **Foster an Inclusive Culture:** Promote awareness and understanding of neurodiversity within the organisation. Encouraging open communication and providing training on neurodiversity can help create a supportive and inclusive workplace.

Implementing these recommendations can not only benefit neurodivergent employees but also enhance the overall well-being and productivity of the entire workforce. By fostering a mindful and inclusive workplace culture, organisations can ensure that all employees feel valued and supported, leading to greater job satisfaction and engagement.

Declarations

Ethics approval

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Appendix: Survey Questions

Information Literacy for Autistic Individuals in the Academic Library Workplace

Hello, and thank you for clicking through to this survey. For my Library and Information Studies MA dissertation at UCL, I am looking at what it means to being information literate for an autistic person in the academic library workplace. If you have been formally diagnosed as autistic, or self-identify as autistic, then please continue on the survey!

The first few questions are about how you learnt technical aspects of your job when you first started, then around social aspects of your workplace and how you interact with your colleagues and finally, there are questions about how the physical environment impacts your work. The final question is a free text box for you to write anything else you feel may be relevant to this study. It will take up to 10 minutes to answer this survey.

All responses are completely anonymised, and there is no need to leave any identifying information unless you want to. At the end of the survey there is a question asking if you would like to leave your email address to take part in an interview, where the questions have been formed using the responses to this survey. If you would like to take part, amazing! If you do not feel comfortable taking part then please feel free to simply put "N/A".

Thank you for your time and interest in this survey!

1. Have you been diagnosed, or do you self-identify, as autistic? Yes or No (if not, skip to end)
2. How did you learn best about the technical aspects of your job (e.g. learning to use the Library Management System, or other software/programme you may need). Please check all that apply.
 - a. Oral Instruction from peers
 - b. Oral Instruction from manager/supervisor
 - c. Written Instructions (via email or handbook)
 - d. Other? (Audiovisual, trial and error)
3. Do you prefer receiving instructions/guidance on technical aspects of your job via:
 - a. In-person verbal instructions
 - b. Email
 - c. Guidebook/ written document
 - d. Other?
4. Do you feel like you have ever 'missed' things (instructions, announcements etc) in online meetings for your academic library job that you have attended?
 - a. Strongly agree
 - b. Somewhat agree
 - c. Neither agree nor disagree
 - d. Somewhat disagree
 - e. Strongly disagree

5. Do you feel like you have ever 'missed' things (instructions, announcements etc) in face-to-face meetings for your academic library job that you have attended?
 - a. Strongly agree
 - b. Somewhat agree
 - c. Neither agree nor disagree
 - d. Somewhat disagree
 - e. Strongly disagree
6. Is there a difference between face-to-face meetings and online meetings in how much information you retain? Why do you think that is?
7. Do you feel there are 'unwritten' rules for your academic library workplace that it took you longer to understand than your neurotypical colleagues?
 - a. Strongly agree
 - b. Somewhat agree
 - c. Neither agree nor disagree
 - d. Somewhat disagree
 - e. Strongly disagree
8. Do you feel that you understood the 'social dynamic' of the academic library workplace when you first started working there? (E.g. Relationships between colleagues, what is 'ok' to talk about with colleagues)
 - a. Strongly agree
 - b. Somewhat agree
 - c. Neither agree nor disagree
 - d. Somewhat disagree
 - e. Strongly disagree
9. How long do you think it took you (if ever!) to identify and understand any 'hidden rules' at your academic library workplace?
10. Do you feel, or have you ever felt, isolated due to not understanding social relationships/hierarchies/communication in the academic library workplace?
 - a. Strongly agree
 - b. Somewhat agree
 - c. Neither agree nor disagree
 - d. Somewhat disagree
 - e. Strongly disagree
11. Do any specific examples come to mind when you think of any hidden rules in your academic library workplace? If you feel comfortable doing so, please write them here! Otherwise, please write "N/A".
12. Do you feel the physical environment of your academic library workplace leads you to distraction? E.g. becoming overstimulated or understimulated
 - a. Strongly agree
 - b. Somewhat agree
 - c. Neither agree nor disagree
 - d. Somewhat disagree
 - e. Strongly disagree
13. What physical aspects of your academic library workplace environment affect you?

- a. Noise levels
 - b. Temperature
 - c. Smells
 - d. Other (please specify)
14. If you are feeling overstimulated/ understimulated by your environment, does it become harder to take in/understand information given to you?
- a. Strongly agree
 - b. Somewhat agree
 - c. Neither agree nor disagree
 - d. Somewhat disagree
 - e. Strongly disagree
15. Please explain, if you can, your answer to the previous question. How does being over or under stimulated in your academic library workplace environment affect your ability to take in/retain information?
16. If you think there is anything else that this survey hasn't covered, but is relevant to the study, please write this down below:

Thank you for taking part in this survey! Would you be interested in taking part in an interview regarding this topic? The focus of the interview will be informed by the overarching findings from this survey. If you would be willing, please leave your email address in the box below. If you would not like to take part, please write "N/A". Your name will not be connected to your answers to this survey.