Autism is a lifelong neuro-developmental condition that affects the way a person experiences the world. Estimates suggest that more than 2% of the population are autistic. Autistic adults are often unemployed, under-employed and socially disadvantaged despite having the skills and capacity to contribute productively to the workplace. Skilled employment can be difficult to find and hard to retain. Traditional recruitment practices such as job interviews represent systematic barriers to otherwise capable employees. Workplace understanding and support are often poor.

Autism and Agriculture is a world-first initiative of SunPork, the Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism (Autism CRC) and Specialisterne to develop animal care career paths for people on the autism spectrum. Goals of the program include:

• To identify and employ the diverse skills and talents of autistic people in animal care.

• To build employment capacity within the agricultural sector for autistic adults.

• To develop innovative labour solutions that recognise labour force challenges in the agricultural sector, matched with the imperative for livestock industries to provide optimal animal care.

In 2017, SunPork Farms announced the commencement of their first autistic employees in Queensland and South Australia. In 2018, SunPork was honoured to receive the Autism Spectrum Australia Advancement Award. Today, some of SunPork’s autistic employees are into their eighth year of fulltime employment and eleven have worked for the business for six years or more. During this time, SunPork’s autistic employees have gained the satisfaction and reward of meaningful work, independence and a regular wage. Secure employment, financial independence, personal development and a sense belonging have supported individuals to transition to independent living, gain confidence, friendships and to undertake pursuits ranging from their first overseas holiday to purchasing their first home.

As a business, Autism and Agriculture has allowed SunPork to scrutinise and challenge traditional human resource management paradigms, with transformative outcomes not only for autistic employees but for their co-workers, trainers, mentors and managers. The program has fostered teamwork, engagement and has provided a sense of achievement and satisfaction across the entire business. It has also built leadership capacity, people skills and fostered business culture and pride.

Autism and Agriculture has demonstrated that shifting the traditional recruitment paradigm and removing systemic barriers to employment can have transformative outcomes for autistic jobseekers and employees. The program has also demonstrated that autistic adults absolutely have the skills, capability, commitment and motivation to work in animal care.

SunPork values and admires its autistic employees and recognises them as an asset to its business. Their achievements are truly remarkable.