

Neurodiversity Challenges in the Workforce and Cybersecurity

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Part 1: Investigation

1.1. The social issue that offers an opportunity for social change

Disability employment has been a long-standing social issue. Recent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) show that roughly 1 of 4 adults in the U.S. Population lives with a disability (CDC, 2024). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the U.S. unemployment rate for people with disabilities (7.6%) was significantly higher than that for people without disabilities (4.1%) (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025). For neurodivergent people, unemployment is much higher, with an estimated unemployment rate "as high as 30-40% for neurodiverse adults" (Rephun, 2024). The recent neurodivergent movement has helped highlight the employment needs and aspirations of neurodivergent individuals like me to achieve equal access to employment and independence.

Employment is a critical milestone for everyone, enabling personal development and growth. It provides numerous benefits, including financial security, independence, social engagement, and improved quality of life. On the contrary, disability unemployment leads to poverty, lower living standards, homelessness, and other issues. The subject of disability employment is important to me not only because of social injustice but also because of my personal employment experience in the cybersecurity field. With support from my career coach, who helped me navigate the interview process and onboarding, I was able to secure an internship opportunity at a banking institution despite many challenges, including masking.

Masking means hiding a disability from employers to avoid being screened out of hiring. According to the surveys conducted by the International Information System Security Certification Consortium (ISC2, 2024), only 13% surveyed are self-reported as neurodivergent;

75% would prefer not to say anything at all, and 6% preferred not to answer; and 7% reported ‘do not know’ (Appendix A, p. 45). Neurodivergent people should be given an equal and fair chance to enter the cybersecurity workforce without having to mask themselves.

1.2. Factors that contributed to the social issue

One reason for the high unemployment rate among neurodiverse adults is the inaccessibility of hiring processes (Davies et al., 2023). According to the report from Council for Registered Ethical Security Testers (CREST, 2020) on neurodiversity in technical security, one key contributor is the mismatch between neurodivergent strengths, such as pattern recognition in autism or creative problem-solving in dyslexia, and traditional recruitment methods that favor neurotypical traits, such as smooth social interactions during unstructured interviews, yet human resource (HR) teams often ‘subconsciously optimize for neurotypical people’, sometimes viewing neurodivergent traits as distractions rather than assets. These identified factors clearly limit access to cybersecurity jobs for neurodivergent people with weaknesses in social skills and interactions during unstructured interviews.

Lacking adequate accommodations is another contributing factor. The Neurodiversity in SAP Report 2024 by Bluewaveselect reported “many aspects of society are based on the assumption that there is one form of ‘the human mind’ and accordingly, many systems (education, employment, health and social services, social relationships) have been built up premised on being neurotypical. So, building a society that is accessible for neurodiverse people is not only beneficial for everyone, but fair” (Bluewaveselect, 2024, p. 5). A systematic review by Vargas-Salas et al. (2025) further supports the idea that cultural norms in high-pressure tech fields ignore the need for accommodations and ongoing support, contributing to higher dropout

rates through emotional exhaustion and decreased job satisfaction, while highlighting research gaps in retention, job performance challenges, and long-term career trajectories.

1.3. How the issue impacted a particular community:

Exclusion in the workforce has profound impacts on the neurodivergent community. The unemployment rate for neurodiverse adults is 30-40% (Rephun, 2024). Many neurodivergent people land in mismatched roles, ramping up stress and mental health hits from constant rejections or the drain of masking those behaviors at work that wear you down and cut job staying power short (Lewis, Personal Communications, 2025). This leads to anxiety, trauma, or even substance abuse as misconceptions attribute traits to personality flaws rather than executive function challenges, often fueled by “stigma and discrimination that continue to exist despite the best intentions” (Page, 2024; Vargas-Salas et al., 2025, p. 83). The issue impacts the wellbeing of the neurodivergent community, going beyond just losing jobs and missing opportunities.

Many in the neurodivergent community are afraid to disclose their disability and seek accommodations or support. “Disclosure risks (fear of stigma) prevent getting accommodations that would make work sustainable.” (Lewis, Personal Communications, 2025). CREST (2020) reported in their Dyspraxia findings that while 64% disclose voluntarily, only 33% get any real advice or support afterward, leaving folks at risk of underperforming or quitting. Prior literature finds persistent challenges in inclusion amid high unemployment rates, stemming from a lack of understanding, as seen in advocates' stories, where non-acceptance fuels judgment, confusion, and anxiety (Page, 2024; Vargas-Salas et al., 2025). Saddiqa et al. (2023) reported that nontechnical learners, including those from humanities or arts backgrounds, perceive cybersecurity as overly complex and tied to coding (when it is not), creating barriers that exclude diverse talent and limit representation. Workshops like their Peacock platform have the potential

to counter this by engaging beginners through ethics- and privacy-focused CTF (Capture the Flag) exercises. However, without broader adoption, these misconceptions persist (Saddiqa et al, 2023).

1.4. An actionable aspect of the issue

Lacking support systems is a specific, actionable aspect of the issue. Structured systems are needed, particularly by implementing supported internships with job coaches tailored for neurodivergent people in the workforce and cybersecurity, which builds on prior efforts such as those in 2019, when the industry pushed for targeted hiring and continues to do so to this day (CREST, 2020). For instance, my Life Coach's (2025) client anecdote, a neurodivergent individual hired by a Boston organization as a UX designer on a grant, who scored above 70% on a required training exam, maintained full attendance and daily check-ins, yet lasted only about 6 weeks before being 'let go' with vague last-minute feedback, this organization failed not his skills, but in providing clear guidance on what to improve, despite the position being supposedly guaranteed. This highlights the need for structured programs that incorporate mentoring and authenticity building.

ISC2 (2025) recommended mentoring and support, along with accommodations, to combat authenticity struggles, as 44% of neurodivergent professionals report difficulty being fully myself at work, potentially through phased coaching to foster retention. Page (2024) discussed initiatives at Microsoft, SAP, Dell, Google Cloud, and DXC Technology that leverage neurodivergent traits such as hyperfocus and innovative problem-solving in tailored roles, and recommended that internships include aptitude-focused assessments rather than traditional interviews to reveal strengths in meticulous analysis of threats.

1.5. Why the chosen issue is an opportunity for social change

Implementing structured, supported internships, with technological interventions and partnerships to address inadequate support systems, represents a compelling opportunity for change. This approach directly addresses employment exclusion by providing structured, timely guidance from a job coach. It engages and empowers neurodivergent individuals to thrive, fosters broader equity and accessibility, and provides workforce benefits to employers and industries. According to the Neurodiversity in SAP Report 2024 by Bluewaveselect, 27% of respondents feared disclosure due to stigma (p. 7). Structured support systems can help address stigma by educating and training employers, providing necessary accommodations, and fostering a supportive working environment. Wiederhold (2024) reported that neurodiverse individuals also bring exceptional cognitive abilities, such as pattern recognition and precision, which are crucial for cybersecurity, with programs like DXC's achieving 92% retention through tailored support, transforming exclusion into sustainable inclusion that benefits everyone (p. 614).

For employers, the neurodivergent community offers a pool of loyal, highly efficient talent to help address the aging workforce. “There is untapped potential to create a neurodiverse workforce, including initiatives to recruit cybersecurity workforce personnel on the autism spectrum” (Henry, 2021). The Neurodiversity in SAP Report 2024 by Bluewaveselect confirms that SAP's Autism at Work Program: autistic hires retain at 90%, matching everyone else, because neurodiverse brains like theirs slash invoice processing from days to 20 minutes (p. 17). This means recruitment savings and increased productivity for those employers that embrace a neurodivergent workforce.

Part 2: Intervention

2.1. How others have attempted to address the issue

Existing efforts to address employment barriers for neurodivergent individuals in cybersecurity have primarily focused on accommodations, specialized hiring, training, and technology. For example, corporate programs such as those at Microsoft and SAP use inclusive interviews and mentoring to highlight the technical strengths of neurodivergent individuals (Loucks, 2022). These programs make it possible for neurodivergent individuals to enter the high-tech industries and for the companies to benefit from a diverse range of talents. DXC Technology established the “DXC Dandelion program, an award-winning program connecting neurodiverse people with meaningful employment, and helping workplaces fill the IT skill gap” (DXC Technology, n.d.). Recognizing neurodiverse individuals with an “extraordinary capacity for visual thinking, accuracy and attention to detail, which are invaluable skills in the IT industry, particularly in areas such as cybersecurity or data analytics”, DXC instituted ‘10 small acts’ including a positive work environment, flexible working, adapted workstations and sensory rooms based on their survey of neurodiverse people (DXC Technology, n.d.).

Locally, the Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH) Aspire Program offers short-term supported internships with job coaching/mentoring and connects neurodivergent individuals with the local employers (Massachusetts General Hospital, 2025). The job coach at the Aspire program acts as an advocate and counselor to the internship participants throughout the interview process, onboarding, and the duration of the internship. The coach provides emotional support to reduce job-related anxiety for neurodivergent individuals.

2.2. A possible strategy to address the social issue

I recommend a hybrid strategy of technological interventions, including AI-driven adaptive tools, along with an in-person job coach, for a 10-week, structured, supported internship at mid-size/large tech firms and nonprofits to enable neurodivergent individuals into cybersecurity. My recommended strategy builds on existing efforts and successes, such as the neurodivergent programs at DXC's Dandelion Program and the MGH Aspire program.

An in-person job coach plays a crucial role in successful employment for neurodivergent individuals (Lewis, Personal Communications, 2025). A job coach specialized in supporting neurodivergent individuals deeply understands the strengths and challenges of the individuals they support. He or she motivates and provides neurodivergent interns with appropriate and timely support, especially during times of struggle. For example, when an intern is frustrated and stuck in a loop of questions that go unanswered despite best efforts by the intern, a coach can intervene and initiate a three-way Zoom call with the intern and the intern's supervisor, advocating and clarifying questions while the intern, who may be too overwhelmed with frustration to listen and process the call effectively. The coach, along with the worksite manager and staff, can help to build a welcoming working environment and enhance the power of belonging. Palumbo (2024) reported "when neurodivergent professionals feel they can be themselves, job satisfaction jumps from 54% to 73%." In addition, I had firsthand experience and benefited from supported internships with my own job coach, who helped me navigate the interview processes and supported me throughout my internship, along with my supervisor and staff at the worksite. The in-person structured job coach is an essential component of any successful employment program tailored towards neurodivergent individuals.

While the existing programs have demonstrated success, the availability of AI tools and technological interventions presents a new opportunity to include neurodivergent individuals and narrow the gaps in access to employment opportunities. “Tools such as virtual reality (VR), biofeedback, and cognitive-behavior therapy can further support neurodiverse professionals by helping to manage social anxiety and improve focus.” (Wiederhold, 2025, p. 614). Open-source AI enables faster innovation. These tools can personalize lessons (3-4 minutes each) with visual and auditory cues, reducing masking and improving learning. For example, a concept like the Human Augmentation Ledger (HAL), integrated with LibreOffice and Alibaba's "Qwen," and reminders apps such as Google Calendar could automate and provide low-cost, personalized reminders for check-ins, preventing disappearances if interns, coaches, or supervisors lag behind schedule.

For those who struggle with text-heavy documents, voice mode can be enabled to read, and AI can be used to explain, like a job coach who clarifies vague instructions or prompts to contact a coach, supervisor, or others for help and support. With 'cues' built into these tools, these innovations can significantly improve the lives of neurodiverse individuals and provide them with more opportunities to practice and develop their skills in a safe, controlled environment, boosting confidence (Wiederhold, 2024).

2.3. One way the plan could be implemented

I recommend a phased rollout based on my career coach's road map (Lewis, Personal Communications, 2025), starting with close partnerships between medium to large companies as employers and nonprofits like the MGH Aspire Program that provide job coaches specialized in supporting neurodivergent individuals for pilots with a cohort of 5-10 interns. Starting in Week 1, employers and nonprofits recruit and define interns' roles, and in Week 2, they orient interns

and families. In Weeks 3-4, assess interns' skills and train program jobsite supervisors on accommodations and support. In Week 5, launch the internship with interns working 10-15 hours weekly, using HAL to organize tasks, schedules, and daily check-ins to establish routines. By Week 6-8, as the interns get used to the work environment and routines, the job coach gradually fades to periodic check-ins, and the interns begin to take on more responsibilities and increase work hours, shifting to weekly check-in sessions by the end of the period. The interns will also gather employer feedback, engage in self-reflection, and adjust accommodations or the schedule if needed. By Week 9-10, evaluate via written performance and wrap up the internship. This constructive scaffolding approach provides gradual support, with HAL as a backup assistant to help manage daily tasks and schedules, ensuring adequate support throughout the internship. To improve this plan's scalability, I recommend that interns rate HAL's effectiveness and usability weekly, enabling tweaks to the app to enhance personalization.

Building on the success of the pilots, partnerships could be further extended to colleges and local communities to broaden recruitment, ensuring diverse cohorts and more substantial commitment from educational institutions and stakeholders. Finally, it is important to conduct post-program surveys and obtain feedback from all the participants and stakeholders. The survey data would help measure outcomes, refine future rollouts, and build evidence to support grant funding to sustain the initiative and ensure the longevity of the programs.

2.4 Resources needed to implement the plan

To implement the recommended plan, employers' and nonprofits' support, financial resources, and technological and community resources are all needed. For in-person and on-site settings, 1 or 2 job coaches per intern cohort are needed. In addition, a steering partnership team of educators, families, supervisors, and staff from accessibility offices is needed to help foster a

welcoming environment and reduce 'stigma' towards neurodivergent individuals. This team will also serve as a resource for implementing the plan. As for financial resources, a \$10,000-15,000 grant is needed to provide training to the participants and workshops for the employers to educate them on the profile of neurodivergent individuals and adequate accommodations. This grant includes the cost of one job coach and open-source AI software tools such as HAL.

Collaboration and partnership with local businesses, government disability agencies, colleges, and communities is also needed for broader support, including fundraising. Tax incentives for hiring, as noted by my life coach (Life Coach, Personal Communications, 2025), can further incentivize employers. Diversifying resource sources will make the recommended neurodivergent internship program more resilient and long-lasting.

2.5 How the strategy could benefit the community members affected by the issue

The recommended strategy will positively impact the neurodivergent community by improving access to employment opportunities and decreasing unemployment. With actual internship experience and exposure to cybersecurity employment, the program can lead to cybersecurity roles for neurodivergent individuals. In return, employed neurodivergent individuals will contribute to the economy and help reduce the unemployment rate in their community. The internship experience was found to improve daily living skills for neurodivergent individuals, fostering greater independence in managing personal and professional responsibilities (Ashworth et al., 2025).

Employers in cybersecurity will benefit further from tapping into a diverse range of talents in the neurodivergent community. Wiederhold (2024) reported that neurodiverse individuals possess exceptional cognitive abilities, such as pattern recognition and precision,

which are crucial for cybersecurity. Upon successful completion of the internship, employers can recruit from the internship cohorts with return offers to fill their vacancies. It will be a win-win for employers and employees, as interns are trained and onboarded with employers, reducing recruitment costs.

Some other benefits of the recommended strategy include increased productivity and a higher retention rate. Hiring neurodivergent individuals can increase productivity, as found by companies such as DXC, Microsoft, SAP, Google Cloud, and Dell (Page, 2024). The retention rate of the neurodivergent employees is much higher. DXC reported a 92% retention rate among neurodivergent employees (DXC Technology, n.d.). This evidence demonstrates significant benefits not only to neurodivergent individuals but also to employers and the community at large.

2.6. Potential outcomes of the plan

If my plan is implemented, potential outcomes could transform the workforce in the cybersecurity field and possibly other high-tech fields, opening doors to more job opportunities for neurodivergent communities and to more loyal employees for employers. This can significantly bring down the high unemployment rate among the neurodivergent community and disability community in general. Survey research results show that internships provide interns with professional and personal self-development (Ashworth et al., 2023). The employers could offer return offers to the interns from the pilot cohorts to fill vacancies, since they already have working experience with the employers. It reduces the need for onboarding and other initial training, saving employers recruitment costs. By integrating neurodiversity into the workforce, organizations can enhance innovation, employee satisfaction, and organizational reputation (Rollnik-Sadowska & Grabińska, 2024, p. 10). For example, bringing in the talents of

neurodivergent individuals with different perspectives can help spot hidden vulnerabilities in software code that a team might overlook, turning security breaches into multi-layered defenses.

As for unintended consequences, it may result in employer burnout from training and overwhelming management (Lewis, Personal Communications, 2025). For example, suppose a manager or supervisor is already juggling deadlines across multiple competing projects or tasks. In that case, he or she might burn out or feel an added burden from attending training sessions and learning about neurodivergent needs while also supporting multiple interns. This can lead to inadequate support without follow-through, resulting in program failures, poor return on investment, and poor outcomes for neurodivergent interns.

The plan may also lead to unintended backfire effects, as found in the research by Leslie et al. (2024). This backfire could stem from non-target groups viewing the program as preferential treatment, potentially creating a new issue of workplace division in a cycle in which inclusive efforts inadvertently raise tensions (Leslie et al., 2024). To mitigate backfire effects, such as preferential treatment or workplace division, I recommend periodically gathering feedback from all program stakeholders, including worksite staff and employers, to assess and monitor potential adverse effects. The survey data will be used to address any adverse effects by adjusting the program training or changing the program. For example, a satisfaction score of 80%+ from all stakeholders is expected, while a program or policy change is warranted if the score falls below a threshold of 60%. This timely adjustment in training or a change to the program should help mitigate potential unintended program outcomes.

Part 3: Advocacy

3.1. Justifying the implementation of the plan

Implementing the recommended plan for in-person, structured, supported cybersecurity internships using AI-driven technology is important for reducing the barriers that neurodivergent individuals face. This plan creates a supportive framework that allows the strengths of neurodivergent individuals to shine and be recognized, rather than being put down.

Neurodivergent individuals often bring valuable skills, such as pattern recognition and hyperfocus, which are ideal for tasks like threat identification and data analysis, but these abilities are frequently overlooked due to inaccessible hiring and workplace practices (Davies et al., 2023; CREST, 2020). Prior research findings demonstrated that supported employment is more effective (Frederick & VanderWeele, 2019). Evidence from prior programs, such as Untapped Talent's Genius Armory, shows that tailored training—including structured rotations and mentorships—helps neurodivergent participants enter roles after 6 months, even without prior experience, demonstrating that such supports are practical and effective (Page, 2024).

From a societal perspective, as emphasized in reviews of sustainable human resource management, incorporating neurodiversity not only fills workforce gaps but also promotes long-term inclusion by recognizing individual needs early on (Naqvi & Joakim Kävrestad, 2025; Rollnik-Sadowska & Grabińska, 2024). The need for a more diverse cybersecurity workforce in the digital age is greater than ever. “A more diverse cybersecurity workforce can provide a broader range of perspectives, experiences, and skills to address the complex and ever-evolving threats of the digital age” (Saddiqa et al., 2023, p. 1). Inclusion of neurodivergent people is found to increase productivity. JPMorganChase’s Autism at Work Program reported “with careful job matching, new employees on the autism spectrum can be 90 to 140% more productive than employees who had been there 5-10 years” (Bluewaveselect, 2024, p. 18). This data shows that

neurodivergent individuals can make significant contributions to the cybersecurity industry, bringing the skills needed.

3.2. How the implementation of the plan would impact society

Inclusion of neurodivergent people in the workforce can lead to a more inclusive society that values diversity and embraces differences. The implementation of this plan will have a positive impact on society by fostering greater employment inclusion of neurodivergent individuals, reducing unemployment, homelessness, and social welfare costs. Henry (2021) reported that autistic employees were 48 percent more productive than other employees, based on a pilot study in which autistic employees participated. This can significantly increase productivity with more hiring of autistic or neurodivergent individuals, not only in cybersecurity but also in other industries.

Embracing neurodiversity in the workplace holds immense potential for both employees and employers. Many neurodivergent individuals possess unique skills and talents that can contribute to a wide range of fields. With the plan in place, the intern employees will gain direct work experience and grow in confidence in their capabilities. The positive employment experience will help neurodivergent individuals to achieve wellbeing, which can then positively impact those around them and the community at large. Research by Pennaforte and Fannon (2025) suggested that if neurodivergent learners achieve wellbeing during co-op, they may be more likely to seek support again and to support others in achieving wellbeing.

“By creating inclusive hiring practices, providing appropriate accommodations, and fostering supportive work environments, employers can tap into this pool of talent and promote

diversity within their organizations” (Sullivan, 2023). For neurodivergent individuals, strengths such as attention to detail and pattern recognition are valuable assets to employers.

3.3. Refuting opposing viewpoints

Some might argue that implementing a structured supported internship pilot is too costly, requiring investment and resources. This actually contradicts the data. Low-cost tools like open-source AI software and platforms such as Google Meet or Slack yield high returns, with DXC's 92% retention rate for neurodivergent hires, far outweighing the costs of constant replacement (DXC Technology, n.d.).

Critics could claim it undermines meritocracy by giving special advantages. Nevertheless, studies demonstrate that it levels the playing field by focusing on skills, social norms, and that neurodivergent teams boost productivity by 1.2-1.4 times through complementary strengths, increasing productivity, quality, and timeliness (Bluewaveselect, 2024, p. 18). Research from a systematic review in sustainable human resource management demonstrated that, contrary to critics' claims, workplace neurodiversity initiatives do not undermine productivity or meritocracy; instead, neurodivergent teams can outperform traditional ones by leveraging unique talents, increasing productivity, job tenure, and quality, with costs of support offset by retention and organizational benefits (Rollnik-Sadowska & Grabińska, 2024). The review also stated that resistance often stems from misunderstandings, which targeted education and inclusive practices can readily address (Rollnik-Sadowska & Grabińska, 2024).

Another opposing viewpoint is that AI tools like HAL might introduce bias. MIT News (2024) reported “machine-learning models can fail when they try to make predictions for individuals who were underrepresented in the datasets they were trained on” (Zewe, 2024).

However, this can be addressed through regular audits and user feedback, ensuring fairness and improving outcomes. Saddiqa et al. (2023) recommended platforms like Peacock that attract nontechnical learners while ensuring fairness and avoiding misconceptions about complexity.

Some might see it as extra work for managers or supervisors as they manage and work on multiple projects and tasks with deadlines. However, research shows that simple adjustments, such as five-minute check-ins, enhance overall team performance and reduce stress, turning potential burdens into benefits, as seen in programs like DXC Technology and CISA's Neurodiverse Federal Workforce (NFW), where neurodivergent inclusion leads to innovation without added strain (Page, 2024).

These oppositions overlook the long-term gains. For example, in Artificial Intelligence-dominated fields, neurodiversity is essential for bias reduction in data, refuting claims of inefficiency by highlighting how diverse thinking strengthens security (Naqvi & Joakim Kävrestad, 2025; The Cyber Express, 2024). The technical security reports from CREST emphasize that ignoring neurodiversity fosters groupthink. At the same time, inclusion taps untapped talent, countering skepticism with real-world examples such as GCHQ's successful employment of autistic individuals for complex analysis (CREST, 2020). Ultimately, the plan's evidence-based design shows that opposition stems from a lack of understanding, which awareness training can resolve, leading to more effective workplaces (Vargas-Salas et al., 2025).

Some have questioned the long-term outcomes of supported employment, as most existing studies focus on economic analyses without considering quality of life and other benefits (Park et al., 2022). The prior meta-study indicates that more studies are needed to examine long-term outcomes over the life course (Frederick & VanderWeele, 2019). With appropriate studies

that include quality of life over the life course of neurodivergent individuals, we can address these oppositions with data and evidence.

3.4. Determining Success of Advocacy

To determine the success of my advocacy for this plan, I would use both quantitative and qualitative assessments that track short and long-term outcomes. Quantitatively, I measure the number of pilots/cohorts recruited along with the total number of interns. These numbers will determine the success and impact of my advocacy. In addition, I measure retention and subsequent employment rates in the internship pilot program, aiming for at least 80% of participants to complete the internships and 25% to secure employment following their internships. These rates are defined based on my own experience with the MGH Aspire program. Productivity gains will be assessed through performance evaluations, looking for improvements, as noted in cybersecurity studies, where participants in the Peacock platform's workshops were given opportunities to share feedback (Saddiqa et al., 2023).

Successes will also be measured through survey questionnaires and qualitative feedback from interns, managers, and other program staff. The survey questionnaires will include internship experience and satisfaction with the pilot program. For example, the respondents will be asked how satisfied they are with accommodations and support. A successful program can expect higher satisfaction ratings from respondents. The respondents will also be asked to rate their confidence and wellbeing on a scale of 1 to 10 when providing feedback. A high rating, such as nine or higher, would indicate success for the program, as interns achieve high levels of confidence and wellbeing.

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