

Autism in the workplace

What is autism?

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability. It is part of the autism spectrum and so is sometimes referred to as Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). People with autism have difficulty with social communication, social interaction and social imagination but the same condition can affect each individual in different ways. Around 1 in 100 people in the UK have autism.

What is Asperger syndrome?

Asperger syndrome is a form of autism, mostly a 'hidden disability' because you can't tell if someone has this condition just by their outward appearance. People with Asperger Syndrome often have average or above average intelligence and do not have the accompanying learning disabilities associated with autism. Only around 15% of adults with Asperger syndrome are in employment, despite the majority being keen and capable of work.

Business Case for employing someone with autism / Asperger's Syndrome

People with autism have proved to be efficient and reliable workers. They thrive in a structured and well organised environment and have many strengths that are advantageous to an employer, such as:

Accuracy and a good eye for detail.

Reliability and meticulous application to routine tasks.

Very good at pattern recognition and noticing errors.

Strong at logical reasoning and picking out irregularities in data or arguments.

Often have excellent memories on subject that interest them.

Some things they have difficult with

Eye contact may be uncomfortable or difficult for an autistic person so at first reduce your eye contact and don't mind if they avert their gaze.

They might find it difficult to "read" emotions in people's facial expressions.

Also have difficulty in "reading" social cues e.g. when to speak; when to stop speaking; when a conversation is over; how close to stand to someone. Ensure a new recruit is buddied up with an understanding colleague.

People with autism tend to think literally, which will make you stop and think sometimes!

They tend to be comfortable when rules, routines and schedules are adhered to and can become uncomfortable or distressed when they are broken, disrupted or changed.

Many people with autism have intense special interests, often from a fairly young age. These can change over time or be lifelong, and can be anything from art or music, to trains or computers. Some people with autism may eventually be able to work or study in related areas. For others, it will remain a hobby.

People on the autistic spectrum may be intensely sensitive (hyper-sensitive) or under-sensitive (hypo-sensitive) to one or more sensory stimuli e.g. heat, cold, sound, light, dark, textures, smells, pain.

For many autistic people, the constant bombardment of sound, light, colours,

patterns, numbers, temperatures, textures, smells and feelings can become too much.

It is little wonder that with all this going on – communication barriers, frustrations, misunderstandings, sensory sensitivity, sensory overload, unexpected changes, rules being broken, discrimination, prejudice – that many autistic people experience stress, anxiety, and sometimes, ‘meltdowns’.

People on the autistic spectrum are often thought to be unable to empathise. However, it may be more accurate to say that autistic people empathise differently from the way that other people do. One theory is that autistic people lack ‘cognitive empathy’ (the ability to predict others’ intentions), but have ‘affective empathy’ (the ability to share others’ feelings) and ‘compassionate empathy’ (the desire to help others).

Workplace Adjustments

Employees with ASD will generally qualify for legal protection from discrimination under the Equality Act 2010. This requires employers to make reasonable adjustments to enable the employee to perform his or her job. Most employees will require few if any formal adjustments. The types of adaptations which might be useful include the following:

When evaluating job candidates, recognise that they may not give a good indication of their skills in a job interview. People on the spectrum often do not interview well due to their difficulty with social interaction. Consider other means of evaluating candidates’ abilities.

Avoid using jargon unless you have explained it first. This could include common phrases like “Good Customer Service or Customer Experience or Customer Journey”.

Make sure instructions are concise and specific. Try to give the person clear instructions right from the start about exactly how to carry out each task, from start to finish. Don’t assume the person will infer your meaning from informal directions. Provide instructions in writing, not just orally. It can be helpful to ask the person to repeat back instructions so you are sure they have understood.

Create a work environment which is well-structured. Assist with prioritising activities, organising tasks into a timetable for daily, weekly, and monthly activities, and breaking larger tasks into small steps. Some employees will appreciate precise information about start and finish times, and help getting into a routine with breaks and lunches.

Clarify expectations of the job. You may need to be more explicit about your expectations for a staff member with an ASD. In addition to the job description, you may need to explain the etiquette and unwritten rules of the workplace.

Provide sensitive but direct feedback. Make sure it is honest, constructive, and consistent. If the person completes a task incorrectly, don’t allude to or imply any problems – instead, explain tactfully but clearly why it is wrong, check that they have understood, and set out exactly what they should do instead.

Be aware that the person is likely to have been bullied in the past, so be sensitive in giving criticism and give positive feedback wherever appropriate.

Regularly review performance. As with any employee, managers

should have regular one-to-one meetings with the person to discuss and review performance and give overall comments and suggestions. When managing a person with a ASD, brief, frequent reviews may be better than longer sessions at less frequent intervals.

Provide training and monitoring. When a person with an ASD starts a job or takes on new responsibilities, clear and structured training is invaluable. This can be provided informally on the job, by a manager, colleagues or a mentor, or may take the form of more formal training.

Provide a mentor or buddy in the workplace – an empathetic colleague who is willing to provide support, advice, and assistance with integrating socially into the workplace.

Offer reassurance in stressful situations. People with an ASD can be quite meticulous, and may become anxious if their performance is not perfect. Let them know you expect they will make mistakes and that it's not a problem if they occasionally arrive late due to transport problems or other unpreventable factors.

Appreciate the employee's sensory sensitivities and allow her or him to make adjustments such as wearing earphones, changing the type of light bulb, or taking breaks from situations of high sensory input such as loud noises or strong odours.

Be aware that eye contact can overload the employee's sensory system and do not misinterpret a lack of eye contact as disrespect or inattention.

Accommodate to the employee's need for predictability and routine. When possible, provide forewarning of any changes and allow the employee time to adjust and make transition.

Give clear and direct feedback to the employee if he or she behaves in ways that seem disrespectful or are inappropriate to the situation (such as interrupting others, publicly "correcting" a manager, or making a distasteful joke).

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