

Inclusive Employers

Autism inclusion in the workplace



Introduction

This autism inclusion in the workplace guide forms part of our disability series. Including this guide, the series contains 11 in-depth documents to support employees with disabilities across all considerations of the employee experience.

These are:

- Colour blindness in the workplace
- Developing assistance dog policies
- Disability staff networks
- Inclusive communications
- Sensory impairment
- Supporting colleagues who acquire their impairment whilst in your employment
- Supporting colleagues with learning disabilities in the workplace
- Supporting colleagues with long term health conditions in the workplace
- Supporting colleagues with physical disabilities in the workplace
- Understanding non-visible disabilities

This guide specifically focuses on supporting autistic colleagues. If you want to find out more information or want to know how to bring this content to life in a meaningful way for your organisation, please speak to your Inclusive Employers' account manager or email members@inclusiveemployers.co.uk.

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1. What is autism?

“Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects how people perceive the world and interact with others” (National Autistic Society). All autistic people share certain challenges but being autistic will affect them in different ways. Some autistic people have mental health conditions or other disabilities or health conditions, meaning people need different levels and types of support.

There are around 700,000 autistic people in the UK, which is about 1 in 100 of us. It is thought that many people, particularly adults, are undiagnosed and therefore autism is much more common than current data suggests. More men are currently diagnosed with autism than women. Many women only realise they are autistic and seek diagnosis after going through the diagnosis process with one or more of their children. However, it is not known exactly whether there is a biological link to gender or that diagnosis is different depending on gender due to social assumptions and norms. Up until recently most research into autism focused on boys, and while this is changing, there is still a lack of research into autism in adults and particularly in women.

Autism is not a learning disability, but around half of autistic people may also have a learning disability (Mencap).

A learning disability is a reduced intellectual ability and difficulty with managing everyday activities. Learning disabilities are categorised at four levels from mild, to moderate, to severe, to profound. An example of a learning disability would be Down's syndrome.

Autism has some common traits which include:

- Challenges with social communication and interaction
- Repetitive patterns of behaviour
- Preferring routines and having difficulties adjusting to change
- Challenges understanding facial expression, tone of voice and sarcasm or jokes
- Some people have limited speech but will often understand more than they are able to express
- Find understanding or interpreting other people's behaviour challenging
- They may struggle to express their own emotions
- Being over or under-stimulated by light/sound/temperature/texture

Language

Over the years there have been many different terms for autism including autism spectrum condition (ASC), classic autism, Kanner autism, pervasive developmental disorder (PDD), high-functioning autism (HFA), Asperger syndrome and Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA). Now, the most common and preferred term is Autistic Spectrum Disorder or ASD, or simply autism. Some autistic people use the term 'autism spectrum condition', as they feel the word 'disorder' is too medicalised or implies that there is something 'disordered' about who they are.

When talking (or writing) about autism there are two different approaches: person-first language or identity-first language.

When referring to a person with a disability, using person-first language you would say "a person with autism" rather than "an autistic person." The idea behind this is that the phrasing places the emphasis on the individual and doesn't reduce them to or view them exclusively as their disability.

However, identity-first language is the opposite: you refer to someone as their identity first, then as a person. You would say "an autistic person" rather than "a person with autism."

Language is a very personal thing. Over the past few years, organisations representing the views and experiences of autistic people have moved from using person-first language to identity-first language. This is because autism, unlike some other disabilities, is core to an individual's identity. The feedback they have received from autistic people is that being autistic is so key to who they are their preference is identity-first language. This change in language is also part of the shift in society towards autistic pride and to value autistic people for their strengths.

Although the identity-first language approach is recommended when talking about autism it is always important to be led by individuals. If they would prefer different language, or a specific term relevant to their diagnosis then this should always be respected.

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2. How autism affects workplace experiences

As autism is a spectrum condition it affects people's experience of the workplace in different ways. There are also some autistic people who are unable to work due to the complexity of their support needs. However, most autistic people could work if the workplace was inclusive of their strengths and challenges.

Recruitment

Autism may impact a person's ability to showcase their skills in a traditional recruitment process. For example, they may not have had the opportunity to gain formal experience to put on their CV or they may not communicate effectively in an interview. However, the skills they have could be perfect for the job if the organisation can offer a different approach to recruitment such as a job trial, a working interview or a chance to demonstrate their skills in a way that works for them. Some autistic people don't make eye contact, or may not have expressive faces, which can set them back as interviewers assume this means they are not interested in the role.

Retention

Autism is a disability under the Equality Act 2010. Therefore, it is a legal (as well as moral) obligation to make reasonable adjustments. It is essential that autistic employees feel supported by their line manager, team, and HR so the organisation doesn't risk losing their skills, attributes, and experience. Section 4, (Supporting autistic people in the workplace) of this guide gives more information on making reasonable adjustments and providing support.

Mental Health

A recent [National Autistic Society survey](#) found 47% of autistic people experience severe anxiety and 50% said depression was having a high impact on their ability to get on with life. Although autism isn't a mental illness, high numbers of autistic people have difficulty with their mental health. This is often caused by societal issues such as lack of access to support, lack of understanding of autism and isolation.

Communication and relationships with colleagues

Autistic people see the world differently from neuro-typical (non-autistic) people. Therefore, understanding other people's actions, behaviours, decisions, jokes, and expressions can be challenging. Many autistic people have meaningful relationships, and it is a common and dangerous myth that autistic people are not social and don't like social interaction. However, for autistic people to have a great relationship with colleagues, colleagues need to understand autism and adapt their behaviour according to the autistic person's needs.

Some autistic people enjoy, and will use, conceptual and metaphorical language including wordplay and idioms. However, some autistic people find non-literal language confusing. A good rule of thumb is to keep your communication and that of your team clear, logically structured and free of unnecessary information.

Working environment

Sensitivity levels to light, sounds and temperature can differ in autistic people. Some people are sensory-seeking and therefore work better with loud music in their headphones for example. Others are easily overstimulated and need quiet spaces with soft lighting. Giving people some control over where and how they work will enable them to work most productively. Hybrid working options, particularly those that enable staff to utilise home working for 'deep work' can help too.

Some autistic people are very sensitive to texture, and can find certain types of clothing, seams, buttons etc uncomfortable. In addition, lack of clarity around dress code (e.g. simply stating 'business casual') can be hard to understand for some autistic people. Be clear in your expectations and allow flex to enable people to dress comfortably.

Suitability of the roles available

Many organisations are in the habit of designing jobs that require a wide range of skills i.e., all forms of communication must be excellent, ability to use technology must be excellent, being able to manage relationships effectively etc., are all written into a large majority of roles, even when it is not essential for producing the roles' outcomes. Because of this approach to job design, many autistic people are not given the opportunity to excel with their skill set. Designing jobs that focus on the output and what is essential to achieve this will lead to more refined job descriptions. Similarly, job-carving: designing the role around the person's strengths, is another option. Many autistic people can develop incredibly deep knowledge and expertise in subjects that interest them. Designing a job role that is 'deep' rather than 'broad', for instance a specialist technical role, plays to these strengths.

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3. Recruiting autistic people

The traditional recruitment process often does not meet the needs of neurodivergent people, so it is good practice to be considerate, flexible and accommodating when advertising job roles and creating the interview process. Additional support may be required from application to interview, and also while learning on the job, which will enable the individual to demonstrate their full capabilities.

For instance, a candidate with autism may not maintain eye contact or perhaps may speak with a monotone voice, meaning they may come across as unenthusiastic or unfriendly at the interview. However, if your recruitment panel is trained to look for the evidence in their responses, and particularly if you include work-based tests into the recruitment process, you can ensure an autistic candidate gets a fair interview and your organisation does not miss out on autistic talent.

Competency-based blind recruitment is good practice, as are work-based technical assessments that allow candidates to demonstrate the skills you are recruiting for rather than good interview skills. Similarly, using blind recruitment software you can ensure the platform is accessible e.g. by offering high contrast colour palettes, the ability to increase the zoom, and dyslexia-friendly fonts, which will help autistic people with common co-occurring conditions as well as other disabled candidates.

Supported internships, traineeships or apprenticeships may be an alternative route for autistic people to increase their chances of achieving paid employment through work experience. The Disability Confident scheme provides a framework for employers to follow to improve their recruitment practices.

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4. Supporting autistic people in the workplace

Employing autistic people can strengthen an inclusive workplace culture. Demonstrating to colleagues that offering a new perspective, behaving in a different way or approaching tasks in your own way is valued in your workplace enables others to feel they can also be their true selves.

Reasonable adjustments may be required to ensure that autistic colleagues are able to complete the job to their full potential. However, needing an adjustment does not mean that they are any less capable than other employees. Workplaces are designed by and for neurotypical people and therefore are not always suitable (without adjustments) for autistic, or other neurodivergent, people.

Conversations about reasonable adjustments should start as part of the application process however the adjustments needed by the applicant to perform at their best in recruitment may differ from those that are needed day-to-day. Once a formal job offer has been accepted, HR and the colleague's line manager should work together to prepare any adjustments ahead of the employee's start date. Adjustments could include (but are not limited to):

- Flexible location (e.g. home-based)
- Flexible hours or fixed shifts
- Acceptance of sensory stimulation such as rocking or listening to music
- Ability to change light/sound/temperature levels around their desk
- A fixed desk rather than hot desking

- Allowing more time for tasks
- Quiet work areas, or periods of time with no Teams calls, meetings or chats for deep work
- Giving instructions differently (e.g. via bullet pointed email) or with more warning
- A mentor or buddy
- Additional training or time to learn
- More frequent breaks
- Provision of stim and fidget toys, or pads and pens for doodling, in meetings or on desks to help with concentration
- Relaxation of triggers for disciplinary action, for matters such as sickness absence or mistakes arising from executive function impairment

Many reasonable adjustments have no cost associated with them. However, if your organisation needs support in funding reasonable adjustment you may be eligible through the government's [Access to Work](#) scheme.

Training

Another vital way to make sure autistic employees are supported in the workplace is through providing awareness training for line managers and colleagues. There are lots of people whose only experience of autism is what they have seen on TV and in film. Often these representations are sensationalised, stereotyped, or dramatised and do not give an accurate understanding of autism. Even people who have worked with autistic colleagues before may have limited experience. There is a famous phrase in the autistic community “If you have met one autistic person, you have met one autistic person”.

Training can break down myths, give more accurate information and boost the confidence of line managers and colleagues that they can support autistic people.

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5. Top tips for autism inclusion

Here are our Inclusive Employers 8 top tips for an autism inclusive workplace:

- Create an open dialogue in your organisation about neuro-differences to start building a culture of appreciating individuals for their strengths
- Be flexible – in job design, location, environment and ways of working
- Equip your line managers with the knowledge and confidence to support autistic employees
- Focus on the ‘can do’ rather than the ‘can’t do’
- Make reasonable adjustments
- Listen to the voices, opinions, and experiences of autistic people
- Work with specialist services to offer internships or work trials to minimise the barriers to recruitment
- Take part in celebration and awareness-raising events such as Autistic Pride Day, Autism Awareness Week and Neurodiversity Awareness Month

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6. Resources

Things to read

[National Autistic Society – what is autism?](#)

[ACAS Report: Neurodiversity at Work \(2016\)](#)

[CIPD Report: Neurodiversity at Work \(2018\)](#)

[Guardian article: Autism in the workplace: 'Always thought you were a bit weird' \(2015\)](#)

[Supporting Neurodiverse Talent in the Workplace \(2022\)](#)

[Neurodiversity in the Workplace – Understanding is Key](#)

Things to listen to

[Inclusive Employers Podcast: Talking Inclusion With... - Episode 4: neurodiversity](#)

[The ACAS Podcast: Thinking differently about neurodiversity](#)

Things to watch

[Amazing Things Happen - by Alexander Amelines](#)

[What it's really like to have autism - Ethan Lisi](#)

[Behind the Mask: Autism for Women and Girls - Kate Kahle - TEDxAustinCollege](#)

Support

[National Autistic Society](#)

[Ambitious about Autism](#)

[Access to Work](#)

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