

Autism and Employment

A Guide for Employers



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Working to Prevent and Alleviate the Effects of Work on Health

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Aims

Many employers lack the skills and knowledge they need to effectively support their autistic employees. There is significant stigma against autistic people with employers incorrectly assuming there will be significant supervision, training and accommodation costs and reduced output. With simple adjustments many autistic people are able to perform productively and effectively.

The Office for National Statistics recently published a report indicating that just 22% of autistic adults are in any kind of employment compared to 50% of disabled people as a whole and 80% of non-disabled people. Many unemployed autistic people would like to be in employment and can have successful and fulfilling careers. However, the difficulties autistic people experience in social communication and overwhelming sensory situations can prevent them from joining and staying in employment.

The Equality Act 2010 made it a legal requirement for employers to make 'reasonable adjustments' for disabled employees including autistic employees. Therefore, this booklet aims to provide employers with the knowledge and tools required to provide equal opportunities to their autistic employees and to allow them to succeed within the workplace.

What is Autism?

Autism is a lifelong developmental condition affecting how individuals communicate, experience and interact with the rest of the world. It is estimated that around 1% of the UK population is autistic.

It is a spectrum condition meaning every autistic person has different strengths and weaknesses. However, difficulties and traits many autistic people share include:

- Communication and social interaction difficulties
- Restricted or repetitive behaviours
- A strong preference for structure and routine
- Over or under-sensitivity to sensory stimuli
- Increased anxiety
- Specific and intense interests

The most important thing to remember is that all autistic people are different.

Autism is not an illness or a disease, and autistic people cannot and do not need to be 'cured'. It simply means that an autistic person's brain works slightly differently to a non-autistic person.

Autism is not a learning disability, and autistic people range widely in the amount of support they require in their daily lives. Whilst some autistic people require assistance with most aspects of their everyday lives, others need only minor support adjustments to live successful, independent lives.

Autism is also not a mental health problem. However, autistic people do experience higher rates of mental health problems than the general population. This is thought to be partially due to social isolation, feeling different from other people, lack of employment opportunities and sensory challenges.

The Autism Spectrum

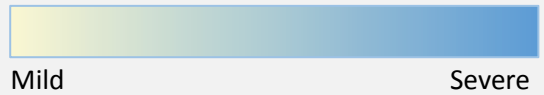
Autism is often described as a spectrum condition as there are a wide range of differences in the type of challenges and traits that autistic people experience.

When many people first hear the term 'spectrum' they interpret this as a linear scale from 'mildly autistic' to 'severely autistic'.

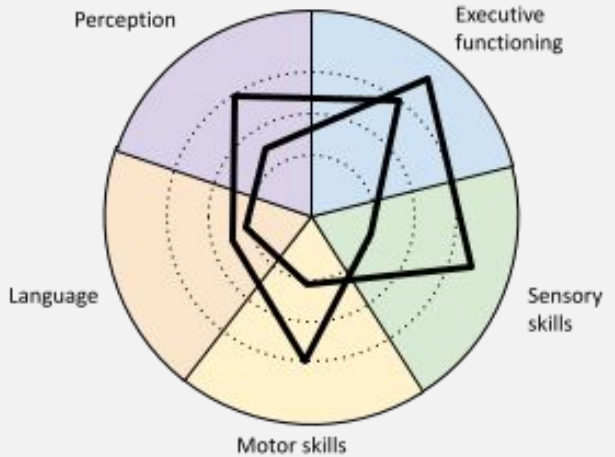
However, these high or low functioning labels diminish the struggles of those considered to be 'mildly' autistic and ignore the abilities of those considered 'severely' autistic. They also misunderstand what is meant by the term 'spectrum'.

Instead the autism spectrum refers to a number of traits and behaviours and every autistic person requires different amounts of support in each of these areas

What people assume the autism spectrum looks like:



What it actually looks like:



Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity recognises that people experience and interact with the world in a variety of different ways. It describes the idea that there is no one correct way of thinking, learning or acting and differences should be supported and celebrated rather than thought of as deficits. Although neurodiversity refers to the idea that every brain thinks differently, it is commonly used in relation to a number of neurodevelopmental conditions including autism, attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, and Tourette syndrome. Whilst this booklet focuses on autistic employees, many of the suggestions can also be useful for other neurodiverse employees.

Language

Many autistic people view their autism as a key part of their identity and so it is important to carefully consider the language you use. Care should be taken to use positive language focussing both on a person's strengths and weaknesses. This guidance is based off research on the language preferences of autistic people. However, these opinions are not shared by everyone and so it is important to respect whichever terminology is preferred by your autistic employee.

Asperger's syndrome

Asperger's syndrome is an outdated diagnosis that has now simply been replaced by the autism diagnosis. It was previously commonly used as a diagnosis for autistic people who were considered to be 'mildly' autistic or 'high-functioning'.

The term is derived from Hans Asperger, a prominent figure in early autism research who was involved in the Nazi regime and euthanasia programme. Therefore, although some people still identify as having Asperger's syndrome, the term can be offensive to some autistic people.

Remember to ask your employee what terminology they prefer

Person first vs Identity first

There is also some debate as to whether identity first language such as 'autistic person' or person first language such as 'person with autism' should be used. Person first language aims to put the person before their condition or disability. However, by separating the person from their autism it can be perceived to suggest that autism is distinct from what gives the person value or worth.

Therefore, identity first language is commonly preferred in the autistic community as it highlights that autism is an inherent part of an individual's identity, and that the person cannot be separated from their autism.

Harmful Misconceptions

Everyone is a bit autistic

This phrase can be well meaning, intending to communicate that an autistic person is not alone. However, it can come across as trivialising the difficulties autistic people experience. It suggests a lack of understanding or that a person is not willing to make changes to accommodate those who are autistic.

Autistic people are anti-social or lack empathy

Many autistic people find social settings challenging but this does not mean that they do not have the same desire to build friendships and relationships. Social environments such as pubs, shopping centres or offices are often noisy, have bright lighting and are crowded which can cause anxiety for people with sensory difficulties. Some autistic people also find body language, sarcastic language or common phrases difficult to understand and may present themselves differently in terms of their eye contact, speech patterns or body language.

Autism only occurs in children, or men

Autism is a lifelong condition and many autistic people are not diagnosed until adulthood. Autistic people are more likely to be gender diverse than the general population and identify as transgender, nonbinary or gender-queer. Although autism is more commonly diagnosed in men than women, women are more likely to 'mask' their autism meaning they try to hide any autistic traits. This leads to later diagnosis and greater risk of burnout.

Autism is caused by vaccines

There was a common myth that the MMR vaccine had significant links to autism. However, many research studies have been performed that demonstrate that there are no links between vaccinations and autism.

All autistic people have a special talent

Some autistic people do have specific interests which they dedicate a lot of time and attention to. However, the idea that all autistic people are incredibly intelligent world leading scientists as presented in many films and tv shows is incorrect. Every autistic person has different strengths and weaknesses.

Reasonable Adjustments

The Equality Act 2010 made it a legal requirement for employers to make 'reasonable adjustments' for disabled employees such as autistic employees. Whilst some autistic people are well aware of the adjustments they need to succeed in the workplace, those that are newly diagnosed may lack the information they require to make an informed decision on reasonable adjustments. Therefore, the suggestions given below aim to educate employers on some of the adjustments that may be appropriate and useful for autistic employees.

Not all of these adjustments will be useful to every autistic person. The most important thing is clear, open and honest communication with your autistic employees to ensure that the appropriate strategies are put in place for them to reach their full potential.

Sensory environment

Many autistic people are sensitive to noises, lighting, touches, smells or other sensory features. The environment that a person with sensory difficulties is in has a significant impact on productivity, fatigue and anxiety levels and so it is important to change sensory aspects that are having a negative affect on an employee.

- Allow short breaks to a quiet location
- Desk partitions
- Seated away from the kitchen
- No hot desking
- Lowered lighting levels in certain places
- Desks near windows for additional light
- Noise cancelling headphones
- Flexible working hours and locations

Autistic people can be acutely (hyper) sensitive or under (hypo) sensitive to any combination of their senses

In some cases it is not possible to carefully control the working environment, especially in more open plan office settings. In these cases it can be useful for an employee to have the opportunity to work from home, where they can more readily control their physical environment and remove any distractions.

Reasonable Adjustments

Social interaction and communication

Some autistic people struggle to integrate into the social aspect of the workplace. Most office environments have a number of unspoken rules which can be difficult for some autistic people to pick up on. Additionally, some autistic people use different speech, eye contact, and body language patterns. Some autistic people also interpret language very literally, and struggle with open questions, sarcastic language or turns of phrases.

Office mentor

For new employees, an office mentor who regularly meets with the new employee over the first few weeks can be greatly beneficial. They can answer any question and help to explain any of the unspoken workplace rules. It can be especially helpful if the mentor is from a different department to the one the new employee is in, as this allows them to ask questions they may not feel comfortable asking their manager.

Training to colleagues

Training colleagues and other employees within an organisation in disability awareness can improve understanding and compassion towards autistic colleagues. However, it is important not to disclose a person's disability to other colleagues without permission.

Peer support

In larger organisations, it is important to provide the resources for disabled or neurodivergent employees to establish a peer support network. Many people find it easier to talk to colleagues who experience similar challenges to themselves, rather than their line manager or HR department due to concerns about lack of understanding or affecting career development. A peer support network, led by the neurodivergent or disabled community, allows employees to have a platform to share strategies and experiences with others and to discuss solutions that have been beneficial to them. It can also highlight if there are more company wide issues which may be resolved through additional awareness training for other staff members.

Reasonable Adjustments

Management and Instruction

It is useful to establish an employee's preferred method of communication. Regular unexpected phone calls can cause anxiety for some autistic people, who may prefer emails, whilst others may find emails lack the opportunity to ask clarifying questions. For some, this is due to a strong preference in processing and implementing either verbal or written instructions.

In either case, instructions should be clear, and concise, and given in an environment that the employee feels comfortable in. Assistive technologies such as screen reading software, recording devices to playback instructions or providing information on a coloured background can also be useful.

Feedback should be given on a regular basis, even if the employee is performing well. Many autistic people have anxiety about their performance and so additional reassurance that tasks are being completed correctly is useful. Feedback should be clear, direct and constructive.

Organisation and Planning

Many autistic people value structure and routine as unexpected changes can lead to increased anxiety. Therefore, if there are any changes to work schedules, tasks, or locations these should be communicated as far in advance as possible. If changes to routine are planned - for example, training or team building away days, or covering for absent colleagues - these should be discussed with the employee as soon as possible to allow them the opportunity to raise any anxieties they may have and to discuss how these could be reduced.

Whilst some autistic people have excellent attention to detail, this can sometimes lead to organisational challenges, especially where perfecting a task is seen as important. Wall planners highlighting deadlines, meetings and tasks, daily to-do lists and deadline reminders can be useful to some employees.

Checklist

This checklist aims to start a conversation between the employer and employee to raise areas of potential difficulty and consider some adjustments that may be useful.

Diagnosis	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- What terminology does the employee prefer?- Does the employee want their colleagues to be made aware of their diagnosis, and if so can some autism awareness training be arranged?
Sensory environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Can the light levels, desk location or noise levels of the office be modified?- Can the employee work from home when they feel they need additional control over their environment?- Can assistive technology such as noise cancelling headphones be provided?- Can the employee work flexible hours to avoid some of the sensory difficulties they may face?
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Does the employee prefer written or verbal communication?- How regular will check-ins be, and who should initiate their organisation?- Would an office mentor/buddy be useful, and if so how should they be contacted?- Is there a peer support network available to the employee?
Organisation and planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- How much notice is useful and practical for the employee in the event of necessary work schedule changes or task changes?- Is any assistive software useful to the employee?- What support is required to keep on track of targets?
Other support	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Check in with the employee on a regular basis to see if there are any other problems arising.- Ask if there is anything else the employee feels would be useful in terms of reasonable adjustments

Quotes from Employers

Employers are often cautious of hiring those with ‘hidden disabilities’ including autism as they may feel that they will need additional support, management or resources. Whilst it is true that management styles, office environments and work structure may need to be adapted, these misconceptions about the potential costs of employing autistic people exclude employees who may be the best person for a particular position.

We asked employer’s about their experiences of employing autistic people. It is important to remember that these quotes are about their experiences with particular employees. All autistic people are different and have a variety of strengths and weaknesses. Whilst some may have excellent attention to detail and time management, others may struggle with this but perform well at creative tasks. Despite these individual differences, the results from employers were overwhelmingly positive.

‘I have found autistic employees to be some of the hardest working staff I have. They have been dedicated to the role and have thrived with the independence offered.’

‘A colleague of mine hired a man in his twenties who was autistic. He found aspects of his role challenging, and accommodations had to be made for him to be able to work as part of the team, however he was valued and well liked amongst his peers’

‘Always positive - Quirky, but very hard working - our experience is that they have been very thorough in their approach to work’

‘We have only had positive experiences with autistic employees. We have found that their attention to detail is superb and they are conscientious and thorough workers’

‘I directly employ autistic people who provide expertise and lived experience that adds great value to the work of our team’

Getting Support

Where to find help in supporting your autistic employees:

- The National Autistic society is the UK's largest charity for autistic people and their families. They provide detailed advice and guidance on their website on a range of topics including guidance for employers.
<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/employment/employing-autistic-people>
- Disability Sheffield provide training and support for employers enabling them to become inclusive and diverse workplaces.
<https://www.disabilitysheffield.org.uk/training>
- Scope are the disability equality charity in England and Wales and provide detailed information on reasonable adjustment requirements
<https://www.scope.org.uk/advice-and-support/reasonable-adjustments-at-work/>
- Wellness action plans are a personalised tool which outline some of the causes of feeling unwell at work and how this can be addressed. Mind provide practical templates which aim to open up the dialogue with a manager or supervisor to help understand the needs of their employee
<https://www.mind.org.uk/workplace/mental-health-at-work/taking-care-of-your-staff/employer-resources/wellness-action-plan-download/>

Where to find support if you are an autistic person:

- Sheffield Occupational Health Advisory Service (SOHAS) provide confidential advice and support to people whose health is adversely affected by their job including autistic employees
<https://www.sohas.co.uk/>
- The Autism Centre for Supported Employment aims to help autistic people find work and get the most out of their experience.
<https://ac4se.org/>

About the Authors

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Holly Rowland is an autistic PhD student at the University of Sheffield. Holly created this booklet as part of a joint collaboration between the Sheffield Autism Research Lab (ShARL) and the Sheffield Occupational Health Advisory service (SOHAS).

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Dr Megan Freeth is the Director of the Sheffield Autism Research Lab (ShARL) and a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Sheffield. The goal of ShARL is to have a positive impact on the lives of individuals diagnosed with autism spectrum conditions (ASC) via advancements in research. The scope of ShARL's research is broad and includes neuroimaging studies aimed at gaining insight into neural and cognitive divergence and applied studies aimed at improving understanding of the lived experience of ASC.

Nick Pearson

Nick Pearson is the Manager at the Sheffield Occupational Health Advisory Service (SOHAS). SOHAS provide advice services in primary care to employees who live or work in Sheffield and feel that their health is being adversely affected by their work, aiming to ensure that people can stay in their jobs.

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