

Supporting trainees with Autism



Information about Autism

Taken from The Autistic Society website <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/employment/employing-autistic-people>

What is autism?

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects how people perceive the world and interact with others. Autistic people see, hear and feel the world differently to other people. If you are autistic, you are autistic for life; autism is not an illness or disease and cannot be 'cured'. Often people feel being autistic is a fundamental aspect of their identity. Autism is a spectrum condition. All autistic people share certain difficulties but being autistic will affect them in different ways.

Autism in the workplace

Many autistic people have a variety of sometimes exceptional skills, that enable them to thrive in roles ranging from sales assistant to computer programmer, and journalist to statistician, to name just a few.

However, autistic people are often disadvantaged when it comes to getting and keeping a job because of other people's lack of understanding and support.

Autistic employees may need some, often simple, support within the workplace. As well as their individual strengths and talents, autistic candidates often demonstrate above-average skills in some or all of the following areas:

- high levels of concentration
- reliability, conscientiousness and persistence
- accuracy, close attention to detail and the ability to identify errors
- technical ability, such as in IT
- detailed factual knowledge and an excellent memory

Many workplace interactions - particularly conversational type meetings - rely heavily on social and communication skills, so autistic candidates may well struggle. They may face challenges with:

- understanding body language and maintaining appropriate eye contact
- knowing how to start, maintain and end conversations or answers to questions
- judging how much information to give – especially if questions are open
- thinking in abstract ways, or considering 'what if?' scenarios
- varying their tone of voice and finding the appropriate level of formality.

Making reasonable adjustments is essential to allow people with autism to display their skills and competencies fully. The adjustments you make will depend on the situation. Here are some suggested adaptations you could make:

- providing information about what will be discussed in meetings in advance - up to two days before
- providing clear and concise written and visual information, including;
- directions or maps and photographs
- clear instructions for procedures, e.g. sign in at front desk where you will be collected by (name of the person)
- providing the names of the people who the trainee will be working with and information about what their role will be
- providing clear timetables and calendars of events
- providing a quiet and calm space for the trainee to work when not teaching, if possible
- avoiding general questions (e.g. 'Tell me about yourself')
- asking specific questions
- avoiding hypothetical or abstract questions, e.g. 'How do you think you'll cope with working if there are lots of interruptions?' A better question would be 'Think back to your last job. Can you tell us how you coped with your work when people interrupted you?'
- telling the trainee if they are talking too much as they may find it hard to judge how much information you need
- prompting the trainee in order to extract all the relevant information and gather sufficient information
- being aware that the trainee may interpret language literally

- being aware that eye contact may be fleeting or prolonged, depending on the individual
- providing adequate breaks during long meetings and prompting the trainee to take a break when needed
- allowing and prompting the trainee to refer to any written notes that they have made

Understanding your autistic employee

"I have difficulty picking up social cues and difficulty in knowing what to do when I get things wrong." Autistic person

If an autistic person seems aloof or uninterested in talking to colleagues, or often says the 'wrong' thing, remember (and, where appropriate, remind colleagues) that this is probably unintentional and is likely to be due to communication challenges.

If an autistic person tries too hard to fit in and irritates colleagues by seeming to interrupt a conversation, be patient, and explain the boundaries if necessary. Other staff may also need reminding that their attitudes may have a strong impact on the job performance of their autistic colleague.

If an autistic person becomes anxious for any reason, try to find out what is causing the problem. One-to-one sessions are probably the best situation for doing this. You may need to think laterally. For example, the stress may not be caused by a difficulty in the job but by a colleague not being explicit in their instructions, by things not working efficiently (such as a computer crashing), or by difficulties in getting to their work. Trying to think around the immediate issue may help, as well as supportively asking the employee specific (though not invasive) questions to try to get to the root of the problem.

There may be occasions where problems do arise for an autistic person, particularly in social interactions, where communication can break down. If you become aware of any of these problems, try to deal with them swiftly and tactfully, and make colleagues aware of the potential for misunderstanding.

Your autistic staff member may also have some challenges in adapting their existing skills and knowledge to new tasks or environments. This can make the work environment hard and may cause misunderstandings among other staff, particularly as autism is an invisible condition. They may misconstrue the person's behaviour as rude, insensitive or unfriendly. However, the good news is that there are plenty of simple ways to make sure that the person has the support they need and to ensure good positive working relationships.

Top tips

Clarify expectations of the job

You may need to be more explicit about your expectations for an autistic member of staff. As well as the job description, you need to explain the etiquette and unwritten rules of the workplace. Make it clear that any adaptations for them in the workplace are there to help them keep doing their job well, not because they are not good enough.

Make sure instructions are concise and specific

Try to give your employee clear instructions right from the start about exactly how to carry out each task, from start to finish, as this will lay the foundations for good working practices. Don't assume the person will infer your meaning from informal instructions – for example, rather than saying 'Give everybody a copy of this', say 'Make three photocopies of this, and give one each to Sam, Mary and Ahmed'. You may also choose to provide written instructions. It can be helpful to ask the person to repeat back instructions, so you are sure they have understood.

Ensure the work environment is well-structured

Some autistic people need a fairly structured work environment. You can help by working with them to prioritise activities, organising tasks into a timetable for daily, weekly and monthly activities, and breaking larger tasks into small steps. Some people will appreciate precise information about start and finish times, and help getting into a routine with breaks and lunches.

Provide sensitive but direct feedback

Autistic people often find it difficult to pick up on social cues, so make sure your feedback is honest, constructive and consistent. If they complete 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 some autistic people may have low self-esteem or experience of being bullied, so ensure that any criticism is sensitive, and give positive feedback wherever appropriate.

Provide reassurance in stressful situations

Autistic people can be quite meticulous, and can become anxious if their performance is not perfect. This means they may become stressed in a situation such as an IT failure. You can help by giving concrete solutions to these situations – for example, by explaining "If the photocopier breaks, use the one on the third floor." Similarly, reassure them that if they occasionally arrive late due to transport problems or other unpreventable factors, this is not a problem. Your employee may benefit from having a mentor or buddy in the workplace – an empathetic colleague who they can go to if they are feeling stressed, anxious or confused.

Support your staff member to prepare for changes

Give information about changes to the workplace or tasks well in advance.

Ask about sensory distractions

Autistic employees sometimes benefit from things like screens around their desk, noise-cancelling headphones, or their desk being in the corner.

Help other staff to be more aware

If your autistic employee consents to their condition being disclosed, then providing colleagues with information and guidance on autism can benefit everyone. Sometimes the employee may find it helpful to write a document for other staff explaining what their colleagues can do to support them.

You may also find these resources helpful

BBC Radio 4 programme 'Room 5' – author of the Geek Girl series of books, Holly Smale, talks about being diagnosed with Autism aged 39 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m001dn5s>

Blog <https://www.neuroteachers.com/post/my-experiences-as-a-neurodivergent-teacher>

Article - <https://www.aocjobs.com/news-detail/proud-to-be-autistic-how-to-succeed-as-an-autistic-teacher>

Diverse Educators - Neurodiversity Toolkit <https://www.diverseeducators.co.uk/neurodiversity-toolkit/>