

# Neurodiversity in the workplace

A guide for working with employees with Autism



## Autism and employment

According to the Office for National Statistics, autistic people are the least likely to be in work than any other disabled group.

According to, a Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics, these employment statistics show that around half of disabled people (52.1%) aged 16 to 64 years in the UK were employed in 2020 compared with around 8 in 10 (81.3%) of non-disabled people. Of that group, just 21.7% of autistic people were in employment.

It is estimated that 1 in 100 people have autism in the UK, meaning that out of a 67 million population, between 670,000 and 700,00 have autism.

## What is Autism?

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects how an individual communicates with and relates to others. It also affects their understanding of the world around them. The condition of Autism is based on a spectrum, meaning that, while all people with autism share certain difficulties, the condition can range from slight to severe, affecting people with autism in very different ways.

Some people live relatively independent lives however, others may have accompanying learning disabilities and need a lifetime of specialist support. People with autism experience three main areas of difficulty (referred to often as the 'triad of impairments'). These are social interaction, social communication, and social imagination.

Many with autism have sensory difficulties, meaning they can be over or under-sensitive to certain senses such as: sights, sounds, smells, touches, or tastes. Some sounds or bright lights, for example, can cause extreme anxiety and sometimes even pain.

## Employing people with Autism



### Why employ someone with autism?

People with autism can make highly effective and valued employees. As is the case with most employees, it's important to match a person's skillset to the requirements needed by the post.

Many with autism have special interests, which can lead to them becoming highly skilled and knowledgeable in a certain topics. They will often pursue their interests passionately and tenaciously with consistency and devotion.

This can lead to them gaining a vast and detailed knowledge of a subject – something which employers can sometimes capitalise on and can overall, benefit the company. Common examples of this are a passion for computers or bookkeeping leading to employment in computing or finance or a detailed eye and artistic passion which can do very well in creative industries.

People with autism are often very focused and have considerable skills in specific areas. Some transferable skills include attention to detail, a methodical approach, strong research skills, good long-term memory, and excellent record-keeping. This guide contains a summary of the types of adjustments you could make when recruiting and employing someone with autism.

# Making adjustments when recruiting and employing someone with autism

Although people with autism have many skills and interests, getting a job at all can be hard. This can be due to lack of adjustments in the recruitment process or even discrimination. This is despite the fact that they have a great deal to offer employers. Being open to making adjustments in the recruitment process can make the journey of applying for jobs much more accessible for people with autism.

## Job advertisements and specifications

Carefully consider the key skills needed for a vacancy and make sure these are written. Jargon-free ads, descriptions, and person specifications are much more accessible and easier for those who have autism to comprehend and make sense of. Don't add extra requirements if they are not needed for the job role, this can put people with autism off from applying. Avoid acronyms and idioms in the job description.

## Application forms

If you don't already, try to include a section on the job application so that the person applying can provide information regarding any adjustments they need during the recruitment process and in the workplace. This is to help them overcome potential barriers or disadvantages.

## Equal opportunities

Ask job applicants to complete a separate (to the application form) confidential monitoring form. This is good practice as you can provide a tick-list of disabilities on your form. Make sure to add autism as a separate category, as it is not a learning disability or a mental health problem.

## Job interviews

Interviews can be very stressful for most of us, especially for people living with autism. Anxiety can surface around difficulties with communication, sensory issues, and the nervousness of meeting someone new in an unfamiliar place for the first time all present a challenge.

Try to let successful applicants know who will be interviewing them in advance and whether there will be a panel (names and job titles). Further information on where the interview will be held and what they expect to happen during the interview can be very helpful. The more information you can provide, the more they will be able to prepare and have a less stressful experience. It is also best practice to ask the interviewee if they need any adjustments to the room, for example, lighting.

## Key adjustments you can make in the recruitment process

During an interview, it's important to adjust the wording of questions and to also give candidates with autism an opportunity to demonstrate their ability. Below are our top tips.

- **Avoid idioms and acronyms**, such as 'ballpark figure', 'BAU', or 'cast your mind back', as many people with autism interpret language literally and won't understand what you mean.
- **Avoid hypothetical questions**, such as "Where do you want to be in five years?" this can be very difficult for people with autism to answer, as they may find it impossible to project themselves into the future.
- **Open-ended questions can be problematic**, a person with autism may find it difficult to talk about their experiences. They may not understand the concept of 'selling themselves', and will simply tell the truth factually, rather than elaborating or expanding on their good points.
- **Be clear and concise in the interview**, ask for clear concrete examples, together with a work trial or test may be a better way to test a candidate's skills and suitability for the job.
- **Allow the candidate to be accompanied**, this can help someone with autism to be assisted by someone who can rephrase questions or duties to make them easier to understand. It can also help the candidate to feel more comfortable.
- **Candidates may also benefit from written tests**. Provide extra time to complete written tests. This should comprise short questions and can be a more efficient way of seeing if a candidate is a right fit for your company.

These allowances could be regarded as 'reasonable adjustments' under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

## How to support employees with Autism at work



### Why employ someone with autism?

Making simple adjustments at work can provide a person with autism with the environment and support they need to hit the ground running at their job. The type and level of support needed depending on the employee's specific needs.

- Selecting a colleague to act as a mentor to an employee with autism, and help them with any issues that may come up as well as advocating on their behalf if necessary
- Bring in help from external support organisations that offer job mentoring, coaching, and general and specific job assistance to people with autism
- Arrange general and specific autism awareness training for staff and colleagues who work with the employee(s) with autism
- Use a career coach to help you and the employee establish a successful employment partnership.

## Management and Autism

Support from a great manager is the key to successful employment for most people. For the employee with autism and the employer, effective communication is essential to this support. Communication strategies can be some of the following:

- Don't make assumptions
- Use clear and direct explanations
- Give detailed instructions for tasks
- Be clear about the expectations of the employee
- Avoid figurative speech and idioms
- Show respect for differences
- Use written and oral instructions
- Check that the employee with autism understands
- Hold regular one-to-one meetings for feedback and monitoring
- Make sure that the person is involved in the team
- Give one-to-one training rather than group training
- Raising staff awareness of the employee with autism's particular strengths, difficulties, and needs

Many of these strategies are great for managing any team but will especially contribute towards a successful employment experience for a person with autism.