



"Tapping The Hidden Talent Pool"

What is Autism?

Autism is a lifelong Neurological difference that impacts how a person will think, behave, communicate, socially interact, and perceive the world around them. People with Autism will often see, hear, and perceive the world differently to those who are Neurotypical which is seen as the global cognitive or Neuro normative way of thinking, behaving, communicating, and socially interacting. Some people with autism will often say that at times fitting into society can be overwhelming.

This can be particularly the case when trying to communicate with other people. Bear in mind that over half of our communication is non-verbal. So, a person with autism may not be able to tell that from your facial expressions that you are annoyed. Perhaps even the use of your hands might be an indicator that you are disengaged from the conversation. Yet, for some people with Autism these non-verbal social cues that can be difficult to understand and de-code.

It is important to remember that Autism is a spectrum difference and although many people with autism will have similar characteristics we are all uniquely diverse. The age-old saying is once you have met one person with autism you have met one person with autism and that is important to remember. For anyone seeking to get a medical diagnosis of autism. You will have to have experienced difficulties with social interaction and communication and repetitive patterns of behaviours and interests. A medical diagnosis of Autism from a Neurologist or Neuropsychiatrist can be given from the age of 4 upwards when autism traits start to present themselves. It is also important to recognise that with average waiting lists in most countries for a diagnosis been upwards of 5 years many people who suspect they may have autism are choosing to self-diagnose. It is important that we respect a person's personal preferences and whether they have a medical or self-diagnosis should make no difference in the support that they can access in the workplace.

Key Statistics

- 1 in 100 children globally have autism according to The World Health Organisation.
- 75 million people globally have autism which is 1% of the global population.
- 40% of Adults with autism have never been employed.
- 1 in 10 children with autism also have ADHD.
- 85% of people with Autism in the USA are unemployed.
- 1 in 6 children with autism are nonverbal and cannot communicate using spoken language.

Workplace Challenges

Autism employment rates globally are among the lowest of all the Neurological differences with the average employment globally for people with Autism being around the 20% mark in countries which report data on autism employment rates. It is important to note that people with autism in the workplace will struggle in different areas and in some instances some employees with autism will experience little to no difficulties in the workplace. Below is a list of some of the challenges that a person with autism might experience in the workplace but please note this is not an exhaustive list:

- People with autism will often interpret language in a literal manner. This is known as black and white thinking. So, they may struggle with sarcasm, idioms, and jokes in the workplace.
- As human beings half our communication is nonverbal so a person with autism might struggle with facial expressions, hand gestures and other nonverbal social cues.
- Employees with autism often prefer to be autonomous workers as working in teams and the communication and social interaction that is associated with teams can be difficult for some employees with autism.
- Employees with autism in some instances might come across as inappropriate in certain social situations. Often this may present itself as rude or blunt behaviour towards others which is often a coping mechanism for when they may feel uncomfortable, not understood, or uncomfortable in that social setting.
- Difficulties with understanding the thoughts, opinions and perspectives of others which is commonly known as The Theory of Mind which cognitively regulates our communications and social interactions as human beings.
- Challenges with sudden change and the appearance of rigid and inflexible thought processes and ways of working.

- Some people with autism may struggle with processing speeds when learning new tasks and might struggle to pick up a task at the same pace as other colleagues.
- They may hyperfocus on a task that is particularly enjoyable (note this can be a strength in a lot of instances) but struggle to transition to new tasks during the working day.
- Sensory overload based on our stimuli of touch, taste, sound, and smell. This may lead to challenges with auditory processing, overstimulation caused by fluorescent lighting, overbearing canteen smells, strong perfume smells and another employee perhaps touching them on the shoulder unexpectedly can all lead to heightened stress and in some instances autistic meltdowns.
- The hidden curriculum of the modern office which regulates the unwritten, unspoken rules of the workplace can be like navigating a minefield for some employees with autism. This is because they may engage in a conversation which is socially inappropriate or unwittingly cause offence through the language they use. People with autism will often have a strong sense of justice and prefer honesty and openness and often the politics of organisations do not work in the way people with autism expect them to.

Workplace Accommodations

However, workplaces need not be places where people with autism cannot thrive and be successful, increasingly more and more organisations are implementing workplace accommodations for Neurodivergent people. The reasoning being that accommodations for Neurodivergent employees can also benefit all employees in the organisation regardless of whether they are Neurodivergent or not. Below we have shared a list of some of the common workplace accommodations that can support Neurodivergent employees in the workplace. Please note this list is not exhaustive:

- Natural light for Neurodivergent employees who are light sensitive will often create a more comfortable working environment.
- Consider fixed desk spaces in quiet areas of your offices. Hot desking seldom works for employees with autism.
- Turning off noisy office equipment such as photocopiers and computers can help remove distractions in the workplace.
- Allow regular breaks between tasks to allow employees with autism to emotionally re-regulate. Transitioning between tasks during the working day can be difficult for some employees with autism.

- Never force a person with autism to make eye contact with you. Perhaps suggest looking at a more neutral part of the face such as the nose or facial cheeks.
- Provide a company directory with employees across the business so that employees with autism and other Neurodivergent colleagues know who to contact when working on tasks or collaborating with other teams in your organisation.
- Provide clear instructions for tasks and be direct and concise with explanations. Avoid jargon and abbreviated terms as much as possible as some people with autism interpret language in a literal way. Often known as black and white thinking.
- Where necessary provide a list of the expectations of a project, such as the goals and objectives to help an employee with autism understand the bigger picture of the work they are doing.
- Schedule sufficient time for an employee with autism to complete a specific task before transitioning onto other tasks.
- Always address change in the workplace as far in advance as possible as many employees with autism thrive of structure, routine, and certainty. Explain why change is necessary and implement as far in advance as possible.

Further Reading

- An Asperger's Leader's Guide to Living & Leading Change - Rosalind A. Bergmann & Will Napier
- Autism in Adults – Luke Beardon
- Women with Autism: Accepting and Embracing Autism Spectrum Disorder as You Move Towards an Authentic Life – Claire Jack Ph.D.
- Autism Working: A Seven-Stage Plan to Thriving at Work – Michelle Garnett & Tony Attwood
- [Autism - NHS](#)
- [What is autism](#)
- [Autism Spectrum Disorder - National Institute of Mental Health \(NIMH\)](#)
- [Autism](#)