



Organisational Guidance & Advice for supporting autistic employees in the workplace

Introduction

In the UK according to research from the Office of National Statistics only 21.7% of people with autism are in full time employment and when grouped together with those in part-time employment only 37% of people with autism are in some form of employment in the United Kingdom. In Australia only 40% of people with autism are in employment. In the United States 49% of 25yr olds with autism have never been employed according to research compiled by Autism

Speaks. People with autism often face considerable barriers to acquiring employment such as employers failing to make reasonable adjustments at all stages of the employee lifecycle process and a lack of organisational knowledge and acceptance of autism in the workplace.

Who we are?

My name is Oliver Fenghour and I am the Founding Director of Advance: The Disability Consultants which is a specialist autism consultancy business. I have Asperger's Syndrome and I was diagnosed on the autistic spectrum when I was 10 years old.

Advance: The Disability Consultants was founded in the Autumn of 2019 primarily in response to my own personal and professional experiences of the workplace. I worked for organisations some of whom understood and accepted my differences of being autistic. However, other organisations saw my autism as a problem and never made allowances or provided appropriate reasonable adjustments for me in the workplace. I am an expert by experience in the autism space and I also have extensive professional experience having worked in recruitment and learning and development whilst also having a chartered HR qualification in UK employment law.

Advance: The Disability Consultants is a specialist autism consultancy business which works with organisations globally to help them become autism confident employers. We provide training, consultancy, and partnerships to help organisations acquire the confidence, knowledge, and skills necessary to recruit, support and develop autistic talent within their workplaces. We live by our organisational values of Achieve, Change & Empower, and aim to help organisations see the considerable business benefits and positive attributes that hiring autistic talent can bring to their organisation.

What is autism?

Autism is a neurological difference where people on the spectrum think, communicate, socially interact, and behave differently to their peers and wider society. Autism is seen as a lifelong development disability which impacts in the UK around 1 in 100 people. In the United States the Centre for Disease Control estimates that around 1 in 54 children are on the autistic spectrum. In Australia it is estimated that around 1 in 150 Australians are on the autistic spectrum or 0.7% of the population.

Autism is seen as a spectrum condition because although many autistic people share similar characteristics, they are also different from one another. The age old saying goes once you have met one person with autism you have met one person with autism.

Furthermore, many autistic people may also have other interlinked differences or disabilities linked to their autism such as ADHD, anxiety disorders, Dyspraxia & Dyslexia.

There are many differing interpretations of autism. The World Health Organisation have classed it as an intellectual development disability. It has been previously classed by International Governments as a mental health condition. Officially, autism is an invisible disability but many people with autism do not class themselves as disabled. However, because of the impact autism and other disabilities may have on an individual's life it could be classed as a disability.

Autistic people can make an enormous difference to organisations if they are given the opportunity to do so. They might see details others miss, they may bring innovative ideas and out of the box thinking to the table that other employees cannot do. The chances are that if given an opportunity to do a job they are knowledgeable and passionate about they will be a considerable asset to an organisation.

However, research from the National Autistic Society in the United Kingdom suggests that 60% of organisations lack the confidence, knowledge, and skills necessary to implement reasonable adjustments for autistic people in the workplace. This sadly means that autistic people are significantly underrepresented in the global workplace, with research from Microsoft estimating that around 80% of the seventy million autistic people globally are unemployed.

Yet, with the right training and support for both the organisation and the autistic employee in the workplace autistic people's lives can be truly transformed.

Talking about autism in the workplace

Autistic people talk about themselves and their autism in uniquely diverse ways so as an organisation it is important to ask the autistic employee how does their autism define them and what their preferences are. The chances are that every autistic employee in your organisation will use different terminology to describe their autism to you. They might use terms such as: “autistic person” or “person with autism” or “I have Asperger’s” etc.

It is important that when we talk about autism in the workplace we avoid terminology such as illness, disease, or condition which all have negative connotations as words. Autism is not a mental health condition or illness; it is a lifelong and differing way of experiencing and processing the world around you. Instead as an organisation focus on the types of reasonable adjustments that autistic people need to thrive in your organisation.

When discussing autism in your organisation, we would encourage the use of the term ‘Neurodiversity’ which encompasses ‘neurotypical’ individuals those without autism and other neurological differences and ‘neurodivergent’ individuals those with autism and other neurological differences such as dyspraxia and dyslexia.

When hiring autistic talent into your organisation think about the considerable business benefits that they can bring to your workplace. They are problem solvers, creative thinkers, they possess an ability to see details others might miss, they might have an intense hyperfocus which allows them to deliver projects to a higher standard than other employees in your organisation. Hiring autistic talent is not just the right thing to do it is the smart thing to do.

Try to avoid using terminology such as ‘high-functioning’ or ‘low functioning.’ Instead focus on the individual support requirements that autistic employee will need in your organisation and remember not all autistic employees will need the same reasonable adjustments in your workplace.

Do not make assumptions or judgements on what interests your autistic employees have. Get to know them personally on an individual-by-individual basis. What makes them tick? Why do they enjoy working for your organisation? What are their motivations for coming to work? What are their strengths and weaknesses? What are their interests and hobbies outside of work?

Guidance & Advice for employers

This guidance section contains key information for organisations, including HR, Recruitment & other organisational functions who are supporting autistic employees in their workplace. The guidance

section will take your organisation through the end-end employee lifecycle process for recruiting, supporting, and developing autistic talent in your organisation.

Having support and working in an accepting and inclusive environment are crucial if an autistic employee is to thrive in your organisation. Employers can benefit from the unique talents and skills that autistic employees can bring to the workplace and as such this can help change the organisational culture where recruiting, developing, and supporting autistic talent in the workplace is the rule and not the exception.

Stage 1 – Invitation to interview – Our Advice

- Provide the candidate with the date, and time for the interview. Avoid where possible a day when the fire alarms are being assessed on site.
- State who they are meeting for the interview. The interviewers job roles, a little bit about themselves and a photo of what each interviewer looks like to put the autistic applicant at ease.
- If the interview is a face-to-face interview, state what building the interview will be in and a photo of the building to put the autistic applicant at ease. Try where possible to avoid changing the interview location, factoring in that sudden change can cause considerable stress and anxiety to an autistic person.
- If the interview is remote based, ensure that relevant information such as date, time and link to the meeting work and are provided to the candidate also ensure that any password to access the call are given to the candidate prior to interview. Also factor in that an autistic applicant might have a slower processing speed compared to neurotypical candidates
- Provide specific examples prior to interview of what questions will be asked during the interview process. This is not to give autistic applicants an advantage but to help them navigate the interview process, they may never have had a job interview but additionally they may be long-term unemployed or they struggle with sudden change which causes considerable anxiety and stress in unfamiliar environments such as job interviews.
- Stipulate in advance what the interview process will entail. Are there any tasks or assessments that the autistic applicant needs to complete as part of this process? Factor in giving them extra time for interview assessments. Clearly outline allotted timeframes for the interview, particularly if it is divided down into different sections. Factoring in time for a panel interview or an in-tray exercise as part of the interview process.

- Ensure that the interview is held in a room with incandescent lighting, particularly if the autistic applicant is light sensitive. Ensure that interview questions are direct and elicit the required response the hiring panel is expecting from the applicant. Avoid jargon, idioms, and hypothetical questions.
- Have a contingency plan in place for autistic applicants if they need any help on the day of the interview. Provide contact details for all members of the hiring panel or a contact in HR, Recruitment who can speak to the autistic applicant prior to the interview, on issues such as locating the building for the interview, so that the applicant does not feel alone or overwhelmed by the interview experience.

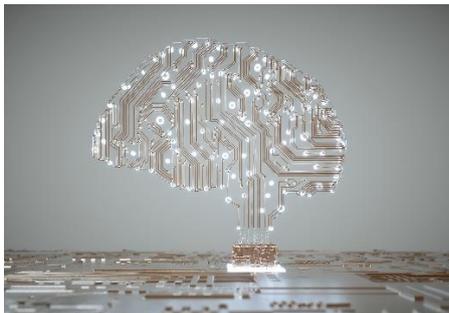
Stage 2 - About me – Our Advice

- Ensure that your CV and personal statement are up to date and relevant.
- Talk about your strengths and how they are relevant to this role.
- Talk about what your ideal job role looks like and how you would be successful in this role if successful.
- State what reasonable adjustments you need at both the interview stage and if successful at the employment stage.
- Practise example interviews with family and friends prior to the actual interview.

Stage 3 – Travelling to the interview & workplace – Our Advice

- When travelling to interview, assist the autistic applicant with information on where the nearest railway stations or car parks are to the building where the interview will be taking place. This could be in the form of photos or a map with your contact details on in the event that they are late or lose their way en route to the interview.
- Describe the outside of the building and entrance process. Is there an intercom, automatic doors, or other access requirements?
- Describe the entrance, lobby, or reception area. Is there an open plan workspace, direction to the lifts or multiple reception desks?
- Advise who the autistic applicant should speak to on arrival at your workplace. Is this security, reception, or someone else in your organisation?
- Advise what they need to say upon arrival at your workplace and where they need to be sent for the interview.

- What is the sign-in-process at your organisation is it a signing in book, is it digitised are there sensory adjustments provided for autistic applicants?
- Do you have a designated quiet zone for autistic applicants to wait, prior to interview? Factoring in that the autistic applicant might struggle with busy, noisy environments.
- What does the route to the interview room look like? Are there security barriers, lifts, stairs, are there noisy open plan office spaces, are there strong canteen smells which the autistic applicant might pass through en route to the interview room.



Understanding autism in the workplace

Autistic people are similar to those around them; they just have a few differences that you may not be able to see.



Social Interactions

Social interactions for autistic people can present a considerable challenge. They might have difficulty in understanding social rules, social expectations, and social interactions. This can include saying inappropriate things, interrupting others or being repetitive. Autistic people may come across as socially awkward, rude, blunt, or even arrogant in social interactions but often these are coping strategies to deal with situations that they find stressful and anxious. When working in your organisations they may need the social rules of the workplace explained to them and support put in place to help them socialise appropriately in your organisation. Autistic people may socially mask a lot of their autistic traits in a social setting to fit in, particularly if they worry that being seen as different will see them singled out for special treatment. This can be socially exhausting for an autistic person because they have to think about all aspects of socialising in a way that other people do not.



Communication

Autistic people may struggle to start and conclude conversation in an appropriate manner. Often autistic people might struggle to recognise other people's feelings and emotions by their facial expressions, tone of voice, body language and gestures. Factor in that when having a conversation with an autistic person that they might not be able to tell from the tone of your voice that you are angry or annoyed with them, that the tapping of your feet or looking away from them might indicate that you are in a hurry to get to a meeting. You might want to consider telling them that you will pick this conversation up later as they might lack the social cues and subtle hints that you cannot continue this conversation right now.



Routines and Repetitions

Autistic people thrive of structure, routine, and certainty. This can vary from eating the same cereal for breakfast or getting the same train to work every day. In the workplace autistic employees tend to be at their most content when in a set routine and structure. They will also thrive of doing repetitive tasks that other employees dislike doing. Yet, in the workplace there is not always a natural flow or order and sometimes autistic people might struggle as a consequence. Change in the workplace can be really difficult for a person on the autistic person to comprehend and if change is necessary, ensure that the change is managed as far in advance as possible.



Sensory Issues

Sensory issues can be a challenge for an Autistic employee in an office. The noise of an open-plan office can make it hard for them to concentrate and do their as effectively as other colleagues who

can often drown the background noise. Glary lighting in an office can cause issues for an Autistic employee with regards to concentration and being able to do their work effectively without getting headaches or repeatedly leaving their desk as a consequence of the lights. If office lights are too bright an Autistic employee might experience what is known as sensory overload and this can cause extreme irritability, restlessness, and discomfort. Similarly, acute sounds can also have the same sensory effect such as workers drilling outside the office or loud music being played or a loud office meeting going on in another room can all trigger a sensory overload. Additionally, certain fabrics, canteen smells or perfume smells may also trigger a sensory overload in an Autistic employee.



Business Benefits of Hiring Autistic Talent

- Attracting new and different talent
- Increase market share in your industry
- Enhancing corporate reputation
- Innovative ideas and ways of working to your organisation
- Higher retention rates and reduced employee turnover
- Improved productivity and morale



How to support autistic employees in the workplace

If autistic employment rates are to increase and autistic people are able to flourish in inclusive, supportive, working environments then organisations must implement the following recommendations:

Our Advice:

- Deliver regular, consistent & well-structured performance reviews.
- Give clear tasks, instructions and highlight what your expectations are.
- Get to know your autistic employees, strengths, weaknesses, motivations for working, interests etc.
- Assimilate them into your teams and the wider organisation.
- Give opportunities to ask questions and give clear, direct answers.
- Explain the unwritten, unspoken social rules of your organisation.
- Provide a workplace buddy or mentor to support them in your organisation.
- Be consistent in all aspects of your day-day dealing with autistic employees in your organisation.
- Provide a clear, concise support plan for the probationary period of their employment and beyond.
- Share (If consented to) their autism diagnosis with the wider team and organisation. The more people that are aware the more likely that knowledge and skills around autism in your workplace will grow.
- Understand what type of working environment best works for them. Is this an open-plan office, closed plan office or designated quiet zones?
- Allow for flexible working and hours as much as possible.
- Do not make assumptions or have misconceptions about autism in the workplace. Ensure that all teams in your organisation have autism training to a standard relevant to the level of knowledge required for their team. Emphasis placed on HR/Recruitment teams to have more specialist training.
- Ensure that reasonable adjustments are consistent, constantly reviewed and the managers implementing them know how to do so in a manner that is appropriate.
- Ensure that all line managers are confident and sufficiently knowledgeable to implement reasonable adjustments for all autistic employees in your organisation.
- Treat the autistic employee like you would any other employee. Never treat them as a disabled person or in a different manner to other employees in your organisation.

Useful Resources

Ayoa

What is Neurodiversity - Ayoa's Assistive Technology

Autism Alliance

<https://www.autism-alliance.org.uk/>

Autism Education Trust

<https://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/>

Mencap

<https://www.mencap.org.uk/learning-disability-explained/conditions/autism-and-aspergers-syndrome>

NHS

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/autism/>

The National Autistic Society

<https://www.autism.org.uk/about/what-is/asd.aspx>

The Neurodiverse Workplace: An Employer's Guide to Managing and Working with Neurodivergent Employees, Clients and Customers – Victoria Honeybourne

An Adult with an Autism Diagnosis: A Guide for the Newly Diagnosed – Gillian Drew

Connecting with the Autism Spectrum: How to talk, How to Listen, and Why You Should not Call It High-Functioning – Casey Remrov Vormer

We are Not Broken: Changing the Autism Conversation – Eric Garcia

Autism Working: A Seven-Stage Plan to Thriving at Work – Michelle Garnett & Tony Attwood



"Tapping The Hidden Talent Pool"

