

A Guide for Employers: Understanding and Supporting People with Autistic Spectrum Conditions

Making employment a positive experience for people living with autistic spectrum conditions and those they work alongside



**Derbyshire Autism
Partnership Board**

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Purpose of this booklet

This booklet has been written to support potential employers improve the level of understanding of autism within their organisations. The booklet highlights the barriers for autistic people seeking or maintaining employment, and makes suggestions as to how employers can make reasonable adjustments. It is appreciated that there are many terms used to describe people with conditions as defined on the autistic spectrum. The terms autism and autistic people will be used in this document to encompass all Autistic Spectrum Conditions (including Asperger's Syndrome).

What is Autism and the Autistic Spectrum?

“Autism is a lifelong development disorder which affects how a person communicates with, and relates to, other people. It also affects how they make sense of the world around them” – National Autistic Society

Many autistic people dislike the term ‘disorder’ and perhaps a better description would be ‘Autism is a lifelong developmental difference’.

Around 1% of population are believed to be autistic, which means that there are around 665,000 people living with autism in the UK. It is estimated there may be over 8712 people in Derbyshire County and 2,580 people in Derby City that are autistic. Everyone on the autistic spectrum is different and unique, but all share three core social difficulties:

- Social interaction
- Social communication
- Social imagination

As a result people on the autistic spectrum can struggle in social situations. For example they may:

- Find it hard to begin or carry on a conversation
- Not understand how far to stand from somebody else
- Find it difficult to make friends

Autistic people may also display restricted and/or repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities. For example they may:

- Develop an overwhelming interest in something
- Follow inflexible routines or rituals
- Make repetitive body movements
- Be hypersensitive to certain smells, tastes or sounds. Autism is not a mental health condition; however, due to the social difficulties that people living with autism face, many may suffer with mental ill health.

Autism is not a learning disability, however, around half of people with a learning disability are also diagnosed as having autism. Autistic people that do not have a learning disability may experience learning difficulties because of being autistic, for example, they may find it harder to structure tasks.

Awareness of autism in society is ok but understanding of the condition and the way the condition affects communication, sensory experience and behaviour, is not as good.

Too many myths about autism still exist, including the belief autistic people lack empathy or that every autistic person is the same.

There are neurological differences between autistic people and people who are viewed as 'normal'. Autism is an example of neurodiversity. Non autistic people are often referred to as 'neurotypical' by people within the autistic community. Some autistic people use these terms to explain and make sense of the neurological differences that exist between them.

Remember that:

‘If you have met one autistic person you have met one autistic person’”

How people with Autistic Spectrum Conditions add value to the workplace

Autistic people have many different talents and skills that will add value to companies and organisations.

Some of these talents and skills include:

Reliability, punctuality and loyalty

Certain types of autistic people are likely to be reliable employees and are proven to have the highest attendance rate of any other disability group within the workplace. It is also worth noting that other autistic people may have low attendance rates due to not having their needs met or co-morbid conditions such as anxiety or depression. Some may be late for work due to executive dysfunction skills, or inflexibility from the workplace.

Often, due to a desire to follow strict, rigid structures and routine, some autistic employees are unlikely to be late for work or deter from time limits, for example breaks and dinner hours. If they also have ADHD for example, they may often run late. Once the employee becomes familiar with their role, they are likely to stay in their job as many autistic people have a high degree of loyalty.

Honesty

Autistic people will often demonstrate higher degrees of honesty in the workplace than other employees. In addition, many autistic people can see areas for improvement in the work place due to their heightened level of attention to detail. This can have positive outcomes for the entire workforce.

Different and creative approaches to working

Autistic people often develop different and creative ways to carry out and complete their work. These different approaches can bring positive changes to their workplace.

Autistic people are often credited for their creative flair, making many individuals suitable for employment in a variety of fields such as

photography, art, drama and design.

High levels of concentration and commitment

People on the autistic spectrum can be very committed employees and apply maximum effort to all their work. They often demonstrate high levels of concentration when focusing on specific tasks and like to see tasks through to the end.

Resourcefulness and a logical way of thinking

Autistic people are often more likely to use a logical 'step by step' approach to dealing with problems. This means that they are less likely to rush a job, or miss any of the finer details.

Good working memory and knowledge around specialist areas

Autistic people can have the ability to remember and retain certain information, such as dates, statistics and facts. Many autistic people are considered to be 'experts' in their specialist areas of interest, having an in-depth knowledge or skills around the subject. This means they would be good candidates for jobs where these specialist skills and knowledge can be applied.



Respectful of rules and boundaries

Many autistic people like structure and routine in their lives, so it is important that employers are clear about expectations and boundaries.

Other skills that autistic people can bring to the table include high levels of concentration,

conscientiousness, persistence, accuracy, attention to detail and the ability to identify errors, and technical ability such as IT.

This means an autistic person may well be better at a particular job than someone who is not autistic. By gaining an understanding of autism, you can open up new possibilities for your organisation.

The above are just a handful of reasons why autistic people can make exceptional employees in a variety of different working environments and job roles. Autistic people should be recognised as 'assets' to the workforce, with skills that can be utilised.

Employing an autistic person demonstrates your organisations commitment to equality and diversity and shows a positive attitude to disabled people. Having a diverse workforce brings benefits to staff and business alike, and managers and colleagues often describe working with an autistic colleague as an enriching experience that encourages them to think more carefully about how they communicate, organise and prioritise their work.

Challenges and barriers in employment for autistic people

Despite the array of skills, knowledge, qualities and attributes that many autistic people possess, the field of employment can still be full of barriers and challenges that many people struggle to overcome.

Sometimes employers do not recognise the difficulties that these barriers pose for many autistic people. This may mean that employers are unintentionally (or purposely) restricting employment opportunities for autistic people. In most cases, the barriers can be removed, or at the very least, reduced, through making 'reasonable adjustments' when necessary. There are many minor adjustments that organisations can make to their processes that will help autistic candidates to apply for jobs, and enable them to demonstrate their skills as potential employees. Many of these adjustments may also benefit other candidates and enhance overall efficiency in recruitment.

What are reasonable adjustments?

Reasonable adjustments are changes to the workplace or employment process, which enable disabled people carry out their job to the best of their ability.

Some examples of reasonable adjustments may include:

- Allowing a guide dog into the workplace for an employee who is visually impaired
- Enabling an employee with mobility issues to work on the ground floor
- Providing a disabled employee with a disabled parking space in the car park

Pre-employment challenges and barriers

For autistic people, the barriers they face while looking for employment can be challenging.

Challenges can present at different stages of the pre-employment process and some of these are discussed below:

Finding a 'suitable' job

Online job searches can often produce results that are misleading for autistic people, making it difficult for them to know whether the job is suitable. In addition, if information is vague. For example, withholding the name of the organisation or working hours or salary, can be very off-putting as it could create uncertainty.

Job descriptions

Job descriptions often include skills that are not essential for the job to be carried out effectively. Qualities such as 'excellent communication skills' or 'good team player' are often included as default skills, even if they are not necessary – and many autistic people will not apply for jobs demanding these attributes. This can mean that suitable applicants may assume themselves to be ineligible for a job even where they have strong skills that are directly relevant to the tasks involved.

What can you do?

- Make information easy to understand, including as much information about the job role, organisation, salary and working hours as possible. This should be backed

up with a clear job description, including the responsibilities and duties a person will be expected to fulfil, as well as the skills and qualifications a person should have.

- Avoid the use of 'desirable' criteria as these can be unclear for people with autism.
- When advertising, use key words that are associated with the field of employment the job is in.
- When re-uploading job adverts, clearly state when and where the original advert was displayed.

Disclosing their autism diagnosis

For an autistic person, the idea of telling the employer about their diagnosis can be extremely daunting. Some of the common reasons for this include:

- Not knowing how an employer will react to the information
- Being unsure whether it may lead to discrimination and prejudice
- Not knowing whether it will reduce their chances of getting the job
- Being uncertain about what stage they should tell them, e.g. on the application or at interview.

Some employers will have a limited awareness of what autism is, or may have negative assumptions about autism in the workplace.

Many autistic people have had negative experiences with employers and employment, including discrimination, prejudice and bullying, so may feel cautious about going into work again.

The Equality Act (2010) aims to take steps to remove, reduce or prevent the obstacles disabled workers and job seekers encounter. Employers have a legal obligation to make 'reasonable adjustments' when required.

What can we do?

- State in job adverts that applications are welcomed from people with disabilities
- Become part of the 'Disability Confident'

employment scheme endorsed by Job Centre Plus (this demonstrates a commitment to ensuring that disabled people are treated fairly and equally in employment)

- State employers credentials in relation to autism and/or disability; for example, whether employees and employers undertake mandatory autism awareness training, disability awareness training, equality and diversity training.

Job applications

Job applications can present difficulties for autistic people as the information required may appear unclear. For example, application forms may require people to provide 'additional information' or 'other relevant information', in addition to the expected 'personal details', 'educational background' 'employment history'.

Application forms

It is not always obvious what information the applicant needs to provide on an application form. It is important to provide clear guidance on this, and to make sure that the form includes a space for applicants to highlight any support or adjustments they may need at an interview. If you are asking an applicant to write about their skills or suitability for a role, it can be helpful to include a word count limit.

“Filling in an application form can be a daunting prospect for most individuals, but especially for those with an ASD. There are so many boxes to tick and fill in, so many questions asking this, this that and the other, and so much information to digest from job specifications to person specifications and more. All this information can overwhelm an individual on the spectrum and leave them feeling disheartened and feeling unable to fill the form in to the maximum of their ability” (An autistic person)

Many autistic people who have not been employed before can find it difficult to explain 'gaps in employment'. Those who have been in employment but have had their employment terminated for some reason, can find it difficult

to answer questions such as 'reasons for leaving'.

Sometimes job applications have short deadlines for application. This can make applying difficult for autistic people who find processing questions and making sense of what is required a challenge.

Some organisations still use application tools such as psychometric tests or personality tests. These are often unclear and people are not given much information and guidance about how to complete them. The strict time limits under which the tests need to be completed can also be challenging.

Many autistic people struggle with lengthy or complex application forms.



Job adverts

Job adverts are not always concise and written in plain English. They should list essential skills, and avoid jargon or unnecessary information. The advert should be clearly presented, avoiding complex design. Try to be really objective about what abilities and experiences are genuinely essential for the job to be done well, and leave out any that are not.

What can we do?

- Be clear about how much information you want; for example, rather than asking an applicant to 'please write a summary of why you think you are the right candidate

for the job', consider asking 'please write 2-3 paragraphs about why you think you are the right candidate for the job'.

- Be specific about what you expect the candidate to write in their answers; for example, instead of asking 'what skills do you have that would make you suitable for this role?' consider using, 'we are looking for an individual who is able to work independently, using their initiative to complete tasks in addition to working effectively as part of a team. Please give us an example of a time when you have used your initiative when working independently and a time when you have worked effectively as part of a team'.
- Ensure that there is a reasonable amount of time between the advert being published and the closing date for applications. It may be useful to allow candidates to save any progress they have made on their application as they progress, to allow them to complete the application form over a period of time.
- Avoid using small size fonts or colours which may trigger sensory difficulties for people with autism. It may be useful to produce an 'easy read' version of the application form, or a visual version which includes pictures to help explain questions.
- Avoid psychometric testing and personality testing wherever possible; if necessary, ask direct questions about a candidate's personality in the body of the application form.
- Try to be really objective about what abilities and experiences are genuinely essential for the job to be done well, and leave out any that are not.

Interviews

The idea of attending a job interview is something that most people find quite daunting. It is extremely difficult to anticipate the kind of questions which may be asked, or even the format of the interview. This uncertainty can be particularly distressing for autistic people.

These might include:

- Who is going to be interviewing me?
- What is the environment going to be like?
- How many people are going to be interviewing me?
- Is the interview formal or informal?
- What if I can't find where I am supposed to be going?
- What am I supposed to wear to the interview?
- How long will be the interview last for?
- Will I be expected to complete any tests?

The interview process relies on a person's ability to show their social and communication skills in a way that will enable a candidate to promote themselves as the right candidate for the job.

Interviews, particularly 'traditional' conversational type interviews, rely heavily on social and communication skills, so autistic candidates may well struggle to 'sell themselves' in an interview, even if they have all the right skills.

"Another problem area is that of eye contact and non - verbal communication. Merely looking at someone with Asperger's after asking a question may very well not elicit any response and give the impression that the interviewee is rude or does not understand that there is more information wanted by the interviewer. This is far from the case and some communication prior to the interview by both parties has the potential to resolve any embarrassing situations." (Autistic person)

It may be difficult for an autistic person to portray their skill sets to an employer, as the interviewing process itself can be challenging. Interviewees are expected to display certain accepted forms of social and communication behaviours which may not be possible for an autistic person. Examples of areas of difficulty for an autistic person may include:

- Reading an interviewers body language and displaying 'appropriate' body language in the interview setting
- Maintaining eye contact with interviewers

- Initiating conversation with interviewers
- Anticipating how much information is required for each question
- Picking up the interviewers verbal and non-verbal cues
- Engaging in formalities e.g. handshaking, appropriate tone of voice
- Answering indirect and hypothetical scenario-based questions
- Knowing how to start, maintain and end conversations or answers to questions
- Thinking in abstract ways, or considering 'what if?' scenarios
- Varying their tone of voice and finding the appropriate level of formality

Awaiting the outcome of an interview can also be very stressful for an autistic person. This can feel even more stressful if an employer has not been clear about 'what happens next' and can lead to unanswered questions for the candidate, such as:

- When will I find out if I have been successful?
- What happens if I haven't been successful, will I find out why?
- If I am successful, when will I start?
- What will I be expected to do next before I can start my job?

What can we do prior to the interview?

Making reasonable adjustments during an interview is essential to allowing autistic candidates to portray their skills and competencies fully, so that you can make an informed choice about who to recruit.

If you want to interview the candidate, it is important to realise that asking each applicant exactly the same question does not always equate to equality of opportunity. You could adapt the interview for autistic candidates by doing the following:

- Be clear about what kind of interview style they will have; for example, is it a formal or group interview and will a presentation be required?
- Consider whether adjustments can be made, or whether an alternative format

could be considered; for example, a work based trial may be a better option for someone who finds it difficult to sell their skills and abilities through communication

- Include as much information as possible about the location of the interview (including maps or directions and photographs of the entrance of the building such as Google street view), the environment in which the interview will take place, what candidates are expected to wear, how long the interview is expected to last and if any tests are included
- The procedure for arriving at the interview location
- The names of the people who will be on the interview panel (with photographs) and information about what their role will be during the interview
- A timetable of events during the allocated interview time, for example the first 30 minutes will focus on questions about your CV and the next 30 minutes will be a technical trial
- Provide candidates with materials that may help them to prepare for the interview, such as copies of the company aims and values
- Try to make sure that the interviewer is known to the applicant
- Be prepared to make alterations to the interview environment if necessary; for example provide a fan if the room is particularly warm and the candidate has sensory difficulties around temperature
- Provide interview questions in advance, up to two days before the interview
- Provide clear and concise written and visual information about the interview
- Provide a quiet and calm space for the candidate to wait prior to the interview

What can we do during the interview?

- Avoid gestures such as shaking hands unless initiated by the applicant
- Avoid open ended questions and try to be

as specific as possible when asking questions to give candidates a better idea of what information is required

- Ask specific questions based on the candidates real/past experiences
- Avoid hypothetical questions, instead ask questions about a person's past experiences so that they have a basis for their answer
- Meet the candidate beforehand to make them feel more comfortable
- Explain online etiquette for remote interviews beforehand
- Ensure every aspect is person-centred
- Only ask questions that are relevant to the role
- Give the candidate the option to have a supporter present
- Allow enough time for the person to process information and questions in the interview
- Be prepared to reword questions if necessary, for clarity
- Inform the candidate if they are talking too much or too little
- Prompt the candidate if necessary
- Be prepared that the candidate may take information literally
- Be aware that eye contact may be fleeting or prolonged
- Provide adequate breaks during long interviews and prompt them to take a break when needed
- Allow the candidate to refer to any written notes that they may have prepared

Other common issues that an autistic person may face regarding the job application and interview process

- Telephone or online interviews and the lack of face to face interaction
- A stressful and unpredictable interview process
- Being put on the spot
- Not understanding expectations or questions
- Silly interview questions
- Meeting new people
- Unwritten social rules



What can we do post-interview?

- Make sure you are consistent - if you tell an applicant you will let them know the outcome by the end of the week, you need fulfil this promise
- If candidates have not been successful, always offer feedback on why
- If candidates have been successful, be clear about what is expected of them next; for example about providing references and completing an induction programme

Challenges and barriers once in employment

Success at the application and interview stages alone may not be enough to reassure an autistic person that they have the skills, knowledge and experience to do the job. They will face other challenges and barriers within the working environment. This section outlines some of the difficulties that autistic employees may experience.

Induction

For an autistic person, being told that they have been successful in securing a job can be both an empowering and overwhelming experience. Before starting any job, it is likely that the person will have to complete a variety of formalities. This may include signing contracts, completing forms, providing bank details for payment, background checks and requests for

references. If these processes have not been explained fully, these tasks can be stressful.

After successfully securing the job, the employee may have many questions and uncertainties, which can cause significant anxiety.

Examples of the questions a new employee may have include:

- What are my colleagues like?
- Where am I going to be working and what environment will I be working in?
- What will my working hours be?
- What is the dress code?
- How long will I get for breaks?

What can we do?

- Be clear about 'what happens next' and provide clear guidelines about how to complete the next steps. Ensure that deadlines allow enough time to be completed
- Try to provide as much information about what a person can expect in their new job role, including information about working hours, location of work, parking and any other key information
- Offer the person the opportunity to visit the workplace prior to starting the job; this may involve introducing them to the team they will be working with, and where they will be expected to work. This will enable the new employee to understand what is expected of them, and allow the employer to make any necessary adjustments prior to the start of employment

Settling in to a new role

Like everybody else, settling in to a new job role can take time; we all need time to adjust to new tasks and responsibilities and to get used to office routines and dynamics.

It is important that the person feels welcomed as part of the team and that any adjustments that have been previously identified have been made. This ensures that any potential barriers or challenges can be avoided, or at least reduced.

For autistic people, it is important that

instructions are given in their preferred method of communication. Some people may prefer spoken instructions, whilst others may want instructions to be in writing. It is important that instructions are clear and concise. It may be necessary to provide each instruction separately to enable the person to process information and complete what is expected of them in a 'step by step' way. For some, a physical demonstration of how to complete a task may be the best way to communicate requirements and instructions.

“I worked in accountancy for 22 years and often found that my choices were limited due to clumsiness and poor spelling. Some of the difficulties I found were particularly around not being understood, not having enough time to complete tasks and dealing with conflicting demands. I found work overwhelming and the overall impression I got was that I did not matter, only as a cog in a machine” - (Autistic person)

It is also important to realise that the social norms of the workplace may present difficulties for autistic employees. People are expected to engage with other employees and participate in social interaction. This may be challenging for autistic people and it is important that other employees respect this. Social rules are taken for granted in the workplace but may be unclear for autistic people; for example seeing another employee making a drink at a time that is not a regular break time may be confusing for an autistic person and they may think this is unacceptable behaviour. It is important that these situations are anticipated as far as possible and fully explained.

What can we do?

- Identify preferred methods of communication and develop a plan for delivering instructions, managing and prioritising tasks and general communication
- Assign a mentor to provide guidance and support to the employee so that they have a person they can go to when experiencing problems
- Ask employees to produce personal

profiles of themselves, explaining what their role is and a bit of information about themselves

- Identify clear guidelines on 'what is acceptable' and 'what is not acceptable' during the work day; for example, whether it is acceptable to make a coffee and take it back to your desk whilst you carry on working or not, or whether it is acceptable to go across the road and get a coffee and take an unauthorised break

Workplace environment

For many autistic people, it can be their working environment that can cause anxiety, rather than the tasks and responsibilities associated with their job roles.

Autistic people may experience sensory differences which may be hard to accommodate in the working environment. Noise, lighting, temperature and colours can all result in sensory overload, causing significant anxiety and distress, and potentially preventing the person from doing their job.

For example, a person is expected to work in a communal office space may find this environment busy and noisy; this may affect their ability to concentrate on a given task and cause stress and anxiety. It may be more beneficial for the person to work in a quieter area of the workplace, where staff members are familiar and noise levels are stable.

“I need to have a manager who is proactive in looking out for my needs. I have this at the charity shop where I volunteer, and it makes a massive difference. For example, if things are busy and noisy she assigns me work somewhere quieter. And she checks that I'm OK from time to time. I may not be able to seek someone out to tell them I'm finding things hard, so this is vital” - (Autistic person)

The workplace can be constantly changing. Many people with autism need structure and routine in their daily lives, including the workplace. Unplanned changes or changes which occur without warning should be minimised as far as possible. It may be helpful

for an employer to accompany an employee with autism on a visit to new office premises prior to any move. This will give the employee time to adapt and plan their approach to their new working conditions.

“Sometimes the most damaging problem with issues of communication is assuming the level of natural ability an autistic person has and that they can adopt this behaviour for different situations. When it is assumed that because a person appears to be Neurotypical and can function just like everybody else does, this leads to the assumption that they are like everybody else and can communicate much the same as a Neurotypical person. Whilst there are many instances when this does occur, this is because in the main the autistic person has either prepared for this situation well in advance or has been through this situation many times before and has a prepared knowledge and expectation of what will happen. It is when this changes unexpectedly and the changes are not noted in advance to the Autistic person or if the situation is new in content and environment, that this can cause problems for them in new or unprepared for situations” - (Autistic person)

What can we do?

- Work with the person to find out what their difficulties are and look for ways for overcoming or reducing these; for example, provide a fan for an employee with sensory difficulties associated with heat
- Prepare people for change and unpredictable situations in advance; for example, explain or demonstrate what they will be required to do to evacuate the building in the event of a fire

Providing feedback and reviewing performance

Providing feedback to employees and reviewing their performance is a standard and expected aspect of all employees' employment. For many autistic people, this is particularly important.

If an autistic person is not given feedback about their performance, it may cause them to feel anxious. Issues relating to self-esteem and confidence may leave the person feeling like they are not doing the job properly. It is important to reassure them that they are managing the work and doing a good job, if this is the case.

On the other hand, an autistic employee may experience work-based problems or difficulties, and they may not feel confident in seeking help or talking to others about their concerns. It is important that an autistic person is encouraged to discuss any concerns they might have. It is important to review performance and provide feedback regularly to make sure that any potential issues are addressed quickly and support can be offered.

This may need to be offered more frequently than to other employees.

Feedback will need to be sensitive, direct, constructive and understood. If an issue has arisen in relation to performance, it is important that this is dealt with promptly but clearly. It is essential that employers do not assume that any issues will be resolved automatically after discussing these with the employees, but rather, provide support and guidance in order to do this. Autistic people often require clear guidelines and instructions about how to overcome difficulties. For example, if the issue is that tasks are not being completed quickly enough, an employee could develop an action plan with the person to address this. An employer's response could be:-

'The quality of your work is good and we appreciate your commitment to completing tasks to the best of your ability. However, in order for us to meet targets as a company, it is important that we are able to complete tasks in a set timescale. For example, X task needs to be completed in Y amount of time for us to do this. In order for you to manage your time effectively we can work together to identify strategies which will help you to do this. What have you done in the past to help you with prioritising your time effectively?'

What can we do?

- Make sure that employees understand what to expect and what the purpose of the review process is
- Make sure that performance reviews are planned in advance to help the employee to prepare for these meetings
- Try to make sure that the same person is responsible for doing all performance reviews to maintain consistency
- Ensure that employees understand policies and procedures, for example annual leave and sickness policies
- Make sure that the person knows who to go to should they have any problems in between performance reviews, making sure that a 'chain of command' is outlined, for example senior manager, team manager, team leader, or employees
- Identify resources that can be used to improve performance, for example daily planners and timetables could be used to manage time and tasks effectively

Managing an autistic employee

Working with an autistic person can be an enriching experience for managers and colleagues alike, however support is important to make it successful.

Your organisation can avoid and overcome challenges in order to ensure enjoyable and effective working relationships via:

- Formal activities – from job coaches to state-funded initiatives to help with extra costs such as adaptations in the workplace
- Informal activities – such as making sure communication is clear, that the environment takes account of sensory needs, and the necessary support is at hand

Lack of understanding and raising awareness

A lack of understanding of autism in the workplace can cause difficulties for autistic people. People may be less likely to disclose their diagnosis of autism if they believe that



their condition will not be understood by other employees. Many autistic people have been

victims of prejudice and discrimination in previous employment due to a lack of understanding.

Autism is often referred to as a 'hidden disability' and without the knowledge of the condition or willingness to try and understand how an employee being autistic affects them; employees do not often receive the support they need from others.

To help raise awareness and understanding, employers can provide autism awareness training and general disability awareness training. In addition, managers could attend diversity events in their local and extended communities to increase their understanding of disabilities and share this information with the rest of the workforce. Having a disabled employees network and a nominated 'disability champion' could improve the workplace for all employees in addition to promoting equality and diversity.

It is also important that employers and employees are aware of the rights and responsibilities of people with autism, to ensure that these are recognised in the workplace. Employers should make positive adjustments and changes in a meaningful way to allow the person with autism to carry out their job.

“I have had some problems with some managers not understanding my condition, including some who think it is 'fake'. There are some who believe the social model of

disability and others who are only interested in the medical model, and even some who doubt that I have a diagnosis at all. As mine [autism] is a so called 'hidden impairment' my managers are unsure as to how to deal with it legally and make reasonable adjustments. I work in a 500 person call centre and have problems with noise which makes it difficult for them to make changes. Some think I'm a problem, they don't know what to do with me and so think they should get rid of me. However, some managers are good with me and display appropriate behaviours. My employers are accessing some awareness training soon and I am hoping that this will help to improve my situation” - (Autistic person).

What can we do?

- Identify and regularly review training opportunities available to employees
- Ensure that employees are aware of autism and, if appropriate, the support needs of autistic people in their workplace
- Develop and use tools which can aid awareness in the workplace, such as one page profiles that provide information about the employee

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.

“I have an excellent memory for facts and figures for example, car number plates and timetables. I never have to write down telephone numbers. I have an excellent memory for jokes anecdotes and even whole movie scripts.” Autistic person

Other things we can do to help autistic employees

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.

Provide training and monitoring

Clear and structured training is invaluable. This can be provided informally on the job, by a manager, colleagues or a mentor, or may take the form of more formal training. Various

organisations and schemes offer job coaches, and funding for this form of training may be available from the Department of Work and Pensions. Our Employment Training Service can provide more information.

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.

Regularly review performance
As with any employee, line managers should have regular one-to-one meetings with the person to discuss and review performance and give overall comments and suggestions. For an autistic staff member, brief, frequent reviews may be better than longer sessions at less frequent intervals.

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.

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 could consider staff training, or our online modules.

Further Advice

- Autism Information and Advice Service, tel: 01332 228 790 visit: www.autisiminformationservice.org.uk
- Citizens Advice, visit: www.citizensadvice.org.uk
- Access to Work: www.gov.uk/access-to-work
- Disability Employment Service, visit: www.derbyshire.gov.uk/des
- Derbyshire Autism Service, tel: 01773 7411221, visit: www.derbyshireautismservices.org
- National Autistic Society: www.autism.org.uk

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