

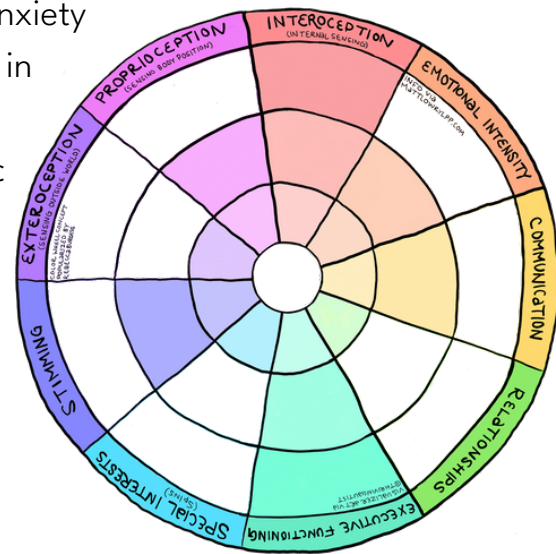


Autistic people in the workplace: Advice for employers



What is Autism?

- Autism is a neurological difference and/or disability, or neurodivergence. It is lifelong and it affects the way Autistic people communicate and experience the world around them. It is not an illness or a learning disability, and does not need to be 'cured' or 'treated'.
- A common phrase that neurotypical people (those who are not neurodivergent) say is "Well, we're all a bit Autistic, aren't we?" - the short answer is "No." To be diagnosed as Autistic under current formal guidance, you must have difficulties in social communication/social interaction challenges and repetitive restrictive behaviours. Saying that 'everyone is a bit on the spectrum' minimises the very real challenges that Autistic people face in a world which is not designed for them, and is a form of gaslighting and ableist microaggression.
- The Autism spectrum is not a linear scale from 'less' to 'more' Autistic, and in fact it is widely preferred that labels like high- or low-functioning and Aspergers are no longer used to describe Autistic people. The spectrum in question is more of a wheel, and all Autistic people will have what's called a 'spiky profile', recognising their individual difficulties in specific areas. Someone's profile can even change depending on other things happening in their life - for example, their stimming (repetitive behaviours that people use to help cope with big or overwhelming feelings) may increase when they're in a high-anxiety situation, or their communication needs may change if they're in an unfamiliar place.
- If you have met one Autistic person, you have met one Autistic person! Autistic people are not a monolith, and their support needs, communication preferences and personalities will vary just as widely as they do in neurotypical people.



Autism in the workplace

- Research in 2021 found that only 16% of Autistic adults were in full-time, paid employment, and 40% of Autistic adults in part-time work wanted to work more hours. This research doesn't account for those who can't work, or who are in training or education, but it's still a shocking number - and is one of the lowest rates of employment amongst disabled people.
- Being Autistic does affect people's ability to work, and in some cases makes it impossible, but many Autistic people are able to thrive at work with the right support. The lack of accommodations in the workplace is the problem, not the Autistic person.
- Autistic people are entitled to reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act 2010. It is important to regularly look at their working environments and the tasks they are expected to undertake with them and offer, and give them the opportunity to request, any adjustments.
- Employers and colleagues understanding the needs of Autistic staff members and being flexible in providing them with support and adjustments can make all the difference!

What is executive dysfunction?

- Executive functions are the mental processes that enable us to plan, focus attention, remember instructions, and juggle multiple tasks successfully.
- They include self-control, the ability to stop and think before acting; self-monitoring, the ability to view and evaluate yourself; emotional control, the ability to manage your feelings; flexibility, the ability to adapt to changing conditions; task initiation, the ability to start and/or finish tasks without procrastination; organisation, the ability to develop and use systems to keep track of materials and information; working memory, the ability to use information held in memory; and planning and time management, the ability to create steps to reach a goal.
- All of these skills are crucial for the workplace, but many Autistic people have difficulty with some or all of them, and the level of difficulty in each area can fluctuate.



How can employers help?

- Do you have alternatives to the application process, or how you interview potential employees? For example, providing questions in advance so applicants have time to process in a lower-pressure situation, and allowing people to apply or interview in different ways also accounts for the different ways that Autistic people communicate.
- How are instructions and training delivered to employees? You should account for the differing learning types that your Autistic employee may have, and give them enough time to process your instructions or questions. Nurturing an environment where people are allowed the space to ask questions and are given patience in addressing them ensures your Autistic staff truly understand what is being asked of them, and aren't struggling in silence so as not to be seen as difficult or saying they understand because they recognise that's what's expected of them.
- How do you monitor output? Tracking Autistic staff based on outcomes rather than hours allows for their differing levels of executive function to be mitigated. Forcing employees to always appear busy even if they've completed the work they have on their plate for right now, or rushing them to complete a task far before it's due date, easily leads to burnout.

What is sensory sensitivity?

- As well as the 5 senses we all know about - touch, taste, smell, hearing and sight - human beings also have proprioception, the sense of where our bodies are in relation to our surroundings and how our body parts are moving; vestibular, our sense of balance; and interoception, which tells us what's going on inside our bodies (e.g. are we hungry or thirsty, do we need to use the bathroom, are we too cold or too hot).
- Autistic people can be 'hyposensitive', not taking in enough information, and/or 'hypersensitive', taking in too much information. This can vary between senses - for example, someone may be hypersensitive to taste but hyposensitive to sound - and can even fluctuate depending on external factors, making it hard to predict.
- Sensory difficulties can create severe discomfort and strong emotions, and an abundance of sensory input can lead to sensory overload, causing someone to shut down or have meltdowns, or a scarcity of sensory input can lead to sensory seeking behaviours - for example, someone who is hyposensitive to sound may hum or mutter in a silent room.

How can employers help?

- Is there a strict dress code or uniform? Some Autistic people struggle with the texture of certain fabrics or the structure of certain items of clothing, so unless there is a safety reason why these items must be worn (such as scrubs, hardhats or aprons), then being flexible about the dress code will create a more accessible workplace. On the same note, allowing staff to wear headphones and earplugs, or even sunglasses, allows them to control external sensory input.
- Can employees be given their own desk? In the era of remote and hybrid working, many offices are embracing hot-desking, but not having the same place to work every day can be extremely stressful for Autistic people who rely on a routine, and makes it harder for them to predict and/or control the environment. Asking them if they'd prefer to be in a quiet or noisy part of the office, near a window or not, or in a certain amount of light helps to maintain a suitable environment for them.
- Are staff actively encouraged to take breaks and finish on time? Autistic people who struggle with interoception and proprioception may not realise that they're hungry, thirsty or tired or recognise the passage of time to realise the day has ended and can end up overworking which can quickly lead to burnout or other health issues.

