

Employers Plan: Making employment a positive experience for people with Autism in Calderdale



CALDERDALE COUNCIL & THE
NATIONAL AUTISTIC SOCIETY

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Contents

Background	4-5
What is autism?	6-12
Adding value to the workplace	13-18
Challenges and barriers in employment for people with autism (including reasonable adjustments)	19-20
Pre-employment challenges and Barriers:	21
• Finding a suitable job	21-22
• Disclosing their autism diagnosis	23-24
• Job application forms	25-27
• Interviews	28-32
Workplace challenges and barriers:	33
• Induction	33-35
• Settling into a new role	36-38
• Workplace environment	39-41
• Providing feedback and reviewing performance	42-44
• Lack of understanding and Raising awareness	45-47

Employers Perspective	48-53
Recruiters Checklist	54-56
Employers Checklist	57-60
Useful links and contacts	61-64

Background

Employment continues to be an area of daily life where many people with Autism are still encountering a significant number of unnecessary barriers and challenges which both affect their 'employability' and result in a lack of support from others who can potentially improve their access to and security of sustainable employment.

The above statement is supported by statistics provided by *the National Autistic Society* which indicate that only 15% of people with Autism are currently in full time employment, in addition to only 9% of whom are in part-time employment.

When considering that Autism is a 'spectrum condition', with each person potentially possessing a variety of skills, knowledge and experience, it calls into question, how truly diverse is our workforce if approximately 332,600 people with Autism are currently of working age and only 49,890 of those are in some form of employment?

61% of people with Autism who are currently unemployed stated that they want to work in addition to 79% of people on Employment Support Allowance (ESA) These statistics indicate that the employment opportunities available to people with an Autistic Spectrum Condition (ASC) are considerably limited despite a collective desire to secure and maintain meaningful employment. Furthermore, 53% of adults with Autism stated that they want help to find work, but only 10% of these people are in receipt of

support to do this. These statistics represent what appears to be a systematic failure in the entirety of the employment process, whereby an evident lack of support is prominent across a large demographic and a holistic approach is absent.

It is with this information at hand that we can consider the workplace a largely inaccessible institution for many people with Autism. Employers should have a legal and moral obligation to transform and adapt the workplace, in all of its functions and processes, to make employment a more positive environment and experience for people with Autism.

In order to do this, we must adopt an 'autism friendly charter' grounded in a commitment to increasing awareness and education of Autism to equip employers with the knowledge, tools and resources required to effectively support people with Autism in employment and make the necessary adjustments at individual, community and national levels.

What is Autism?

Our understandings of Autism have transformed since the term was first coined, with various theories for the causes of autism being widely discredited, including ideas that 'refrigerator mothers' were responsible for the onset and manifestation of autism and that MMR vaccines triggered autism. However, societal attitudes do not appear to have progressed in many societies, communities and cultures as the stigma attached to autism still enforces that many people with autism are still subjected to widespread discrimination and prejudice in many of societies major institutions- including employment.

Attributing a definitive understanding of 'what autism is' is an elusive responsibility as it often how autism impacts on a person at an individual level that helps us to contextualise and make sense of the condition. However, the *National Autistic Society* has defined autism as:

'A lifelong developmental disability that affects how a person communicates with, and relates to, other people. It also affects how they make sense of the world around them'

Autism is often referred to as a 'spectrum condition' as it affects different people in different ways. Autism Spectrum Conditions (ASC) is often used as an umbrella term which encompasses and can be referred to through a variety of labels, which enable others to categorise autism.

Some of the terms which posit under the primary heading of 'Autism Spectrum Conditions' include; Asperger' Syndrome, low-functioning autism, high functioning autism, pervasive development disorder- not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS), Kanner/classic autism, autistic traits, atypical autism and semantic pragmatic disorder.

How a person perceives their autism will influence the label they adopt to make sense of their condition and to help others understand how their autism impacts on them at an individual level. Furthermore, some people prefer to be referred to as a 'person with autism' whereas others prefer to be called an 'autistic person'.

Autism is also considered to be an example of 'neurodiversity' in the context that there are considered to be identifiable neurological differences between people with autism and people who are 'normal'; these people are often referred to as 'neurotypical'. Some people with Autism use this binary opposition as a means of explaining and making sense of the neurological differences that exist between people with autism and people without autism.

The National Autistic Society recognise and celebrate the diversity that exists across the 'autistic spectrum' but aim to explain some of the most common difficulties experienced by people with autism, these are generally categorised under three main areas of difficulty, which is often referred to as the 'triad of impairment'.

Difficulties with social communication

Some people with autism will present with extreme difficulty or an inability to communicate verbally with others and may use alternative and augmentative communication methods to interact, make choices and decisions and express their views and opinions. Whereas others may appear to speak fluently using an extended vocabulary to interact with others, often making their difficulties with communication harder to detect. However, it is the ability to use their communication skills and contextualise communication that is 'impaired'

People with autism may present difficulties with:

- Processing language and interpreting facial expressions, body language or tone of voice
- Understanding metaphors and 'figures of speech' (people with autism may take information very literally and may not understand the underlying hidden meaning/interpretation)
- Understanding jokes and sarcasm
- Following long or complex sentences and instructions
- Explaining how they feel

Difficulties with social interaction

People with autism can also experience difficulties in social interaction and in social environments and situations. This can often result in the person appearing

'withdrawn, aloof or uninterested' in the people they meet and enforcing a magnitude of difficulties in forming and maintaining social relationships with others.

People with autism may present traits such as:

- Difficulty in maintaining eye contact with others
- Difficulty in reading and understanding the emotions that other people present
- Preferring to spend time alone or in isolation from others
- Difficulty in understanding the social rules and norms that govern society
- Appearing to behave 'strangely' or 'inappropriately' due to difficulties in expressing feelings, emotions or needs
- Showing no interest in other people's opinions and interests
- Unintentionally invading others' personal space

Difficulties with social imagination

People with autism experience difficulties with social imagination which allows us to understand other people's behaviour, make sense of abstract ideas and to imagine situations outside of our immediate daily routines. This concept does not suggest that people with autism have difficulties with lack of imaginative thought and creative outlook but rather have limitations around the flexibility of thought which enables us to do the above.

This means that people with autism may experience difficulties with:

- Understanding and interpreting other people's thoughts, feelings and actions
- Predicting what will happen next, or what could happen next
- Understanding the concept of danger
- Preparing for change and planning for the future
- Coping in new or unfamiliar situations

Sensory differences

In addition, as our knowledge and understanding of autism has progressed, sensory differences are now identified and recognised as an area where many people with autism can encounter difficulties.

This can manifest in the form of heightened sensitivity (hypersensitivity) or under-sensitivity (hyposensitivity) to one or more sensory stimuli e.g. sound, light, textures, smells and taste.

These sensory differences can sometimes result in sensory overload, as people can struggle to manage aspects of their environment which can cause sensory distress.

People with autism may also engage in self-stimulatory behaviours or 'stimming' as a means of regulating their sensory needs.

Although this information can inform us about what autism is and some of the characteristics and behaviours that people with autism may present, it should only be used as a guideline for some of the things an employee with autism may present. Autism is a spectrum condition, which means that the intensity and frequency in which some of these behaviours are presented will vary from person to person.

Similarly, a variety of factors will play a key role in exacerbating some of the characteristics, therefore, although we can make preparations and identify strategies to reduce the impact that some of these characteristics may have on people with autism in workplace situations and environments, we must not generalise and stereotype the behaviours of people with autism, otherwise we fall into patterns of expecting and predicting the behaviours of others, which will inevitably have a detrimental effect on the person in a number of different ways.

We must always remember that:

'If you've met one person with autism, you have met one person with autism' (Stephen Shore)

People with autism are the same as 'neurotypical' people in the ironic sense that we are all unique and different. The skills, knowledge and attributes that each person with autism have will add different value to a company or organisations workplace. However, it is how we celebrate these qualities and empower people with autism in the workplace through a commitment to increasing our

knowledge of autism and celebrating and embracing difference that these skills, knowledge and attributes will flourish.

Adding value to the workplace

As mentioned in the previous section, if we remain open-minded and allow our minds to be susceptible to the varying degrees of talent and skill that exists across the autistic spectrum, it is a certainty that employers can add value to companies and organisations through extending the employment opportunities that are available to people with autism.

An array of skill is apparent at a local level, with each person that we come across possessing a number of skills who desire an outlet for these to be utilised in a positive and meaningful way.

Through the use of a focus group, consisting of seven people with autism and four employment advisors, we were able to identify some of the skills that people on the spectrum may possess.

These were inclusive of:

Reliable, Punctual and Loyal

People with autism are likely to be reliable employees and are statistically proven to have the highest attendance rate of any other disability group within the workplace.

In addition, punctuality was identified as another attribute which people on the spectrum are likely to possess; this statement was supported by the group, as they believed

that due to a desire to follow strict, rigid structure and routine, it is unlikely that employees are to be late for work and deter from time limits e.g. breaks and dinner hours.

Furthermore, once employment has been secured and people become familiar with their roles, it is likely that employees with autism will demonstrate a high degree of loyalty, with staff retention levels remaining high amongst people with autism across job roles and organisations.

Honest and 'catalysts for positive change'

It is thought that people with autism will demonstrate higher degrees of honesty in the workplace than other employees. Those present stated that they would alert employers of problems in the workplace opposed to 'following the rest of the workforce'.

In addition, many people with autism have the ability to identify and see areas for positive change in the workplace due to an increased awareness for attention to detail. This can have an overall positive outcome for the entire workforce in addition to enabling improvements, adjustments and adaptations to be made.

Creative and alternative approaches to working

People with autism can adopt creative approaches and methods for ensuring that tasks and responsibilities are completed and can bring innovation to a workplace which

provokes and promotes positive changes to traditional ways of working.

People with autism are credited for their creative flair, making many people suitable and compatible in a variety of workplaces e.g. photography, art, drama and design.

High levels of concentration and commitment

People with autism are very committed employees who apply maximum effort to all tasks that are assigned to them. They are often able to perform with high levels of concentration when focusing on specific tasks and like to see tasks through to completion.

In addition, people with autism are less likely to engage in 'office dynamics' and 'idle chit chat' with others, meaning that more emphasis is placed on completing their duties and responsibilities.

Resourcefulness and a logical way of thinking

Many people with autism are credited for their ability to tackle challenges by taking logical steps towards problem solving. People with autism are more likely to adopt a 'step by step' approach to dealing with problems, which avoids missing the finer details which may act as a barrier to other employee's means of problem solving.

Good working memory and knowledge around specialist areas

People with autism are often merited for their impeccable ability to remember and retain information about certain things e.g. dates statistics and facts making them suitable for a variety of job roles.

In addition, many people with autism are considered to be 'experts' in their specialist area(s) of interest, which often sees them having an in-depth knowledge or heightened skill around a particular field. Some of these include museums, transport, animals, computers, product ranges etc. This makes them ideal candidates for a number of job roles where skills and knowledge of a particular area of interest can be transferred and applied.

Sensory differences

Some members of the focus group suggested that the sensory differences that people with autism can experience could be advantageous in the workplace. This was supported by the idea that people with autism may be more tolerant of particular working environments e.g. someone who preferred colder environments may be more adaptable to outside working.

Respectful of rules and boundaries

Many people with autism like to have structure and routine implemented in their lives including in the workplace. This often enforces a desire for clear

expectations to be outlined from the offset. As a result, many people with autism find rules and boundaries in the workplace beneficial, meaning that they are more likely to familiarise themselves with and follow policies and procedures more strictly than others.

The above are just a handful of reasons why people with autism can make exceptional employees in variety of different working environments and job roles. It is important that employees do not succumb to the abundance of myths, stereotypes and stigma that are attached to autism and begin to recognise the potential value that people can add to their workforce.

People with autism should be recognised as ‘assets’ to the workforce, with skills that can be utilised opposed to ‘deficiencies’.

Temple Grandin (1999) produced a list of job roles which may be suitable for people on the autistic spectrum, in a piece entitled *Temple Grandin: Choosing the right job*. Some of these jobs include:

- Accountancy
- Statistician
- Animal trainer
- Veterinary assistant
- Engineering
- Journalism
- Visual arts
- Web page design

- Photography
- Factory work
- Maintenance work
- Computer programming
- Bank cashiers
- Telemarketing
- Architecture
- Physics
- Library work
- Data entry
- Inventory control

The individuality and level of skill, knowledge and expertise that exists across the autistic spectrum means that this list is only a glimpse at the kind of employment that people with autism may excel in.

Challenges and barriers in employment for people with autism

Despite the evident array of skills, knowledge, qualities and attributes that many people with autism possess, the field of employment can still encompass a whirlwind of barriers and challenges that sadly many people struggle to overcome.

These are often ignored by many employers who do not recognise the difficulties that they pose for many people with autism, as they remain key components to securing and sustaining employment. By adopting a narrow minded view of employment, employers are unintentionally (or purposely) restricting employment opportunities to people who do not have additional needs.

However, in most circumstances, the challenges and barriers that are presented in employment can be removed, or at the very least, reduced, through making 'reasonable adjustments' for those who require these.

What are reasonable adjustments?

Reasonable adjustments are changes to the working environment or employment process which enable disabled people to fulfil the requirements of their job role that they would not otherwise be able to do or experience greater difficulty in doing so without adaptations being made.

In a general sense, some examples of reasonable adjustments may include:

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

Some of the challenges and barriers that people with autism may experience in the workplace and some suggestions for reasonable adjustments that employers can make are discussed in the below sections.

Pre-employment challenges and barriers

Often for many people with autism, the barriers faced prior to employment can be equally, if not more, challenging than those actually faced in the working environment. Challenges can be faced at different stages of the pre-employment process and some of these are discussed below.

Finding a 'suitable' job

Often, when searching for jobs, people with autism can experience some difficulties. Job search engines can often produce results which are ambiguous or misleading, making people with autism very cautious as to whether the job at hand is suitable for them. In addition, clarity of information is essential, and if information is vague e.g. withholding the name of the organisation, usual working hours, salary etc it can be very off-putting for people with autism as a huge degree of uncertainty is attached.

Many people have encountered difficulties with job search engines as they often produce results using 'key words' which can often be associated with a diversity of job fields opposed to specific fields. This can be confusing and lead people to misinterpret what a job will entail.

In addition, job information is often re-uploaded at intervals after the original advert was posted which can lead to uncertainty as to whether a person is applying for the same or different job.

Furthermore, people with autism who are in receipt of work-related benefits are expected to apply for a specific number of jobs over a given time period, regardless of whether the job is suitable for them.

What can we do?

- Make information as transparent and informative as possible, including as much information about the job role as possible e.g. what organisation you are, what salary the successful applicant will start on, what the usual working hours will include, clear and concise job description (highlighting the responsibilities and duties a person will be expected to fulfil in addition to the skills and qualifications a person is expected to have)
- Avoid use of 'desirable' criteria as this can be too ambiguous for people with autism
- Identify key words that are associated specifically with the field of employment the job is located in when advertising on job search engines
- When re-uploading job adverts, clearly state when and where the original advert was advertised

Disclosing their autism diagnosis

For a person with autism, the idea of disclosing their diagnosis to an employer or potential employer can be extremely daunting. Some of the common reasons for this include:

- Not knowing how an employer will interpret this information
- Whether this will lead to discrimination and prejudice
- Whether it will reduce their chances of being successful in securing employment
- At what stage this information should be disclosed.

Often it is anticipated that most employers will have a limited awareness of what autism is or will have misguided ideas of how autism can have a negative impact in the workplace due to the stigma and stereotypes which are embedded in our society and culture.

In addition, many people with autism will have negative past experiences with employers where discrimination, prejudice and bullying have been prominent, leading them to believe that this will happen again. Furthermore, many people who have disclosed their autism in the early stages of the recruitment process believe that they have been treated unfairly and as a consequence have not been successful in securing employment in the past.

When to disclose or if to disclose an autism diagnosis remains a key challenge for people with autism as disclosure can encompass both positive and negative outcomes.

The Equality Act (2010) aims to remove the disadvantages that are commonly experienced by people with disabilities and take steps to remove, reduce or prevent the obstacles disabled workers and job seekers encounter. Therefore, if people require 'reasonable adjustments' to be made, then employers have a legal obligation to ensure that this happens.

What can we do?

- State in job adverts that applications are welcomed from people with disabilities
- Become part of the 'two ticks' employment scheme endorsed by Jobcentre 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 e.g. if employees and employers have had autism awareness training, disability awareness training, equality and diversity training etc.

Job applications

Job applications can sometimes present people with autism with difficulties, as the content of what is included in the application will often inform the employer's first impressions of the person applying.

This can be a stressful time for people with autism, and the amount of information that is required is often very ambiguous. Application forms sometimes require people to provide 'additional information' or 'other relevant information' sections in addition to the expected 'personal details', 'educational background' 'employment history'.

"Filling in an application form can be a daunting prospect for most individuals, but especially for those with an ASD. So many boxes to tick and fill in, so many questions asking 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."
(Person with an ASC)

Many people with autism, who have not had the opportunity to experience employment can find it difficult to explain 'gaps in employment' and those who have experienced employment, but this has terminated for whatever reason can find it difficult to answer questions such as 'reasons for leaving'. Again, these difficulties are often shaped by the not knowing of how an employer will

interpret this information, or what an employer considers an 'acceptable' answer.

In addition, job applications can sometimes have a quick turnaround process, whereby, the window of opportunity to apply for positions is limited. This can be difficult for people with autism, as processing questions and considering how to answer can be a lengthy process which requires time in order for them to make sense of what is required of them.

Application forms are not always in an accessible format for some people with autism; however, this will be determined at an individual level. For people who may experience sensory difficulties, even the finer details of font choice, size or colour can determine whether completing an application form is a successful experience.

In addition, some organisations still use application tools such as psychometric tests or personality tests. These are often very ambiguous and provide little information and guidance about how to complete these. Furthermore, these are usually expected to be completed under strict time constraints which add a further element of worry for people with autism.

What can we do?

- Be clear about how much information you want e.g. opposed to 'please write a summary of why you think you are the right candidate for the job', you

could ask '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 e.g. instead of asking 'what skills do you have that would make you suitable for this role?' you could ask 'we are looking for an individual who is able to work independently using their initiative to complete tasks in addition to working as part of a team effectively, please give us an example of a time when you have used your initiative when working independently and a time when you have worked as part of a team effectively'
- Ensure that there is a reasonable amount of time between the advert being advertised and the closing date for applications. It may be useful to allow candidates to save any progress they have made on their application- this will allow people to set realistic targets to complete sections of 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 also be useful to produce an 'easy read' version of the application form, or a visual version which could include pictures to help explain questions.
- Avoid psychometric testing and personality testing wherever possible, if necessary, ask direct questions about a person' personality in the body of the application form.

Interviews

The concept of attending a job interview is something that most people find particularly daunting as it encompasses a large degree of uncertainty about what to expect. It is extremely difficult to anticipate the nature and kind of questions which may be asked in an interview or even the format of the interview. This can trigger a variety of questions that without answers can be particularly distressing for people with autism.

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?

In addition the interviewing process encompasses a huge reliance on a person's ability to demonstrate social and communication skills in a way that will enable a candidate to promote themselves as the right candidate for the job.

"Another problem area is that of eye contact and non-verbal communication. Merely looking at someone with Aspergers 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." (Person with an ASC)

Despite the skill base that a person may possess, it may be difficult for a person to portray this to an employer, as the interviewing process in itself expects a person to display expected and accepted forms of prescribed social and communication norms.

Examples of this and areas of difficulty for some people with autism 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 and picking up on cues
- Engaging in formalities e.g. handshaking, appropriate tone of voice
- Answering indirect and hypothetical scenario based questions

Furthermore, awaiting an outcome of an interview can be very stressful time for someone with autism. This can be exacerbated if an employer has not been clear about 'what

happens next' and can lead to a variety of unanswered questions for the candidate. Examples of these include:

- 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?

- Be clear about what kind of interview the candidate will be expected to complete e.g. a formal interview, a group interview, a work based trial, a presentation etc and if a particular interview format would be difficult for a candidate, consider whether other adjustments can be made or whether an alternative which may be better can be considered e.g. 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 additional information as possible e.g. about the location of the interview, environment the interview will be conducted in, what candidates are expected to wear, how long the interview is expected to last for and if any tests will be expected to be completed.

- Provide candidates with some materials that may help them to prepare for the interview e.g. company aims and values
- Be familiar to the candidate- try to give as much information as possible about who is going to be conducting the interview e.g. send out a personal profile including information about what people like and admire about you, what your job role is, a picture so the person can see who is going to be interviewing them.
- Be prepared to make alterations to the interviewing environment if necessary e.g. provide a fan if the room is a particularly warm environment and the candidate has sensory difficulties around temperature.

What can we do during the interview?

- Avoid making gestures such as handshaking unless initiated by the person
- 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 in their response
- Avoid hypothetical questions, instead ask questions about a persons past experiences so that they have a basis for their answer
- Give the candidate the option to have a supporter present
- Allow ample opportunity for the person to process information and questions and be prepared to

reword the question in a manner which enables the candidate to understand better.

What can we do post-interview?

- Try to ensure that expectations are met regarding informing people as to whether they have been successful in securing the post e.g. if you say 'we will let candidates know by the end of the week if they have got the job.
- If candidates have not been successful, always offer feedback on why they haven't been successful.
- If candidates have been successful, be clear about what is expected of them next e.g. providing references, completing an induction programme.

Challenges and barriers in employment

At this stage, it has already been identified that the person has the skills, knowledge and experience needed to meet the requirements of the role, however, people may still have to overcome difficulties in the working environment. This section outlines some of the difficulties that employees with autism may experience.

Induction

For a person with autism, being informed that they have been successful in securing a position can be both an empowering and overwhelming experience. Prior to starting any job, it is more than likely that the person will have to complete a variety of formalities before they can begin. This may include signing contracts, completing forms such as providing bank details for payment, getting references, background checks etc. If this is not a well co-ordinated process or the person has not been made aware of 'what happens next' this may be a stressful experience.

Furthermore, employees will inevitably have to make to some significant changes to their daily structure and routine and ideally, many people would prefer for this to occur incrementally to prevent sudden changes which could provoke anxiety.

Again, being successful in securing employment can provoke a series of questions for the employee, which if left unanswered in the early stages of the induction

process may result in feelings of anxiety. Some of these questions may include:

- Who and what are my colleagues going to be like?
- Where am I going to be working and what environment will I be working in?
- What are my working hours going to 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 and in what timeframe this is expected to be completed in e.g. 'we now need you to complete the following 'X Y Z' by the XX/XX/XXXX' and ensure that enough time is given to do this.
- Try to provide as much information about what a person can expect in their new job role e.g. working hours, location of work so that a person can make adjustments to their daily routines prior to commencement of employment e.g. if a person is informed that their working hours are 9am-5pm with 15 minute breaks at 11am and 3pm with a 30 minute lunch break at 1pm , the person can prepare getting up earlier, working out a travel route and adjusting the times they eat if necessary
- 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, where they will be expected to work e.g. a desk in a small office, on the 2nd floor of a 5 floor building. This will enable the person to understand what is expected of them and allow the employer to make any necessary adjustments prior to the start of the person's 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 that we may not be used to 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 prior to the first day have been made to ensure that any barriers or challenges a person may encounter can be avoided, or at least reduced.

For people with autism, it is often essential that any instructions are communicated in a way that is best understood by the person. Therefore, some people may prefer verbal instructions whereas others may prefer instructions to be written down in an ordered list. It is important that instructions are clear, concise and sequenced and it may be necessary to provide instructions individually to enable the person to process information and complete what is expected of them in a 'step by step' fashion. In addition, some people may prefer a physical demonstration of how to complete a task; therefore, it may be necessary to do this before expecting a person to do this independently.

"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” (Person with an ASC)

It is also important to consider that the social norms of the workplace environment may present with difficulties for employees with autism. There is an expectancy to engage with other employees and engage in social interaction; however, engaging in small talk may not be as easy for people with autism. It is important that other employees respect and acknowledge these difficulties and engage with employees with autism in a way that is preferred by them. In addition, social rules, that are taken for granted in the workplace environment may be ambiguous for people with autism e.g. people with autism may follow strict rules and instructions set by employers, therefore if they see another employee making a drink at a time that is not designated to this but is acceptable, it is important that these situations are explained.

What can we do?

- Identify preferred methods of communication and develop a plan for delivering instructions, managing and prioritising tasks etc.
- 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 e.g. it is acceptable to make a coffee and take it back to your desk whilst you carry on working but not acceptable to go across the road and get a coffee and take an unauthorised break.

Workplace environment

For many people with autism, it is sometimes the working environment that can cause more anxiety than actually completing the tasks and responsibilities associated with their job roles.

Many people with autism can experience sensory differences which are very often not accommodated for in the working environment. Noise, lighting, temperature and colours can all result in sensory overload which could potentially prevent the person from fulfilling their job role in addition to provoking anxiety and distress.

For example, if a person is expected to work in a communal office space, where staff members from across the workforce come to use the photocopier. It is likely that the environment will be busy and noisy which could affect the person's ability to concentrate on a given task due to the levels of abstract noise. It may be more beneficial for the person to work in a quieter area of the workplace environment, where staff members remain familiar and noise levels are stable, so that the person is able to adapt to these.

'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' (Person with an ASC)

In addition, the workplace environment can be unpredictable with unforeseen changes not accounted for in many situations. Many people with autism like to implement structure and routine in different aspects of their daily lives, which includes the workplace. Any unplanned changes or changes which occur without warning can have a detrimental impact on the person.

An example of this may be changing of offices, whilst it is likely that employees would be made aware of this in advance, it is often taken for granted that most people would adjust as expected to a new working environment. It may be useful for the employer to accompany an employee with autism to go and look around the new office space prior to the move so that they are able to visualise this and anticipate how they are going to adapt. Furthermore, in this instance the person may have to work out a new travel route to work, adapt their morning routine to accommodate for longer or shorter travelling time to work and prepare for the prospect of having to meet new people.

“Sometimes the most damaging problem with issues of communication are assuming the level of natural ability an AS 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 NT person. Whilst there are many instances when this does occur, this is because in the main the AS 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 AS person or if the situation is new in content and environment, that this can cause problems for them in new or unprepared for situations” (Person with an ASC)

What can we do?

- Work with the person to identify what their sensory difficulties may be and establish methods for overcoming or reducing these e.g. for a person who has sensory difficulties associated with heat, provide them with a fan for their desk.
- Try to prepare people for change and unpredictable situations in advance e.g. ‘in the event of a fire alarm, you will need to...’ providing clear and concise instructions, making sure that the person has understood

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 people with autism, this is particularly important.

If work-based performance is not addressed or feedback is not provided this can result in anxiety and distress. Issues relating to self confidence, esteem and image may leave the person feeling like they are not doing the job properly and will need reassurance from management and other employees to affirm that this is not the case.

On the other hand, an employee with autism may be experiencing work-based problems or difficulties, and due to issues such as communication barriers and lack of clarity in management structures, may not feel confident in expressing their concerns or seeking help from others. It is essential that people have an outlet to discuss their workplace difficulties and seek support from others. Due to potential problems in communication barriers, it is important that reviewing performance and providing feedback occurs regularly to ensure that any potential issues are addressed promptly and support can be offered. This may need to be offered on a more frequent basis than to other employees.

In addition, the way in which feedback is provided will need to be considered to ensure that it is 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 upon communicating these to employees, but rather, provide support and guidance in order to do this. People with autism 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 of an exceptional standard 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?

- Ensure that employees understand what to expect and what the purpose of the review process is
- Ensure that performance reviews are scheduled in advance to enable the employee to prepare for these meetings.

- Try to ensure that a nominated person is responsible for completing all performance reviews to maintain consistency
- Ensure that employees understand policies and procedures e.g. annual leave and sickness policies
- Ensure that the person knows who to go to, should they have any problems in between performance reviews, ensuring that a definitive 'chain of command' is outlined e.g. senior manager, team manager, team leader, employees etc.
- Identify tools and resources that can be used to improve performance e.g. daily planners and timetables could be used to manage time and tasks effectively.

Lack of understanding and raising awareness

A lack of understanding of autism in the workplace can be a major source of workplace difficulties for people with autism. People may be less likely to disclose their diagnosis of autism if they believe that their condition will not be understood by other employees. In addition, many people with autism have been victims of prejudice and discrimination in previous employment due to a lack of understanding of what autism is.

Similarly, 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's autism impacts on them directly; employees do not often receive the support they need from others.

Employers can be focal in ensuring that awareness in the workforce is raised through organising and providing autism awareness training and general disability awareness training. In addition, employers could attend diversity events in their local and extended communities to increase their understanding of disability and disseminate this information to the rest of the workforce. Also, 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 be actively promoting the rights and responsibilities of autistic employees in the workplace through their practice and through a commitment to making positive adjustments and changes in a meaningful way for employees with autism. Furthermore, an increased awareness of making reasonable adjustments will be of maximum benefit to all employees as it will provoke positive changes to workplace environment and processes for the entirety of the workforce.

“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” (Person with an ASC)

What can we do?

- Identify and regularly review training opportunities available to employees
- Ensure that employees are aware of other employees autism and support needs (with the employees permission)
- Develop and use tools which can aid awareness in the workplace e.g. one page profiles which provide information about the employee

Employers Perspectives

Case Study 1: Scope Aspire Mentoring and Volunteering Service (Newsletter Editor)

The person wishes to remain anonymous

The role X does

X is our newsletter volunteer. X's role is to research subjects and write articles for the quarterly newsletter. In her own words, "To write articles for the newsletter, Joel gives a list of suggestions and I think about what I could write about that subject. Some of the time I can write about personal experiences, like when I wrote about my experience with volunteering and visiting an information event. Most of the time I don't really know anything about the topic, like an event that is coming up, but I can still write about it because I can research it on the internet.

I enjoy doing this because I can collect information from several different sources and put it into my own words. Very often I end up learning a lot about the topic that I had no idea about before. I also like compiling themed crosswords and word searches for each issue of the newsletter. In order to do this I research vocabulary for specific themes (Valentine's Day, Christmas, Tour de France etc) and think up corresponding clues, then enter these into a generator online."

The skills and personal qualities X has brought to the role

X's quiet demeanour does not prepare one for the brilliant way in which she writes. X will take a subject she knows nothing about, research it, extract the important points, and then put together a really interesting and engaging article. X is equally good at writing about her own life experience – making sure to share relevant and helpful information with the reader. X is polite and friendly in every situation.

When we are discussing the contents of an upcoming newsletter, X will ask great questions to determine what is required from her and once she has it, she has it, and she remains focussed on what she has to do. X prefers to work alone and the newsletter has provided her with the perfect volunteering opportunity. In her own words, “The newsletter was an easy choice for me because I have good typing and internet research skills and for most of the time I can work alone in a quiet place, which allows me to be much more productive as I am able to concentrate better.”

The benefits employing X has had

Since X has begun volunteering with us, the newsletter has gone from strength to strength. The content X writes is interesting and informative and this information is shared with everyone who reads the newsletter. A knock on effect of X's hard work is that the newsletter work load is shared with fellow volunteers and staff, creating an easier experience all round. All of this is reflected in the

newsletter and in the compliments that the newsletter receives from those who receive it.

Some examples of compliments received include, “The review of the autism information day is brilliant”, and “Really, really good. Please pass on how impressed I am with both the content and how it is put together. Great job!”

The biggest benefit, however, we are happy to see in X herself, “I have low self-esteem so have always struggled to say anything positive about myself in CVs without feeling like a liar, but getting genuine positive feedback from several different people for my contributions to the newsletter have made me feel surer of my abilities.

Writing has always been one of my greatest strengths but I feel that I am not able to convey this well to other people. If I am forced into a situation where people have no choice but to judge my ability or intelligence based solely on my social skills I feel useless and demoralized. But by giving me the opportunity to focus on what I am good at, Scope Aspire has gained a loyal volunteer who is motivated to do well.”

The value employing X has added to the organisation

X is so valuable to our organisation – she is a perfect fit in our service and within the newsletter role. X enjoys researching and does it well, she writes brilliantly, and enjoys working alone or with another volunteer, and she requires minimal guidance and supervision. X really puts a huge amount of effort in to her volunteering role – every minute she spends here. We would not be without her!

Case Study 2: Lloyds Banking Group

Lloyds Banking Group are a business group who are committed to promoting equality and diversity within the workplace and as a result are inclusive in their employment process. Lloyds current employ many people with autism in a variety of different roles. Lloyds recognise the added value employing people with autism can bring to their business but equally recognise some of the challenges and barriers they can face in employment. Subsequently, Lloyds have a dedicated sub-contractor network who work in partnership with employers and employees to implement 'reasonable adjustments' within the workplace to remove some of these barriers for people with autism.

Through collating data on employees, some of the most common reasonable adjustments that have been made include:

- Autism awareness training for colleagues and line managers
- Extra rest breaks
- Software training (including 'Mindmapping', 'TextHelp' and 'Screen Ruler')
- Quieter working conditions
- Opportunities to work from home
- Support from peers/mentors
- Ergonomic aids

Case Study 3: The National Autistic Society

The person wishes to remain anonymous

The role X does

X supports the NAS National Brokerage Project, he has previously worked for office services and our Policy and Campaigns Team. He supports the project developing accessible documents, quarterly Newsletters, filming for the project and online training courses such as Ask Autism. He is an active self-advocate for Aspergers Syndrome, and as part of this he co presents training and also sits on Head office interview panels.

The skills and personal qualities X has brought to the role

X is passionate about working for the NAS, is an excellent time keeper, very self-aware and able to share this with others. X is Efficient with deadlines, has a great imagination and has a creative, artistic flair.

The benefits employing X has had

X brings a different dynamic to the team, giving the team an autism perspective at all times. X also said that 'the reason I get up every day is because of this job' meaning there are benefits to both us as an employer and X as an employee.

The value employing X has added to the organisation

It has enabled the NAS to do what we want others to do, actively employ people who have autism. Employing people like X allows us to support people with autism in employment appropriately and promote full inclusion in the workplace.

Recruiters Checklist

Statement	Yes	No
Application Form		
Are questions in the application form clear and direct?		
Is the job specification clear and concise?		
Is there an adequate amount of time for the person to complete the application form?		
Can people save progress on application forms?		
Is it clear how much information applicants are expected to provide in their responses to questions?		
Is there an 'easy read' version of the application form available?		
Is there guidance for people completing psychometric and/or personality tests as part of the application process? (if applicable)		

Interviews		
Have you provided information about the venue prior to interview?		
Have you provided information about the dress code prior to interview?		
Have you provided information about the interviewers prior to the interview?		
Have you provided information about how long the interview will last for?		
Have you considered the communication methods of applicants?		
Have you provided any additional information which can help applicants prepare for the interview?		
Have you considered alternative types of interviews?		

Have you avoided indirect questions?		
Have you avoided hypothetical questions?		
Have you considered making changes to the interviewing environment?		
Have you provided the option for an applicant to bring along a supporter?		
Have you made any other necessary reasonable adjustments?		
Post Interview		
Have you let candidate know whether they have been successful in the timescale given during interview?		
If candidates have not been successful, have you provided feedback?		

If candidates have been successful, have you provided clear information about what happens next?		
Have you offered successful candidates the opportunity to visit the workplace prior to the start of their employment?		

Employers Checklist

Statement	Yes	No
Settling in		
Have you made efforts to introduce new employees to others?		
Have you considered reasonable adjustments that may need making to the workplace environment?		
Have you made it clear who new employees can go to for support and advice?		
Have you provided guidance about 'what is acceptable' and 'what is not acceptable' in the workplace?		
Have you provided instructions or given demonstrations of how to complete tasks?		
Have you been clear about deadlines for completing tasks and responsibilities?		
Have you assigned a mentor?		

Do you have tools/resources in place which may help a person to fulfil the requirements of their role?		
Workplace environment		
Have you considered aspects of the workplace environment that may affect an employee's performance?		
Have alternatives/adjustments to the working environment been considered for employees?		
Do you have protocols/procedures in place for employees in unplanned situations?		
Have you identified strategies to help employees cope with change?		
If planned changes are happening, are employees informed in advance?		
Performance review and feedback		
Have performance reviews been regularly scheduled and attended?		
Has the same person completed the review consistently?		

Is feedback sensitive and direct?		
Have you identified strategies that can be used to improve performance? (if applicable)		
Is there a nominated person employees can go to for feedback/support in between performance reviews?		
Employee awareness		
Do employees have access to autism awareness or disability awareness training?		
Are training opportunities regularly reviewed?		
Are there any tools and resources being used to raise awareness of employee's autism? E.g. one page profiles		
Are employees aware of their rights and responsibilities?		

Useful links and contacts

Links

An overview of the autism strategy (2009):

<http://www.autism.org.uk/working-with/autism-strategy/the-autism-strategy-an-overview/autism-act-2009.aspx/>

An overview of the Equality Act (2010):

<https://www.gov.uk/equality-act-2010-guidance#overview/>

Finding work handbook:

<http://www.autism.org.uk/working-with/employment-services/training-and-consultancy/training-for-organisations-and-service-providers/supporting-individuals-with-an-asd-into-sustainable-employment/toolkit.aspx/>

Helen Sanderson one page profiles:

<http://www.helensandersonassociates.co.uk/reading-room/how/person-centred-thinking/one-page-profiles.aspx/>

TUC 'Autism in the workplace':

<http://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/Autism.pdf>

Untapped talent: A guide to employing people with Autism:

<http://www.autismsomerset.org.uk/document/untapped-talent-a-guide-to-employing-people-with-autism/>

'Access to work' information:

<https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work/what-youll-get>

'Work choice programme: wage incentives':

<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/work-choice-wage-incentives-qa.pdf>

Information about disabled employee networks:

<http://www.katenashassociates.com/home>

Contacts

Halifax Job Centre

Crossfield House,
St James Road,
Halifax,
HX1 1PE

Telephone: 0845 608 8548

Brighouse Job Centre

Owler Ings Road
Brighouse
HD6 1EH

Telephone: 0845 604 3719

Todmorden Job Centre

27-31 Adelaide Street,
Todmorden,
West Yorkshire,
United Kingdom,
OL14 5HT

Telephone: 0845 604 3719

Access to work

Email: atwosu.london@jobcentreplus.gsi.gov.uk

Telephone: 0345 268 8489

Textphone: 0345 608 8753

Specialist Autism Services

Email: mercie.kennedy@specialistautismservices.org

Telephone: 01274 789 789

Website: www.specialistautismservices.org/employment-programme/

NAS Employment Training and Consultancy Service

Email: employment.training@nas.org.uk

Telephone: 020 7704 7450

Website: www.autism.org.uk