

Untapped Potential

How to benefit from recruiting and retaining autistic people



Terms

Autism is something a person is born with. It means that they think about and experience the world differently from most people. Autistic people communicate and interact differently from other people.

This guide is about autistic people without learning disabilities. It includes people who are neurodiverse in other ways, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia and dyspraxia.

For ease of reading, in the guide, we use the term 'autistic people'.

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Summary

This guide encourages you to reflect on these key areas:



1. Potential

The opportunities that employing autistic people can offer to your organisation.



2. Benefits

The particular strengths of autistic people and how they can add value to your organisation.



3. Actions

What you can do to recruit and retain autistic people.



Golden Opportunities

Autistic people offer both a new pool of talent, and a greater diversity of thought within a workforce and teams. They can offer your organisation:



Improved Productivity

Through their strengths and talents in performing specific tasks in the right roles, autistic people offer greater efficiency and effectiveness.



Reduced Staff Turnover

Autistic people tend to be more loyal to a good employer, so saving time and costs in recruiting and inducting new staff.



Reduced Sickness Absence

If employed well, autistic people tend to have higher levels of commitment and attendance in their jobs.



Organisational Benefits

The particular strengths of autistic people

Autistic people are diverse but most commonly tend to offer to employers:



Intense Focus

- **Characteristics:** high concentration
- **Business value:** higher productivity



Attention to Detail

- **Characteristics:** accuracy; analytical thinking
- **Business value:** higher quality



Thinking Differently

- **Characteristics:** new insights; creativity; innovation
- **Business value:** new solutions and approaches



Reliability

- **Characteristics:** loyalty; integrity; trustworthiness
- **Business value:** reduced sickness absence



Commitment

- **Characteristics:** passion; perseverance
- **Business value:** lower staff turnover; meeting deadlines



Diligence

- **Characteristics:** attentiveness; thoroughness
- **Business value:** completion of tasks



Recruitment and Retention

1 Recruitment and Selection

For autistic people, it is important that recruitment and selection processes are as clear and as practical as possible.

Advertising

Advertisements should be clear, concise and use plain language. They should also highlight the support and development available in the role.

Your organisation can go to many places to find autistic people with the particular strengths that it is seeking.

These include:

Education Providers



Work and Skills Services



Autism Organisations



Internet / Social Media



Recruitment Agencies



Fairs and Networking



Designing Pre-employment Opportunities

As an employer, to assess an autistic person's suitability, your organisation might consider offering:

- apprenticeships
- work experience
- internships

Work Trials and Placements

Rather than a traditional recruitment process, a work trial or placement before employment can be a good way of witnessing the strengths, ability and potential of an autistic person. This also lets them demonstrate these qualities, rather than trying to describe their job suitability.

These are important factors for effective work trials and placements:



- Describe the work trial as an opportunity to show what they can do.
- Check in what physical environment the person performs the best.
- Advise on how they might best prepare for the work trial.
- Show the person around the workplace before the work trial.
- Introduce them to relevant work colleagues.
- Use very clear, direct instructions and explanations.
- Offer visual advice and guidance, if required.
- Allow for short breaks, if this helps the person to perform effectively.

Application and Documentation Stages

Consider how to relate your documents – such as the job description, person specification and job advertisement – to the particular strengths and skills that autistic people tend to have (intense focus, attention to detail, thinking differently, reliability, commitment and diligence). Try to avoid a focus on background, work experience or qualifications, unless genuinely essential.

To improve the recruitment process, consideration might be given to these ideas when designing your documentation:



- Keep job descriptions and person specifications clear and concise, using simple language, and no more than one or two pages in length.
- Avoid the use of abstract language and metaphors.
- Use visual or video material to illustrate what the role involves.
- Seek skills and knowledge specific to the job, rather than generic ones (such as 'team player' or 'good communication skills').
- Avoid phrases suggesting no support such as 'hit the ground running'.
- Provide a practical guide to producing a high quality application.
- Actively encourage disclosure of autism and neurodiversity, so that you are aware of any adjustments that might be appropriate.
- Offer a contact to help if a person might struggle with the process.

Interviews and Alternative Assessments

Due to the social, communication and interaction challenges that autistic people tend to face, standard interviews are not very effective to assess their capabilities.

If, however, your organisation still decides to use an interview process, the more realistic and practical the methods used, the better. Options include:

- tests of practical skills necessary for the job
- work exercise in a real environment
- assessment days or centres
- structured presentations

This can be supported by the appropriate choice of interview style:

Best: One to One



Possible: Two to One



Not Recommended: Panel



For the best interview results, you might want to consider these ideas for making the experience more informal and relaxed:



- In communications, talk of a 'conversation' or a 'discussion', rather than an 'interview', and reassure the person it is not an interrogation.
- Ask the person about any preference they have for time and place (such as in person or online).
- Encourage informal, comfortable clothing.
- Use a quiet, relaxing environment, appropriate to any sensory sensitivities (such as bright light, sharp sounds and strong smells).
- If you can, send the person images of the space, or let them visit to see it beforehand.
- Provide the names and roles of interview panel members in advance.
- Send the person the exercises, tests and questions in advance.
- Provide a practical guide to doing a high quality interview.
- Provide clear travel advice and information about where to arrive.
- If the person does not understand a question or request, rephrase it or give practical examples.
- Make allowances for eye contact or presentation that is different from other people's.

2 Induction and Onboarding

A successful induction programme will be well designed and feasible, and consider any specific issues for the autistic person to settle in.

Beyond your organisation's standard induction and onboarding processes, you might want to consider these ideas for an autistic person:



Before the First Day

- Discussing any reasonable workplace adjustments as early as possible.
- Arranging a colleague to be a 'buddy' for the person's first few days.
- Showing them their work station, or images of it, as appropriate.
- Providing clear information about the start date and the induction programme, including any guidance and support available.



Getting Started

- Meeting the person at their arrival on their first day.
- Giving a guided tour around the workplace, showing the facilities, and telling the person about places nearby, such as shops and parks.
- Communicating key policies and procedures in a succinct, interactive way.
- Describing the organisation's values and culture: how things are done in practice.
- Introductions to colleagues to promote positive interactions.
- Enabling a gradual adjustment into the role, with flexibility for routines and short breaks, if necessary.
- Discussing how to manage any feelings of overstimulation or anxiety.

3

Inclusive Workplace Environment

It is best to speak with each individual about their preferences to optimise their effectiveness and efficiency (such as a daily/weekly task list). You can get general advice and support about how to create the best workplace environment for an autistic person from government and specialist agencies.

There are various aspects that your organisation might consider:



- **Job carving:** matching skill sets to the role and then identifying other colleagues to do part of the job that may not suit the autistic person.
- **Explaining 'how things are done around here':** the culture of the organisation and the ways that things are done that are not written down in policies and procedures.
- **Adjusting for sensory issues:** some autistic people are particularly sensitive to light, sounds, smells, textures or surfaces.
- **Flexible working and location:** such as home or hybrid working.
- **Staff awareness:** improving the awareness of managers and colleagues about autism, the strengths that it offers, and how an autistic person communicates and interacts with the world differently.

Many, but not all, autistic people tend to prefer quiet rather than crowded, busy or highly stimulating spaces.



4 Managing a Neurodiverse Team

Once the person has started work with your organisation, it is important to have an appropriate approach to managing a neurodiverse team. This includes:



Management

- Person-centric management styles
- Example: focus on what inspires the person



Feedback

- Sensitive but direct feedback
- Example: positive comments for development



Review

- Regular review of performance and adjustments
- Example: one-to-ones on progress and next steps



Support

- Support and mentoring strategies
- Example: learning and development planning



Development

- Clear opportunities for progression
- Example: actively share development opportunities



Well-being

- Reassurance in stressful situations
- Example: provide time and space if required



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