

Information Sheet: Working with an autistic person

Autistic people can be excellent employees as they are often reliable, punctual, have a professional attitude to work, a high level of attention to detail and are good with routine and repetition.

However, in order to reap the benefits that an autistic employee can offer, it is important to put in place some strategies to ensure success.

Autistic people often have difficulty changing from task to task, multi-tasking, difficulty with learning new tasks and transferring skills from one situation to another. Things we assume a person learns from exposure and experience have to be specifically taught to the autistic people and constantly reinforced to reduce the stress, confusion and frustration which may lead to behavioural difficulties, or withdrawal and depression.

Understanding the difficulties of an autistic employee is important, as is providing routine, structure and predictability.

Not every autistic people will excel in every job but where they do find a niche they are generally well regarded and with support and understanding, make reliable and productive employees.

In the workplace, the autistic person may have difficulty:

- interpreting instructions
- in noisy situations
- in unstructured situations
- starting work
- organising tasks

Strategies

1. Keep instructions brief and precise

- use simple, concrete language
- give instructions in writing
- confirm that the person has understood
- use peers/workmates to provide cues

2. Give the person time to process the instruction

- be sure you have the individual's attention and that you allow them enough time to absorb each instruction

3. If practical, make use of visual cues and procedures

- a written schedule or task sheet is preferable to verbal instructions

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4. Break work into smaller steps

- check progress regularly
- be prepared to negotiate with the worker

Organisational Skills (Planning)

Autistic people have difficulty with:

- organising themselves and their belongings
- listening to multiple instructions
- coping with changes – room, times, workmates
- distractions
- interpreting abstract instructions
- sequential instructions
- focussing on the important part of instruction
- planning how to tackle a task
- fine and gross motor skills

Strategies

- use visual cues and instructions
- colour code the instructions
- use concrete language
- suggest that the worker marks off each task as it is finished
- point to the starting place
- show an example of what you need
- daily briefing re changes, targets etc
- formal peer support system
- verbal reassurance

Communication

The expressive (spoken) and receptive (listening) language skills of the autistic person have particular characteristics: they may

- have a foreign or odd intonation
- Interpret expressions literally, for example, interpret “Pull up your socks” as an instruction.
- show one word/one meaning use of words
- show unusual linkage of thoughts
- be confined to narrow topics of conversation
- feature learned phrases in particular situations
- have different levels of receptive skills and expressive skills
- misinterpret what was said

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- often hear only the beginning or end of an instruction or comment
- not be able to interpret the real meaning of colloquialisms, metaphors, similes, sarcasm or wit
- feel confused or isolated because they cannot understand what is happening

Strategies

- use visual cues where possible
- explain if you are joking or teasing
- reassure that it is OK to be wrong and be supportive
- keep your language simple and direct
- talk through situations...what could you say?
- Avoid using sarcasm

Social Skills

Autistic people have difficulties with understanding social cues.

They may:

- not understand rules of social behaviour
- talk about inappropriate subjects
- find it hard to understand their own feelings and those of others
- be very outspoken
- develop a fixation on certain individuals
- have a strong sense of justice, but see things in black and white terms
- have difficulty making friends
- find personal space difficult
- misinterpret the behaviours of peers
- dislike being touched
- appear naive and be vulnerable
- not interpret body language or facial expressions
- find conversations difficult

Strategies

- “debrief” situations by discussing what the autistic person could have done
- encourage self control by providing quiet time and a location to enable them to relax without any social expectations or demands placed on them
- use written reminders to support proposed actions
- be aware of how vulnerable the person may be to peer pressure and being set up

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References

Attwood, T., *The Complete Guide to Asperger's Syndrome*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006. This book is essential reading for those living or working with a child or adult with Asperger Syndrome. It is written in a clear and concise manner, with plenty of examples, practical suggestions and resource lists.

Fast, Y., *Employment for Individuals with Asperger Syndrome or Non-verbal Learning Disability*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2004. This book is a handy guide to gaining employment. It includes actual case examples written by adults with Asperger Syndrome.

Hawkins, G., *How to Find Work That Works for People with Asperger Syndrome*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2004. Gail Hawkins is a vocational consultant, having specialised in Autism Spectrum Disorder for the past 15 years. This book is aimed at people with Asperger Syndrome who need information on how to find and maintain employment. The book covers topics such as choosing appropriate careers, building a resume, educating employers and how to disclose necessary information to the employer.

Meyer, R., *Asperger Syndrome Employment Workbook*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2001. This workbook has practical activities for individuals with Asperger Syndrome to explore their talents, strengths and difficulties in past work experiences in order to identify the best suited jobs and work environment.

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