

Social skills for autistic people in the workplace

Many autistic people have problems relating to others socially at work. These difficulties may be with knowing when and how to talk with a colleague, recognising non-verbal cues, personal hygiene, and understanding social conversation.

This article outlines some practical tips that may help autistic people improve their social skills, and be successful, in the workplace.

Getting on with work colleagues

Employment is not just about work: getting along with people and relating socially is a large day to day part of being employed.



How you relate to others will depend partly on what sort of work environment you are in and on the work culture in your industry or profession. For example, there would be differences in how you would relate to colleagues if you worked in a supermarket as opposed to a large corporation. In a supermarket your manner would be more relaxed and informal, whereas in a corporation you would be expected to relate more formally to people.

You might need to work with others as part of a team, or be required to network to make contacts at social functions in a more corporate role. Interpersonal skills, for example, networking, can be necessary to advance to roles with more responsibility.

Good manners

Using good manners is an important part of being successful, both personally and professionally.

Having poor manners can risk your success in the workplace, as people may judge your personality and professionalism by them. Also, people may be easily embarrassed by poor manners, for example, walking too close to other people.

Be mindful of where other people are standing or walking when you walk around the office. You don't want to brush past your colleagues when you walk because it may make them feel uncomfortable.

It's polite to give right of way if you and a colleague arrive at a doorway or small space. If your colleague gestures for you to go through the area first, you can accept and lead the way but remember to acknowledge their gesture by saying 'thank you' or nodding your head.

Be aware of how much space you take up when you sit on a chair around other people. Don't let your legs stick out in front of you as it might appear

as if you are not considering the space and comfort of others. Also, someone may trip over them!

Table manners at work lunches and social gatherings are important too. Eating with your mouth closed, using your napkin to wipe your face, and not speaking with food in your mouth are basic rules. Conversation should be fairly evenly shared, try not to dominate the conversation if you have a lot to say about an issue. Likewise, if you tend to stay quiet around others ask a colleague one or two questions about themselves. Generally, people like to talk about themselves, so if you ask about others you will make someone else happy by showing interest in them.

Working as part of a team

Although you may largely work independently, some basic teamwork skills are usually needed in the workplace. The skill of working as part of a team can be broken down into smaller, more manageable skills, to make it easier to learn them.

These skills can be learnt over time and include: helping others, communicating cooperatively, showing empathy, and supporting others in the team.



Helping others

Team members each have an individual role; however, sometimes boundaries may become blurred. Colleagues may ask you for help in an area that may not necessarily be in your role. It's important to realise that this will happen from time to time. To answer: "This isn't my job", is generally not

considered showing good teamwork skills. A good rule is to always try to appear willing to help others.

Teamwork can be easier if you think of the common goal. This could be a project deadline or a presentation. Knowing that you are doing your bit to achieve the common goal can help you feel productive when you're helping a colleague with a task. Your manager should clearly define this goal and you can ask your manager to clarify the goal if you are uncertain.

Communicating cooperatively

When you relate to your colleagues, try to be light-hearted and easy to be around. The workplace can be a stressful place with work-related pressures and you do not want to appear uptight or rude. Practice social niceties and casual conversation. Prepare some pleasant phrases to say to show that you're interested in others. If your colleague has a photo of a pet on their desk you might comment on this. Or you might make a statement about the weather.

You can use humour – but not in every situation. Remember, the levels and style of humour will differ according to where you work.

Observe how colleagues use humour to deal with difficult situations. Practice non-verbal skills, such as how you say things, your tone of voice, gestures, and facial expression. Imitate these skills from someone who socialises well and practice in front of someone you trust. Listen to their feedback.

If you have difficulty maintaining eye contact when someone is talking to you, you can reassure the speaker that you're listening but find it easier to concentrate on what they are saying when you look away. Or you can look at a point in between the speaker's eyes if you find that more comfortable. Show that you are appreciative of other team members by making clear statements, such as: "Thank you", "I appreciate what you did there for me", "That was helpful, thanks".

Empathy towards other team members

Practice understanding the perspectives of other people. Sometimes you might disagree very strongly with another team member's idea. It's important to think about why they might be suggesting their idea before you react. Explore other reasons and possibilities for their suggestion, and accept that there may be more than one way of looking at something. It's very important to show that you have consideration for another's opinion, even if you don't agree with it. You can say: "I can see your point of view" or "I think that idea has some good points" to show this.

Supporting others

Everybody has good and bad days. Sometimes people might be feeling unwell or have a personal problem that prevents them from performing at their best. It is important to show that you consider those you work with. This includes showing support to your colleagues when you know they're struggling.

Demonstrate your support by offering to help finish a task or make them a cup of tea. Think about how you might like to be treated if you were in their situation.



How to interact with work colleagues in different roles

In the workplace there are hierarchies. The higher up the person is in the hierarchy, the more thought you need to put into how you interact with them.

Manager/CEO

Act very responsibly and show that you are a hard worker. Managers are usually very busy so it is best not to interrupt them too often with questions. If you need their support or have many questions to ask it's a good idea to write down all your questions and then arrange a time to meet with them to discuss your questions. It's friendly to smile and say hello when you walk past them, but don't get too friendly with your managers or talk about controversial topics.

Same-level colleagues

You can let your guard down slightly but remember to be sensible. It's acceptable to have a joke and a laugh with your peers, but you don't want to be known as the departmental clown. As a rule, it's best not to mix your professional and private life. This means that you don't talk about your relationship issues or how drunk you got on the weekend. It's OK to discuss what you did on the weekend in general terms.

Avoid gossip about people and remember to keep your opinions about people to yourself, especially on the subject of your boss. If someone gossips to you about a work colleague, you might want to answer with an impartial comment like "Oh really?" or "Gosh". If someone continues to ask for your opinion you can say something like "I don't really know that person".

Networking to make contacts

Networking to make contacts is about building professional relationships. It's a way to present yourself effectively and ultimately advance your career. Networking can benefit you by providing you with 'insider' information about a particular company, give you an idea of what sorts of training and experience you might need in a new role, or give you tips for interviewing.

Networking to make contacts can be an overwhelming process. Some tips to ease the process are:

- If attending a conference in your field, prepare planned, thought-out questions to ask other attendees or presenters at breaks.

- Join a professional society in your field or industry and attend meetings. Plan for these by writing down questions you would like answered.
- Write down a list of people in your profession or workplace who interest you and every fortnight contact one person from your list and find out if they're happy for you to ask them some questions. Keep a record of your correspondence from them.
- Send out articles and information of interest to colleagues to maintain positive contact.
- Email is a good way to stay in touch, without the pressure of social interaction.
- Hire a networking coach (may be called Corporate Relationship Builders in your workplace) for expert advice relating to networking.
- Be aware of others' space. Don't stand 'too close for comfort'. Standing too close to another person may be misinterpreted as intimidating, bullying, making a sexual advance, or could just be annoying.
- Don't touch others. At work there are strict rules about touching others. You can generally shake a person's hand or tap them on the shoulder, but any physical contact beyond this is risky as it can be misinterpreted.
- Have a plan of action in place that will help you cope with stress at work. If you feel overloaded and need some time to be alone and gather your thoughts then perhaps you could go for a walk, start a new task, or go somewhere quiet. What you decide to do will depend on what type of workplace you are employed in, so you may want to prepare this plan with someone who is familiar with your industry. You may wish to discuss this plan with your manager if you think it might disrupt your ability to complete your work or impact on another person in the team.

Quick tips for relating better at work

- Say 'hello' and 'goodbye' to your colleagues every day.
- Have good personal hygiene. Make sure you wear deodorant, have fresh breath, and wash your hands after using the toilet.
- Show that you are eager to help others.
- Some casual conversation around the office is important to ensure the atmosphere is relaxed and positive. This can be brief, such as "How did you go the other day with (insert an event they mentioned)", or "Did you have a good weekend"?
- Treat managers with respect and be friendly and easy to talk to around colleagues and supervisors.
- Offer to make tea and coffee for others occasionally, to show that you're helpful and considerate.
- Listen when a colleague gives you feedback about how you relate to people at work. You may like to talk about the feedback with a trusted friend or family member.
- Consider your phone manner. Is it polite and approachable? Practice answering the phone and ending conversations appropriately. It may be helpful to prepare a script that you can refer to in order to help you remember what to say and how to say it.

This information sheet was produced using advice from the lived experience of families and autistic people from the Amaze community.

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