



Autism in the Workplace: Hints and tips for managers of autistic staff

1. Clarify expectations of the job.

You may need to be more explicit about your expectations for someone on the autism spectrum. As well as the job description, you need to explain the etiquette and unwritten rules of the workplace.

Make it clear that any adaptations for them in the workplace are there to help them to continue doing their job well, not because they are not good enough.

2. Provide ongoing training and monitoring.

Clear and structured training is invaluable. This can be provided informally on the job, by a manager, mentor or colleagues. We recommend consistent on the job training with regular follow-up and offering the individual the chance to show their understanding. The training may take the form of more formal training if required.

3. Make sure instructions are concise and specific.

Try to give the employee clear instructions right from the start about exactly how to carry out each task, from start to finish, as this will lay the foundations for good working practices. Don't assume the person will infer your meaning from informal instructions – for example, rather than saying 'Give everybody a copy of this', say 'Make three photocopies of this, and give one each to Tim, Mary and Lisa. You may also choose to provide written or visual instructions. It can also be helpful to ask the person to repeat back instructions, so you are sure they have understood correctly. It may also be important to re-teach instructions in new contexts or when there is a change within the team or to the process.

4. Ensure the work environment is well-structured.

Some individuals on the autism spectrum will thrive in a structured work environment. You can help by working with them to prioritise activities, organising tasks into a timetable for daily, weekly and monthly activities, and breaking larger tasks into small steps. Some people will appreciate precise information about start and finish times, and help getting into a routine with breaks and lunches. Some employees will benefit from assistance in setting up and implementing these strategies in the first instance.

5. Regularly review performance.

As with any employee, line managers should have regular one-to-one meetings with the person to discuss and review performance and give overall comments and suggestions. This is very important for employees on the autism spectrum because it provides confirmation and reassurance when they are on the right track, increasing efficiency and reducing anxiety about whether they are doing a good job. It also offers the opportunity for honest feedback



if they need to improve, as some employees may not be able to read between the lines if they are not performing as expected. For an individual on the autism spectrum, brief and frequent reviews may be better than longer sessions at less frequent intervals.

6. Provide sensitive but direct feedback.

Individuals on the autism spectrum often find it difficult to pick up on social cues, so make sure your feedback is honest, constructive and consistent. If they complete a task incorrectly, don't allude to or imply any problems – instead, explain tactfully but clearly why it is wrong, check that they have understood, and set out exactly what they should do instead. Be aware that they may have low self-esteem or experience of being bullied, so ensure that any criticism is sensitive, and give positive feedback wherever appropriate.

7. Provide reassurance in time of change or stressful situations.

Individuals on the autism spectrum can be quite meticulous, and can become anxious if their performance is not perfect. This means they may become very stressed in a situation such as an IT failure. You can help by giving concrete solutions to these situations – for example, by explaining "If the photocopier breaks, use the one on the third floor." Similarly, reassure them that if they occasionally arrive late due to transport problems or other unpreventable factors, this is not a problem. Your employee may benefit from chatting to their mentor or buddy when stressed – an empathetic colleague who they can go to if they are feeling stressed, anxious or confused.

Give information about changes to the workplace or tasks well in advance. For example, if their Manager or Supervisor is going on leave or if there is a change to the structure of their role.

8. Ask about sensory distractions.

Many individuals on the spectrum are overwhelmed with lots of noise or distractions. This is different for everyone, so asking people what they need is the best course of action. Individuals on the spectrum sometimes benefit from things like screens around their desk, noise-cancelling headphones, or their desk being in a quiet corner which may assist them to tune out any distractions.

Some individuals on the autism spectrum may also be affected by fluorescent lights particularly if they flicker. While most people may not notice the subtle flickering, someone with autism may be acutely aware. Try switching the lights to more steady or natural-style lighting or move the individual to a window seat to allow for natural lighting.

9. Help other staff to be more aware. If the individuals on the autism spectrum consents to their condition being disclosed, providing colleagues with information and guidance on autism can benefit everyone. Sometimes the employee may find it helpful to write a document for other staff explaining what their colleagues can do to support them. Specialisterne can provide tailored Autism Awareness Training to your organisation as part of this process.