

Manager Guidance

Supporting Employees with
Autism Spectrum Disorders



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Introduction

Many of the greatest ideas and discoveries have come from a diverse mix of minds, backgrounds and experiences. Which is why we should all be committed to providing meaningful employment for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs).

ASDs are estimated to affect 1% of the population worldwide and it's also estimated that more than 80% of adults with ASDs are unemployed or underemployed. However, individuals with ASDs (such as Asperger's or Autism) represent a significant pool of hidden talent and if you provide the right accommodations, they offer significant benefits, such as:

- An uncanny ability to spot patterns and errors
- Very structured thinking, and the ability to follow a defined process and improve it
- Promptness, loyalty and a willingness to stick with it – turnover is rarely a problem

For businesses, individuals with ASDs represent a talent pipeline for jobs that have historically presented us with turnover challenges, and specialists who bring a different perspective to the work and help us improve our processes and quality.

This guidance provides an overview of ASDs, and tips for interviewing, managing and supporting individuals with these disorders.

What is a disability?

The Equality Act 2010 defines a disabled person as “an individual has a physical or mental impairment, which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on a person’s ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities”. Long-term is defined as lasting for or likely to last for at least 12 months and substantial is defined as more than a minor effect.

Some conditions are classified as disabilities from when they are diagnosed, these are: cancer, HIV and multiple sclerosis.

Progressive conditions are covered by the Act from the point when the condition causes an impairment which has some effect on ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities, even though it may not be considered a substantial effect, if impairment is likely to have a substantial adverse effect in the future.

Some conditions are not always readily visible – these are often termed ‘invisible illnesses’ or ‘hidden disabilities’ and can include mental health conditions, fatigue, chronic pain, diabetes, brain injuries, cognitive function and conditions effecting sight. In 2019 the CII launched further information on invisible disabilities and a video <https://vimeo.com/377344222>.

The definition of disability is often more complicated than the legal definition allows. Many disabled people do not identify they are disabled because of their impairment or condition, as the definition in the Equality Act states. Instead, they identify they are disabled because of the barriers they encounter in their everyday lives, including at work.

As they do not consider themselves as having an impairment or condition based on a limited legal definition, more and more organisations, such as Scope, do not define disability using the Equality Act. Therefore, for the purpose of this report and subsequent work, we base our definition of disability on an approach known as the social model of disability. This approach argues people are disabled by barriers in society and focuses on removing those barriers.

What are Autism Spectrum Disorders?

ASDs are lifelong developmental disabilities that affect how people communicate with and relate to other people. They also affect how individuals process the world around them. With a spectrum condition, people who have it share certain similarities, but are affected in different ways. For example, some people live relatively independent lives, but others have accompanying learning disabilities and need a lifetime of support.

Social Interaction

Many people with ASDs are uncomfortable and/or awkward in social situations for a variety of reasons. For example, they may:

- Not understand the unwritten social rules that others usually pick up without having to think about them – so they may stand too close to another person or start an inappropriate subject of conversation
- Appear insensitive, as they have not recognized how someone else is feeling
- Prefer to spend time alone rather than actively participating in workplace socializing and banter
- Have difficulty recognizing and expressing their needs or feelings
- Want to interact with others, but are unsure of how to do so

When interacting with someone with an ASD, it will help to keep these points in mind and be prepared to handle different behaviors.

Social Communication

Many people with ASDs have a very literal understanding of language and can struggle to understand or “get” metaphors, similes, idioms, irony and sarcasm. Expressions like “it’s raining cats and dogs” or “when pigs fly” can be taken literally. People with ASDs can often come across as being very blunt and have difficulty reading another’s facial expressions or tone of voice. For example, they may:

- Not speak, but communicate using signs or visual symbols
- Have extremely good language skills, but find it hard to understand the “give and take” of conversations
- Talk in length about their own subjects of interest and not appear interested in others’ interests.

When communicating with people with ASDs, it will help to speak clearly and give them time to process what you have said.

Social Imagination

Difficulties with social imagination should not be confused with a lack of imagination, as some people with ASD are very creative and successful musicians, artists and writers. For example, they may find it difficult to:

- Interpret other people’s feelings, thoughts and actions
- Predict what will happen next
- Understand the concept of danger
- Prepare for change and plan for the future
- Cope with change and unfamiliar situations.

When interacting with people with ASDs, it will help to keep these points in mind and to be prepared to handle different reactions to situations.

What duties do UK organisations have to disabled employees?

The UK Equality Act 2010 requires organisations to ensure there is no discrimination, victimisation or harassment. Equality of opportunity for disabled employees is encouraged and positive relationships are promoted between employees with a disability and those without.

Organisations need to ensure they consider each stage of the employee lifecycle and take steps to ensure disabled employees can enter, develop and advance within an organisation. There is also a duty on organisations not to act less favourably to an individual with a disability because of a challenge resulting from their disability.

With all of this in mind, one of the main duty’s organisations have is to ensure they make “reasonable adjustments” within the workplace or to workplace practices. This is in order to ensure employees with a disability can access work and work safely and productively during employment and are not disadvantaged compared to individuals without a disability.

Making reasonable adjustments for employees with disabilities is a legal requirement. To fail to do so could be considered discrimination, resulting in legal action against an employer. Therefore, it is always best to check with your employee, to see what support they feel they need.

What is considered ‘reasonable’ will depend on a variety of factors such as the size of the employer, the type of organisation and the resources available to the organisation. Employers should investigate any adjustments thoroughly before deciding on whether they are deemed reasonable, as many adjustments can be introduced relatively easily and cheaply, for example, changing working hours, offering a parking space or providing a new chair.

However, for many disabled people, reasonable adjustments are essential to doing their job effectively. Scope research has found 21 per cent of people with disabilities, and 25 per cent people with disabilities with high support needs, said flexible working or modified hours have helped them at work.

Some disabled people, who have employment experience, shared their insights and stated: knowing an employer would be proactive in asking candidates and staff about the support they need and quickly making reasonable adjustments, is a real priority for them.

This means there is a need for organisations to demonstrate they understand their role as an employer in providing reasonable adjustments and support to employees and have experience in delivering reasonable adjustments effectively.

Recruiting and Selecting Candidates with Autism Spectrum Disorders

Organisations need to take time to consider providing all applicants with an equal opportunity to apply for any vacancies they have. Consideration needs to be made to each stage of the recruitment and selection process, to guarantee any arrangements or criteria encourages applicants with disabilities and ensures they are not disadvantaged in any way, in comparison to applicants without a disability. This includes conscious and unconscious biases that may occur during this process.

As a Manager you may not have responsibility for these areas, but can advise colleagues and partners developing your recruitment offer to consider these points:

Job design: organisations need to take care when they prepare job descriptions and person specifications to ensure they are not discriminatory against a person with a disability. This includes making sure that they focus on the actual requirements of the specific role being recruited rather than by making assumptions and subjective statements.

For example, a requirement of the role might be to be able to lift objects weighing up to 10kg rather than stating applicants must be 'physically fit'. The applicant can then ascertain whether they are able to fulfil this requirement and whether they may need an adjustment to be able to do this. For instance, using a trolley.

Consideration should also be made as to whether the role could be conducted flexibly, agile working or part-time rather than just stating all roles are fixed, full-time hours.

Advertising the vacancy: when advertising a vacancy, you need to ensure the job advert is accessible to all applicants, including those with a disability. This may include:

- Stating the organisation promotes equality and diversity and encourages applications from all applicants
- Ensuring the advert is clear to read and written in plain English
- Considering advertising in a variety of media channels to encourage applications from diverse communities
- Only state criteria which are required in the role, for example, do not state that the person requires a driving licence if driving is only on rare occasions and other modes of transport could be used
- Reassure applicants who may require reasonable adjustments that they can contact the organisation to discuss and explore this
- Offer the option of completing an online or paper application form
- Employers should consider signing up to the Disability Confident scheme where they can place a logo on adverts to show they encourage applications from candidates with a disability.

Shortlisting candidates: organisations should ensure they use a pre-selection matrix (where candidates are scored against the requirements of the role) when shortlisting candidates and this is applied equally to all applicants.

This will ensure all candidates are assessed and scored against the requirements of the role and not on any subjective, possibly discriminatory factors. Applications should be pre-selected by at least two people to reduce the possibility of conscious or unconscious bias in the process.

Interviewing Candidates with Autism Spectrum Disorders

If you are interviewing a candidate with an ASD, please speak with your HR / recruitment team at the outset so they can advise you, as well as ensure that reasonable accommodations are made in line with UK legislation. Those recruiting candidates should also ask those invited for interview whether they require any reasonable adjustments to be made during the interview/selection process.

It is essential prospective employers do not make assumptions about what a disabled applicant can and cannot do and this should be discussed with the applicant in the first instance to understand better what their disability is and how reasonable adjustments can help.

As you prepare for the interview, it is important to adjust your approach in order to give the candidate with an ASD the opportunity to demonstrate his/her abilities. For example:

- Consider a work trial or test, which may be a better way to assess skills and suitability for the job
- Review and adjust the type of questions you will ask and/or how they are worded. However, interviewers need to ensure the same interview questions are asked of all candidates, whether they are disabled or not in order to provide all candidates with the same opportunity to talk about their skills and experience
- At the start of the interview, explain the process, number of questions you will ask and your expectations of the candidate
- Avoid idioms and abstract language, such as “ballpark figure” or “blow your own trumpet” or “cast your mind back” as many will interpret language literally and won’t understand what you mean
- Don’t use hypothetical or abstract questions, such as “where do you see yourself in ten years?” These may be very difficult for the candidate to answer, as they may find it impossible to project into the future
- Stay away from open-ended questions. These can be problematic because the individual may find it difficult to talk about their experience and not understand the concept of “selling” themselves and will simply tell the truth/be factual rather than elaborating and expanding on their good points
- Allow the candidate to be accompanied by someone who can rephrase questions or duties to make them easier to understand
- Provide extra time to complete written tests
- Remember that an individual’s body language may not match conventional social norms, so appearing aloof does not necessarily mean the person is disinterested or unmotivated. Also, some people may have unusual eye contact, so do not make incorrect assumptions about it.

Supporting Colleagues with Autism Spectrum Disorders

By making some simple adjustments in your onboarding and management processes, you can provide individuals with ASDs with the environment and support they need to excel at their job. The type and level of support required will depend on the person's individual needs, but the latest Autistica workplace adjustments report <https://www.autistica.org.uk/news/autistica-releases-report-on-workplace-adjustments-for-autistic-staff> sets out this support could include:

Social and cultural adjustments:

- Appointing a colleague to act as a buddy or mentor to the individual(s), to help with any issues that arise and to be an advocate, if necessary
- Arranging general and specific ASD awareness training for colleagues who work with the individual(s)
- Arranging coaching and support systems for neurodivergent employees to help them understand the expectations neurotypical people have of and around them
- A team culture that encourages not eating lunch at desks (due to sensory discomfort for others)
- A team culture that encourages quieter lunchtime conversations
- Access to other job opportunities within the company and to senior mentoring
- A team culture that educates about negative language in the workplace (e.g., describing autism as a tragedy)
- A team culture that avoids unnecessary metaphorical and idiomatic language (these can be hard to interpret for autistic people)
- A team culture that respects preferences concerning physical contact (e.g., no handshakes)
- Being asked about preference for social events (e.g., whether to receive birthday cards, location for social dinner)
- Colleagues conscious about wearing strong perfumes
- Ensuring all team members understand and respect adjustments in absence of manager
- Flexibility regarding clothing choice if possible
- Handouts in advance of training/presentations (to follow what is being discussed verbally)
- A culture that respects keeping promises if they are made
- More patience and flexibility from colleagues regarding misunderstandings

- Offering the option to refuse taking on more work (since some employees find it very difficult to say no)
- Reduced overnight stays where possible
- Relaxed obligations to social commitments
- Specified hours for responding to emails
- Working near familiar and understanding colleagues.

Physical adjustments:

- Ability to adjust temperature where possible (e.g., through air conditioning, desk fan)
- Allocated desk (i.e., in otherwise hot-desking environment)
- Allocated parking space
- Avoid working in areas with fluorescent strip lighting if possible
- Avoid open plan office if possible
- Blue screen filter for computer screen to see colours more easily
- Clear signage throughout building and designated quiet areas
- Communication devices (e.g., a slider on desk to indicate when working from home).
- Designated quiet space
- Ear defenders, ear plugs and/or noise-cancelling headphones
- Ergonomic chair, wrist-rest and keyboard
- Fast response to malfunctioning equipment (e.g., a flickering light above desk)
- Laptop stand (neck and back support)
- Maximise personal space where possible (e.g., spaced out seating in meetings)
- Online accessible resources about getting up to speed in a new role
- Option to work away from doors (which slam shut) and busy pathways and repositioning of desk (e.g., in corner to avoid being startled)
- Secondary glazing (to provide sound protection)
- Site blocker software to avoid internet distractions
- Small desk lamp (if main light too bright or not bright enough)
- Software to improve accessibility (e.g., screen reader)
- Tinted glasses (to minimise overpowering lights)
- Visual partitions of workspace (i.e., to minimise distraction and sound.



Initially attracted to working in a progressive company that could offer me support with both career and personal development, I can honestly say that my experience of working at Willis Towers Watson has been resoundingly positive.

My role primarily involves assisting with the completion of the daily casework, though I also carry out additional ad-hoc tasks when required. Recently, I have been offered an invaluable progression opportunity of undertaking the checking of some of the work of other colleagues; my portfolio as a checker has since broadened to include multiple, more complex casework.

I have quickly built up a strong rapport with colleagues, both professionally and personally. I feel highly valued as a member of my team and my year-long experience in the industry has now resulted in me stepping up to pass my knowledge and expertise on to another generation of brand-new starters.

I cannot fault the support provided by Willis Towers Watson in light of my autism. Immediately upon being recruited, the company went to every effort to ensure that I was put onto the most suitable team in accordance with any work adjustments that were needed on my part. I have since received nothing short of impeccable support and ecstatic praise from my manager, who has gone above and beyond to ensure my professional and personal development reaches its maximum potential in every scenario.

Moreover, I feel that my confidence and abilities in my personal life have augmented exponentially as a direct consequence of working with the company. Recently, I was able to make a telephone booking for a large party dinner with a restaurant for the first time. This is something that I would never have been able to have done before.

I would urge any individual on the autistic spectrum looking for full-time employment to seriously consider applying here at the earliest opportunity.

Ed Mitchell, Pensions Administrator, Willis Towers Watson:

Managing Colleagues with Autism Spectrum Disorders

Manager support is the key to successful employment for colleagues with ASDs and effective communication is central to this support. Some communication tips for managers include:

- Not making assumptions
- Using direct and precise explanations
- Giving detailed instructions for tasks
- Being clear about your expectations of the person
- Avoiding figurative speech or idioms
- Showing respect for difference
- Using written as well as oral instructions
- Checking that you have been understood

In addition, successful management of a colleague with an ASD can include:

- Holding regular one-to-one meetings for feedback and monitoring
- Making sure the person is included in the team
- Giving one-to-one training rather than group training
- Raising team awareness of the strengths, difficulties and needs associated with ASDs

Many of these strategies are applicable to managing any colleague or team but will contribute toward a successful employment experience for a person with an ASD.

Willis Towers Watson Managerial Case study

Prior to Willis Towers Watson I had some limited, unsupported experience managing people with neurodiversity. When I joined the business in the summer of last year, I was very happy to discover that I would be provided with one on one bespoke training from Ed's work support partner Rachel in relation to his specific requirements.

The session with Rachel and our subsequent meetings gave me exactly what I needed to know to have confidence that with some minor accommodations I could provide Ed with everything he required from his working environment.

Watching Ed's progression within the business over the last year has been such an incredibly rewarding experience for me as a Team Leader. Seeing him go from an inexperienced, nervous individual that lacked confidence in his skills and abilities to a team member that is thriving in his role, open, willing and shows great conviction in his various capabilities, has been completely magical. Ed is, as all his co-workers would agree, an absolute joy to work with.

I think one of the biggest barriers for people entering the workspace with Autism and other Neural Diversity could be a lack of understanding and preconceived misconceptions. I approach working with Ed as I do any other team member. We all have likes and dislikes, differing strengths and conditions that affect us personally in and outside of work. I consciously adjust my managerial style for every individual I work with and believe this to be tremendously beneficial for everyone, not just those who identify with having a specific condition.

Ed requires little additional support these days and is a brilliantly capable young man with a very exciting career ahead of him, I thank WTW for allowing me the opportunity to watch it begin to unfold and look forward to supporting the business with further workplace inclusivity initiatives. The future is diverse and bright!

Rebecca Sheppard, Technology and Administration Services, Willis Towers Watson

Being a Disability Confident Employer

One way of showcasing that you are an inclusive employer is by joining or asking your organisation to join the Disability Confident scheme. The scheme was launched in November 2016 and supports the government's commitment to having 1 million more disabled people in work by 2027. It was developed by employers and disabled people's representatives to make it rigorous but easily accessible, particularly for smaller businesses.

Disability Confident is about creating a movement of change, encouraging employers to think differently about disability and take action to improve how they recruit, retain and develop disabled people. It also helps customers and other businesses identify those employers who are committed to equality in the workplace plus aids improve employee morale and commitment by demonstrating that you treat all employees fairly.

The scheme was designed as a journey. All employers start at Level 1 and can progress through the scheme at their own pace. Accreditation for each level lasts for 3 years.

The CII set out more about the Disability Confident scheme and how it relates to a more diverse working environment in their inclusive workplace good practice guide.

Also, you can find out more about the scheme and how to apply at <https://disabilityconfident.campaign.gov.uk/>

Why it's important we focus on supporting people with ASDs

It wasn't easy for me to accept my two sons aged 8 and 10 have a variety of neurological issues. My youngest has significant communication difficulties yet a keen intellect, my eldest scores as a 29-year-old in certain areas of IQ tests and yet struggles with the simplest of everyday tasks such as dressing, the pressure of school and suffers from crippling anxiety.

As a father I've been on a journey firstly of denial, then acceptance and adaptation to the conditions my kids have. It has been an ongoing, lengthy and costly struggle to get them educated in a schooling system starved of funds and seemingly indifferent to their needs. As my knowledge and experience has grown, I've become adept at recognizing neurodivergent behaviour in others and to a degree myself. Finally, I have come to understand such behaviours not as a disability as some might, but simply a different perspective with its own advantages and disadvantages.

Through my experiences at home I've come to understand the importance of calm and emotionless communication even under stress, of repeating details many times without displaying frustration, of providing calm and quiet spaces and of being flexible in my agenda. Visualizing objectives through images and diagrams eases anxiety and promotes understanding.

As an employee I believe we need to tackle several key areas. Colleague awareness should be raised by inviting in guest speakers, arranging displays and promoting the sunflower lanyard. The introduction and promotion of clear processes for physical changes to the working environment is important. These enable employees to quickly request changes such as the introduction of soft lighting or the relocation to quieter parts of the floor; adaptations are typically low cost. Mentoring can help employees to feel understood and valued.

The recruitment process needs to be flexible and adaptable; offer out of hours interviews, send questions in advance and make quiet space available to candidates upon arrival.

The needs of no two individuals are the same and managers should be proactive in reaching out to those who may struggle to vocalise their needs.

I believe that getting the most out of a team isn't solely about measuring deadlines vs capacity but breaking a project up into pieces of work tailored to the neuro profile of the individual; of giving the right job to the right person. I've learned the need to make concessions, for example it might be vitally important to an individual that they are left finish a task even if its de prioritised. Be prepared to accept behaviours that don't fit into the typical working world such as fidgeting or getting up to walk around in the middle of a meeting.

I am proud to be associated with this initiative and my hope is that it will lead to a fairer job market. Difference should not be viewed as a disadvantage.

Christopher Green, Human Capital Solutions Technology, Aon:

This guidance document has been a collaborative production and is supported by Johnny Timpson, the Cabinet Office Disability Champion for the Insurance Industry and Chair of the Access To Insurance Working Group.

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