



## Autism in the Workplace

### What is autism?

Autism means your brain works differently to others and comes under the umbrella term - neurodiversity. Autistic people may have different strengths and challenges but to get a diagnosis, they must find communication difficult, find social interaction difficult, find it hard to understand how others think or feel.

They may also find bright lights or loud noises intrusive and get anxious about unfamiliar situations or events. They may also need longer to understand information or answer questions and repeat actions such as hand flapping or lining up objects.

Autism is not a neurological condition that can be cured but people may need support or help. Some autistic people may have other conditions or neurodivergent diagnoses such as Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) or dyslexia. Everyone is different and will have different access needs as a result.

### Equality Act 2010

The act legally protects people from discrimination in the workplace and wider society. There are nine protected characteristics under this act including disability, gender, sex, race, religion, sexual orientation, pregnancy and maternity and age.

The act defines disability as ‘a physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' and 'long-term' negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities. An autistic person may find parts of their work life and day very challenging and stressful but making reasonable adjustments can help with this.

Reasonable adjustments need to be made to make an office and business more accessible and to improve an autistic person’s experience. Understandably, larger businesses will be able to make more adjustments than smaller ones. Don’t panic if you can’t make all the changes that you would like.

## What barriers do autistic people face in the workplace?

There are lots of different barriers that autistic people face in the workplace. According to the National Autistic Society, only 16 per cent of autistic adults are in full-time employment, while 32 per cent are in paid work.

These barriers fall under four different categories: organisational, communication, physical access and attitudinal. In this resource, we have listed what these barriers may look like and how you can help to improve autistic people’s experience. Each person with autism is different so it is always best to speak to someone about what would help them.

### ***Attitudinal:***

- Neurodiversity/ Disability training

We can sometimes forget that not everyone knows what autism is or how some of the traits can affect someone in the workplace. By booking bespoke training, experienced trainers can relate the session to your industry and help staff understand what neurodiversity is and how they can help a customer or team member.

We offer neurodiversity awareness training which you can read about [by visiting our website.](#)

- Ask don't assume!

Don't assume that all autistic or neurodivergent people have the same needs as each other. Each person will have their own traits that are different and that means different needs. One person may love having extra time for complex tasks, but another may find that stressful because they have more time to procrastinate. The best thing to do would be to ask them what you can put in place to help them. This can help someone feel supported and included while making a big difference to their working day.

It's also worth checking in with people frequently about their access needs. This will change over time as people age or develop other conditions or even if the nature of their role changes. They may also figure out more about themselves as time goes on especially if they have had a late diagnosis.

- Don't avoid someone!

People can feel uncomfortable or not know what to say to autistic people. It usually comes from a good place of not wanting to offend someone or worry about saying the wrong thing. By being welcoming, chatty and taking the plunge by starting a conversation, you can see very quickly that autistic people are just like anyone else!

If you are a manager and notice that someone is being left out, then why not create opportunities for the team to bond? This could be playing icebreaker games at meetings, setting up socials or even cake and coffee mornings. But be conscious that sometimes people may want to be on their own and not be part of a big group so don't force someone to take part if they don't feel comfortable.

- Assuming someone can't do the job

Don't assume that because someone is autistic, they are less able to do their job compared to someone who is neurotypical. Many autistic people have fantastic skills that make them a valued part of a business such as being highly creative, excellent focus or memory. Utilise their skills where possible and offer support with things they may find more challenging. However, don't avoid giving them tasks because you think they may not be able to complete them - have a conversation about it!

The same goes for denying someone a promotion for that reason. It's discrimination and is illegal under the Equality Act, of 2010.

- Disclosure

Disclosure is difficult. Some people may feel comfortable saying that they are autistic, but others may not want to say anything at all. Don't assume someone will want the whole office to know when it isn't important that they do. Consider the context in which you are disclosing (is this for a work-related reason?), would the person be okay with the disclosure? (Have you asked them?) And be respectful if you do need to tell someone.

Someone does not need to disclose their diagnosis to have their access needs considered. They also do not need to tell you their diagnosis when you hire them. Many people feel more comfortable disclosing when they get to know the team and their managers better.

- Empathy not sympathy

No one wants to feel pitied! If someone discloses they are autistic and feels comfortable discussing it then avoid saying something like, 'oh no, poor you'. Be supportive by thanking them for their honesty and asking them if there is anything you can do to help. It might be that you can, or you can advise them on who to speak to in the office and who has more

authority to put things in place. Often, it's nice for someone to know that another team member knows and is friendly and supportive.

They may say there is nothing they need which is fine. Just let them know you are there if they ever need a chat or help and move on.

- Bullying

Sadly, some autistic people may experience bullying in the workplace. Workplace bullying can leave someone feeling alone, depressed, anxious, and dreading coming into the office. There are lots of different ways that someone can be bullied including but not limited to physical abuse. One such tactic is verbal bullying which could be asking rude or personal questions about a person, especially around their disability or autism when someone is uncomfortable or does not want to talk about it. Sometimes, people feel comfortable or are happy to discuss but it should never be assumed that they are. The person could also make rude gestures or facial expressions.

It's not always safe for someone to approach the person who is doing the bullying. Keep a record of the events but it should be reported to a senior member of staff. This should follow the procedures of the individual business.

### ***Communication:***

- Clear communication

Too much detail can be overwhelming for neurodivergent people. Keep communication, especially around a task, simple, to the point and easy to understand. Don't give too much unnecessary information that someone needs to process or multiple ways to get a task completed.

Avoid asking multiple questions at once but stick to one at a time so that autistic people know which question you need the answer for and

in which order. Avoid open-ended questions where possible as autistic people may give too much detail or worry about how much to say. It might also be a good idea to send questions in advance or let someone know what the topic of conversation will be in a meeting so they can plan what they want to say or answer.

- Allow for extra processing time.

While it might feel tempting to fill the silence or keep chatting, allow an autistic person to process what you are asking or instructions. This also goes for emails as well, allow extra time for someone to respond to an email as they may take longer to make sense of your initial email.

- Visual communication where possible

Many autistic people find visual information easier to process and retain than large blocks of text. It is easier to add visual information to your communication by considering videos, objects, symbols, or pictures. If you have to have text, break it up with colour, headings and paragraphs where possible to help people read it easier.

- Short manageable instructions

Keep instructions short, simple and to the point. Don't overcomplicate things by adding multiple different ways of doing things. Let someone know that there are other ways of doing it if this one doesn't work but let them process one set of instructions first. Too much information is too overwhelming!

- Avoid negative instructions.

Avoid using negatives when instructing people. This could be: 'Don't get your phone out in the meeting.' This could be misheard as get your phone out in the meeting because 'get' 'phone' and 'meeting' are the keywords in this sentence. Instead, telling someone to leave the phone outside the room or in their pocket is easier.

- Silent communication

We communicate in lots of different ways including eye contact and touch. Autistic people may find both difficult and not understand what is meant. For autistic people, sometimes touch, gesture, or eye contact can be incredibly intrusive so they will find ways to avoid it or react suddenly. Unfortunately, not everyone will understand this so it can seem potentially rude or confusing. It may also be something that they worry about - what is the right amount of both? Etc.

Just be respectful and don't force either if someone is uncomfortable.

- Written communication over verbal

Some autistic people may find it easier to communicate by writing rather than verbal language. If possible, could someone report their work over email or through a Word document rather than a meeting? This may not always be possible but could be implemented occasionally or for smaller projects.

- Banter

Office banter is great fun, but it can be confusing for some people. A lot of autistic people have difficulty distinguishing sarcasm or humour from genuine facts. They may miss tone or respond to the literal message. It's important to be as literal as possible when speaking and explain meaning where you need to. Also, be respectful if someone has misconstrued the joke.

- Conversation

Sometimes autistic people may think of questions to ask people ahead of time in order to get a conversation going. This could be around their interests where they use questions to drive the conversation back to a preferred topic such as football or TV programmes. Others may feel frustrated by the conversation, but autistic people may not be able to

pick up cues on when to switch topics. They may also repeat themselves as a means of stimming (\*see below for terminology) Awareness means that team members know why this is and understand to be patient.

- Clear planning

Knowing the breakdown of a day can make things less stressful for neurodivergent people. This could be letting someone know when they can expect a break or if there are likely to be any group activities. It also allows time for someone to let you know if they need any adjustments to be made to tasks to make them easier.

- Inappropriate conversations

Sometimes it can be hard for neurodivergent people to draw boundaries with others or understand how much information to give in a conversation. Information dumping or inappropriate information sharing can be part of this where someone fails to notice that this isn't appropriate. You may have to speak to someone about this depending on the severity of what has been said but be aware that it is possibly not something they are aware they have done.

- Communicate changes before they happen.

Autistic people may find any changes difficult to process. Many autistic people enjoy routine and rules which help to make a chaotic world seem a bit more orderly. This may mean travelling to and from work the same way or taking a break at exactly the same time every day. Interruption can be extremely stressful such as a train delay or meeting cancellation. This may even be a change to the layout of a room or verbal rituals where someone asks a question needing to hear a particular answer.

It is helpful to note that a change is coming where possible and communicate this change to the person as clearly as possible using



visual supports such as photos of the new room layout or a new train timetable. Let them know what is going to happen because of the change and be aware that they may have heightened levels of anxiety.

- Direct naming

Use someone's name to let them know when you are addressing them directly. Sometimes autistic people may not be sure if you are addressing them which may be seen as 'not listening' when they are.

- Rejection sensitivity dysphoria (RSD)

Rejection and punishment for not meeting neurotypical standards can contribute to a person experiencing RSD. Often, this can be not just direct rejection or punishment but when it is perceived to be the case. Someone may imagine they are being criticised or told off even when they are not. Neurodivergent people have different sensory and perceptual experiences than neurotypical people and can feel strong emotions that they are unable to regulate.

It can be hard to know how to deliver criticism when someone has RSD because there is the risk they may take it badly. This could take many forms such as crying, meltdowns, shutdowns or depression and anxiety. However, be as upfront as you can, allow someone to ask questions, compliment them where you can and be conscious that they will need some encouragement to keep going. Avoid emailing them towards the end of their shift with negative feedback where they don't have a chance to comment or ask questions but call and speak to them so they can hear a tone of voice.

Encourage feedback and conversation so that someone feels able to ask for more information when they notice signs of RSD. Answer as openly and honestly as possible but don't get annoyed with them for asking - possibly multiple times. It is usually how someone processes information and they are trying to keep calm.

- Open body language and friendly

It can go a long way when it comes to encouraging people to come and talk to you!

- Technology

Some apps can help autistic people in the workplace. This could be things like Tiimo which helps people to keep track of time but also has a social element, Trello which allows people to organise their thoughts into boards or Asana which helps you to plan different projects. Some organisations use messaging platforms like Slack which may be useful if someone prefers text to conversation or visual timers if someone is struggling with time.

Ask - don't assume that apps will help people - some neurodivergent people may struggle with layout or process them. It's always helpful to have that conversation otherwise it may be adding stress to someone's work list.

### ***Organisational:***

- Sensory overload

Open-plan offices can be a nightmare for autistic people because they provide a lot of stimulation. Everything from intrusive smells to loud noises to bright lights. Not to mention, the eternal shared office struggles to achieve a temperature that suits everyone! While you may not have the space to give everyone an office - do consider making changes that might help people to adjust. This could be installing quiet spaces where someone can go if they feel overwhelmed, letting people wear headphones if they are not in meetings or creating a meeting room where people can go if they need to have a chat therefore keeping the main room low noise.

If someone is still struggling, why not consider allowing someone to work from home either full-time or hybrid where possible? Although this may not be an option for all businesses.

- Flexible meetings

Autistic people can become completely absorbed in a task they are enjoying. This might mean that they don't notice the time, which creates a problem with meetings. Alarms may work but often, the loud noises can be incredibly jarring or painful. Gentle reminders at the start of the day, verbal reminders, creating to-do lists with the meetings included and allowing extra time for someone to arrive at a meeting may be helpful.

- Flexible work hours

Not everyone is capable of working 9 to 5 pm every day. Autistic people may benefit from flexible working hours that allow them to take a longer break at midday, start later in the day, or finish earlier therefore using the hours they are more productive in. Although this may not always be possible for every business.

- Allow stimming.

Stimming is a repetitive action, noise, or movement that autistic people do that helps them to self-soothe. This could be barely noticeable like playing with their hair or a pen or could be loud such as grunts or moans. It may even be rocking back and forth. This can often become more noticeable when someone is tired, stressed or overwhelmed.

The automatic reaction from someone who isn't aware of what is happening may be to tell someone to stop or to view it as rudeness when this isn't the case. Allow someone to stim as this can help them to feel more comfortable.

- Events

There is a lot to be said for a cheeky pint after a long day. It's often where a lot of team bonding can happen on a Friday night. However, for a lot of autistic people, they may struggle with social gatherings and/or the setting of a noisy pub.

An alternative is to create social gatherings that aren't centred around the pub or alcohol. It could still be a party, sports event, or team activity day rather than relying on pints and pubs. Also, don't make the gatherings mandatory or stress that no one ever misses them. Keep it casual and allow people to skip if they need to.

- Lists

Autistic people may work with lists so it's a great idea to normalise creating a task list. This could be colour-coded or done using technology. If they are organised in terms of priority, then it can help autistic people recognise what work needs to be done faster.

- Regular meetings

It's helpful to check in regularly to make sure that someone knows they can talk to you about work difficulties or anything they are stressed about. Not to mention clear up any instructions or create to-do lists to help them prioritise workloads.

- Workplace mentors

It may be helpful to have a designated workplace mentor who can be approached if there are any issues at work. This may mean someone who is not a member of management (as some people may worry about disclosing and affecting their job) who can talk them through office etiquette, any confusion over tasks or a person's needs. This should be someone that they feel comfortable with and someone they can trust to potentially liaise with other teams such as HR or

management if they have to on someone's behalf. Regular meetings or email contact can help someone feel supported but allow them to decide what works for them.

- Unwritten office rules

We all have unwritten office rules that we never really think of such as making a cup of tea for everyone when it's your round or everyone giving a tenner when someone leaves. While we assume that everyone knows the office culture, be prepared to break it down for a new autistic member of staff who may not understand the new rules.

- Texture

Some autistic people may find different textures overstimulating or painful. This could cause a problem with things like uniforms if they can't wear the fabric they are made from or if there are labels that irritate the skin. Consider the alternatives such as allowing someone to wear something different, cut out labels or having different fabrics available. Could someone work from home bypassing their need for a uniform?

### ***Physical access:***

- Notice of changes

There may be sudden changes in the physical environment that can be hard for autistic people to deal with. This could be fire drills where loud alarms go off or workplace renovations where there are noisy drills or banging. Consider the environment and give autistic employers advance notice of the changes, offer the chance to work from home those days if possible or move to a quieter part of the office away from the noise.

- Personal desks

Having their own personal desk or office can help autistic people feel a sense of control and safety. This may be challenging in crowded spaces or co-working spaces, but it would be a reasonable adjustment to allow an autistic person to book a particular desk or have a desk allocated to them.

- Order

Autistic people find spaces that are well organised and defined easier to process. This could mean adding symbols, coordinated colours and signs to improve navigation around an office space.

- Screens

Sometimes brightness can be a problem for autistic people. There are screen filters that you can install over the top of a laptop or desktop PC monitor which can make the screen seem less bright. This can help to reduce headaches or sensory overload.

- Natural light

Similarly, make as much use of natural light as possible so it eliminates the need for bright synthetic lighting.

- Balance

Autistic people may also struggle with balance. While, in some roles, it may not be possible to avoid heights or steps, could you reduce the amount that an employee needs to be in these situations? Often giving someone an extra hand to help guide or steady them can help, allowing the use of lifts or giving them an office/desk on the ground floor where possible can make a difference.

- Overwhelm

Some autistic people may struggle with becoming overwhelmed leading to a shutdown or meltdown (\*see terminology below). Having a quiet space where they can go can help. If you do have a space, it's important to make sure it remains quiet and that other colleagues don't use it for meetings or chats. Add seating so that people can sit down or couches so that people can rest if they need to. Cushions or soft furnishings can also help but ultimately, keep it as free from overly stimulating smells, sounds and colours even highly stimulating patterns on the carpet or walls as you can.

Screens that can be placed around desks can help to minimise stimulation and distractions.

## Some terminology to know.

### ***AuDHD***

Some people with autism may also have ADHD but not everyone. While some people feel their autistic traits and ADHD traits are separate, there is a growing group of people who believe that the two combine to make a different condition - AU (tism) DHD (Adhd). Their traits are a blended mix of the two.

### ***Neurotypical***

A term used to describe someone who does not have any of the conditions that come under neurodivergent such as autism or dyslexia.

### ***Neuroqueer***

Some people who identify as LGBT+ also use neuro (as in neurodivergent) and queer to describe how their behaviour and thinking are influenced by both.

## ***Meltdown***

A meltdown can occur when someone is overwhelmed or overstimulated. It could be a result of any number of reasons from sensory to stress to sudden changes in routine. Meltdowns look different for each person they may involve crying, shaking, or yelling. It can be helpful to take someone to a quieter space where there is less noise or bright lights. Speak to them about the problem calmly and reassuringly. Find a simple solution and reassure them that you are going to help them to figure it out. Avoid arguing or shouting at them to be quiet. Also, saying this isn't a big deal is not helpful to someone experiencing a meltdown - it is.

## ***Shutdown***

A shutdown is related to a meltdown but appears differently. It's where the brain cannot take any more information in as it is overwhelmed with sensory input, so it just stops. A person may appear on autopilot or distracted while being unable to talk or move. Some people may stand, sit, or need to get close to the ground while this is happening. As with meltdowns, reassurance helps but also giving someone enough space to come around is important. You could also ask if the person would like to move somewhere quieter. If they don't want help, let them know you are there and stand a distance away so they know they can call you if they need to.

## ***Masking***

Often neurodivergent people observe how other neurotypical people behave and mimic their behaviour as a coping mechanism. The world is often not set up for neurodivergent people meaning that it can be difficult for them to understand how to behave or what to say. By mimicking others, it can help someone to fit in, and feel accepted or part of the office. However, it takes a lot of energy to do this so often, it can be exhausting. You use double the energy trying to mimic someone else either subconsciously or consciously. Suppressing autistic traits as a result of a desire to fit in or be accepted is also exhausting. This is commonly referred to as masking.



## ***Stimming***

Stimming is the name given to a series of repetitive noises, movements, or actions that people do. Sometimes these may be more obvious or subtle depending on the person. Some autistic people may flap their hands, play with a certain object, pull their hair, pick their skin or make loud/small noises. These actions or noises are a way of self-soothing and comforting themselves when situations become stressful.