



Untapped Talent

A guide to employing people with Autism

Foreword

Research by The National Autistic Society indicates that there are currently just 15% of adults with autism in full time employment. This compares with around 31% for all disabled people in full-time employment and 57% for non disabled people of working age in full time employment in Great Britain.¹ Given the many talents and skills that adults with autism can bring to a business I am determined to work with businesses and other partners to increase this figure.



We need to be clear to employers that making business environments more ‘autism friendly’ is not about meeting corporate social responsibility objectives, but about tapping into and seeking out the most talented individuals for a role. That is why I am delighted that a range of employers and organisations have worked with The National Autistic Society and Department for Work and Pensions to produce this leaflet.

People with autism can have exceptional talents and by making some straightforward adjustments can prove to be a tremendous asset to business. We need to do more to make use of those talents.

My thanks go to the businesses and organisations who came together to produce this leaflet. I hope that businesses will consider their advice carefully and look at adapting practices to attract and support adults with autism into the workplace, making the most of the skills of people with autism and untap their potential to the benefit of business.

Lord Freud
Minister for Welfare Reform

¹The employment rates for all disabled and non disabled people are taken from Labour Force Survey Quarter 2, 2011.

Employing people with Autism: Untapped Talent

People with autism have a great deal to offer the world of business and may have unique skills and abilities that will help an organisation thrive. As well as their individual strengths and talents, candidates with autism may demonstrate above-average skills in some or all of the following areas:

- › **Problem-solving skills and attention to detail:** people with autism tend to prefer logical and structured approaches to their work, and often think in a very visual way. They may enjoy problem-solving and can bring new ideas and take fresh approaches to their job.
- › **High levels of concentration:** people with autism may often find focusing on detailed work rewarding, and can tend to work persistently and without being distracted, paying great attention to detail.
- › **Reliability and loyalty:** people on the autism spectrum can be very conscientious and committed to their work, often with good levels of punctuality, honesty and integrity. For example, employers tell us that they notice that absenteeism is lower.
- › **Technical ability and specialist skills and interests such as in IT:** people with autism may develop highly specialist interests and skills, which can be very valuable in the workplace.
- › **Detailed factual knowledge and an excellent memory:** people with autism may develop highly specialist interests, which will mean that they develop very detailed factual knowledge in that area.
- › **Retention:** people with autism have a preference for routine and once settled in a job will often stay in that role considerably longer than others.
- › **Resourceful:** people with autism may also have had to find ways to overcome challenges and so can be resourceful.



What is Autism?

Autism², including Asperger syndrome, affects the way people relate to and communicate with the world around them. It is a spectrum condition, meaning that the support people will need will vary from individual to individual. It is a non-visible disability, and some people may be highly intellectual, while others may have additional learning disabilities.

Many people with autism have a variety of skills that can enable them to thrive in roles ranging from sales assistant to computer programmer and journalist to statistician, to name a few. However, they are often disadvantaged when it comes to getting and keeping a job because of difficulties with social skills and employers' lack of experience in how to assess and manage individuals with this kind of impairment.

Everyone on the spectrum has difficulties in three main areas:

- > Social interaction: difficulty establishing relationships, not reciprocating socially or emotionally or appearing indifferent.
- > Social communication: difficulty with verbal and non-verbal communication, including facial expressions and tone of voice.
- > Social imagination: difficulty with flexibility of thought, affecting sequencing, organising, planning ahead and thinking in abstract ways.

In addition, many people with autism have sensory over- or under-sensitivity, for example to light, sounds and touch. However, with the right support, people with autism can thrive and some may excel in particular tasks.

The range of jobs someone with autism might undertake.

Prospects, The National Autistic Society employment service, has supported people into wide ranging types of jobs. These include:

Librarian	Visual merchandiser	Bookshop assistant
Gardener	School science technician	Cinema assistant
Music studio technician	Community Support Officer	Traffic warden
Firework company director	Retail assistant	IT Support
Florist	Artist/Illustrator	Software Tester
Costume designer	Journalist	Business Analyst
Theatre usher	IT assistant at train station	Data Analyst

²Through this publication, we use the term "autism" to refer to all conditions on the autism spectrum including Asperger syndrome, high functioning autism and Kanner autism. Individuals can have other Hidden Impairments such as Attention Deficit Hyper-Activity Disorder, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia and Dyscalculia

Additional benefits to the organisation as a whole:

Organisations that are effective at managing people with disabilities (including autism) are usually better at managing their whole workforce. Becoming disability confident and employing people with disabilities positions disability as an issue to do with maximising talent, enhanced productivity, and investment in human potential. Being disability confident means you also understand that you need to treat people differently in order to treat them fairly, and this involves every part of your business not just your Human Resources department.

The disability confident business will attract and deliver:

- > **The right people** – a disability confident approach will help to ensure that recruitment is undertaken on merit rather than convenience.
- > **Higher productivity, reduced costs** - the effective line management and investment in reasonable adjustments that disabled people need in order to do the job, is shown to help the wider workforce make the most of their capabilities.
- > **Innovative products** and service offerings disability confident companies have demonstrated that products that can be used easily by older and disabled people are being adopted by wider customer markets.
- > **Outstanding customer relationships, satisfaction & retention** – 66% of disabled people choose businesses where they have received good customer service related to their disability.
- > **Stronger stakeholder relationships & reputation** - Government bodies are increasingly using procurement to promote good practice in diversity. A disability confident approach to procurement should therefore be considered by businesses as a means of developing stronger and more beneficial relationships with suppliers and partners.



For a more detailed overview of the business case for disability confidence visit: www.efd.org.uk/disability-business-case

What are employer's experiences?

Ciaran at Norton Rose LLP

“Ciaran has an unflagging eye for detail which is perfect for his role in compliance. He is also as focused at the start of the day as he is at the end of the day, which is very rare for most people!”

Ciaran is Master Data Manager in the Compliance section of Norton Rose's Partnership Office. When he first started in his role, his employers used a different pace to ensure that he was happy with the different aspects of his work. At first, he was uncomfortable using the telephone and so his managers carried out role-play exercises to show him how to deal with different types of call. He always had the option to forward calls through to his mentor but now rarely needs to. Ciaran has been praised for his eye for detail and ability to concentrate, as well as for his relationships with his colleagues: “Ciaran has an excellent sense of humour and is a great team member, lunching with his team and attending and contributing to team meetings and so on. He has fitted in very well and is a much valued member of the team.”

Sarah at Goldman Sachs

“Sarah was a highly valued member of the Internal Support team. She quickly demonstrated that she was very conscientious and thorough so the team had complete faith in her to deliver work on time and to a high standard. This meant that we were able to increase her responsibilities and, in turn, Sarah added more value to, and gained more from, her time with us.”

Sarah spent a six month placement with Goldman Sachs as an Administrative Support Officer. Before she joined the team, Goldman Sachs held an awareness raising day for those who would be working with and around Sarah, so that they were aware of issues she might have in the workplace and ways to avoid these. “We had scoped out core functions we needed Sarah to perform and then adapted that by adding responsibilities, based on her comfort level, capacity and capability.”

Sarah's placement was a great success, she fitted in well with colleagues and she was able to increase her duties as she settled into the role.

George at Hao2.eu Ltd

George first joined Hao2.eu as a trainee Digital Project Assistant. Within a year George was promoted to a Sub Group Team Leader position, managing two other members of staff. The company put in place practical support structures for George including offering him flexible working hours and location; providing structured SMART objectives, frequent feedback and personal development sessions; and training on presentation, teamworking and networking skills.

We have been particularly impressed by George's ability to rapidly acquire new creative and technical skills and pass these abilities on to other staff. He also acts as a role model, "leading by example in terms of productivity, commitment and willingness to learn".

All Hao2.eu staff were given training around autism and working with colleagues with autistic spectrum conditions which has been supportive for George but also helped us improve quality and customer service.

Guidance for Managers

The recruitment process

Recruitment procedures often inadvertently create barriers for people with autism. Many of the minor adjustments that will help candidates with autism apply for jobs may also benefit other candidates and enhance overall efficiency in recruitment. By taking these simple steps, your organisation will also be meeting the Equality Act 2010 requirement for employers to make 'reasonable adjustments' for people with disabilities.

The job advert

Job adverts and job descriptions should be concise, clearly presented, and written in plain English. They should list essential skills, and avoid jargon or unnecessary information. Be objective about what abilities and

experiences are genuinely essential for the job to be done well, and leave out any that are not.

The interview process

Interviews rely heavily on social and communication skills, so candidates with autism may well struggle to 'sell themselves' in an interview, even if they have all the right skills. In particular, they may face difficulties with:

- > understanding body language and maintaining appropriate eye contact;
- > demonstrating enthusiasm for the role;
- > knowing how to start and maintain conversations;
- > judging how much information to give, especially if questions are open;
- > thinking in abstract ways, or considering 'what if?' scenarios;
- > varying their tone of voice and finding the appropriate level of formality.

Before the interview

- > Give clear information about what will be expected at the interview, what needs to be brought along and email/post this information to the candidate. Send clear instructions on how to get to the interview.
- > Tell the applicant approximately how much time the interview will take and do your best to stick to this.
- > Describe any tasks that will be asked of the candidate and give some indication of the content/types of questions that may be asked.
- > Asking each applicant exactly the same question does not always equate to equality of opportunity. Consider offering an adapted interview in which you ask 'closed' questions, based on the applicant's past experiences, rather than 'open' (generalised or hypothetical) questions.



Tips for the interview

- > Avoid open questions. Instead of “Tell me about yourself”, try: “Tell me about your last job and what it involved.”
- > Hypothetical (“What if?”) questions can also be confusing. Instead of “How would you cope with lots of interruptions?”, use “In your last job how did you cope when people interrupted you?”
- > Be prepared to tactfully prompt the candidate if they give too much or too little information.
- > The candidate may interpret language quite literally. A question like “How did you find your last job?” may invite the response “I found it in the newspaper.”
- > Be aware that the candidate’s eye contact and other body language may appear different from that of other candidates so do not use this as an indication of how they feel about the job.

Are there alternatives to the traditional interview?

Yes. If you feel that a standard interview might not be the best way to gauge the person’s suitability for the post, there are other options:

Inviting a supporter to accompany the person

Many people with autism perform much better in interviews if they have a supporter with them. This person can act as a go-between to ease communication between the interviewer and the candidate, rewording any unclear questions for the candidate and helping them understand exactly what the interviewer wants. This does not only benefit the candidate: it can also help employers understand what the candidate has to offer.



Two-way placement evaluation

Some employers find that a two-way placement evaluation - a period of work experience - is a better way of assessing individuals’ talents than a formal interview. This approach may also help if you think that a person with autism is likely to do well in the job but you have concerns about how well they will adapt to the workplace.

Working with someone with autism

Working with someone with autism can be an enriching experience for managers and colleagues alike. This section explains how to avoid or overcome any difficulties, in order to ensure enjoyable and effective working relationships. It should also be highlighted that much of what is described below is good practice for managing any individual, but is much more important for people with autism.

Before the first day

Any induction-related information should be sent out before the start of the job with clear expectations of the working day and breaks, holiday provision, time frames, dress code and social expectations. Consider having a pre-start date orientation to introduce the employee to their new colleagues and the organisation. This may reduce anxiety and enable the individual to understand the corporate set-up.

Getting started

Make sure instructions are concise and specific. Give the person clear instructions 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 Sam, Mary and Ahmed'. You may also choose to provide written instructions. It can be helpful to ask the person to repeat back instructions so you are sure they have understood.

You may need to be more explicit about your expectations for a member of staff with autism. Make it clear that any adaptations for them in the workplace are there to help them keep doing their job well, not because they are not good enough.

The working environment

Ensure the work environment is well structured. Some people with autism need a fairly 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 with getting into a routine with breaks and lunches. You should also consider the workplace setting; a workspace area that is away

from general office traffic and visual distractions such as clutter may be beneficial to the employee.

Provide sensitive but direct feedback

People with autism often find it difficult to pick up on social cues, so make sure your feedback is honest, constructive and consistent. If the person completes a task incorrectly, don't criticise – 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 the person may have low self-esteem or experience of being bullied, so ensure that any feedback is sensitive, and give positive comments wherever appropriate.

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. When managing a person with autism, brief, frequent reviews may be preferable.

Help other staff to be more aware

If the person with autism consents to their condition being disclosed, then providing colleagues with information and guidance on autism can benefit both parties. Sometimes an employee with autism may find it helpful to write a document for managers and colleagues explaining how their autism affects them and what kind of things they find hard.

You may choose to distribute some specialist resources to your staff, or to provide training in disability confidence in general, or specifically in autism. The person may also benefit from having a mentor or buddy – an empathetic colleague they can go to if they are feeling stressed, anxious or confused. Having someone to turn to at times of stress may help to nip any problems in the bud, and is a valuable experience for the mentor.

Provide reassurance in stressful situations

People with autism can be quite meticulous, and can become anxious if their performance is not perfect. Situations such as IT failures can therefore be very stressful. Give concrete solutions to these scenarios – for example, by explaining “If the photocopier breaks, use the one on the third floor.” Similarly, reassure the person that if they occasionally arrive late due to transport problems or other unpreventable factors, this is not a problem.

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