



# Employees with Autism: Strategies for a More Inclusive (and Compliant) Workplace

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1

## Autism Facts

- In 2018 the CDC determined that approximately 1 in 59 children is diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD)
  - 1 in 37 boys
  - 1 in 151 girls
- 31% of children with ASD have an intellectual disability (intelligence quotient [IQ] <70), 25% are in the borderline range (IQ 71–85), and 44% have IQ scores in the average to above average range (i.e., IQ >85)
- Over the next decade, an estimated 500,000 individuals with autism will age into adulthood



2

## Autism in the Workplace

- **Approximately 60-70% of people with autism are unemployed**
- **Only one in seven individuals on the spectrum hold down a full-time job**
- **35% of 18 year olds with autism attend college**
- **85% unemployment rate among college graduates with autism**
- **Over 50,000 people on the spectrum graduate from high school in the U.S. each year**

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## Initiatives to Hire Individuals with Autism on the Rise

- **Hiring employees with autism makes good business sense**
- **Hiring employees with autism into well-suited roles can lead to greater productivity, fewer errors, and lower costs**
  - Hyper-focused characteristics enhance performance, workflow, and productivity
  - Overall morale benefit, in part because managers adjust their communications to set clear expectations, reduce ambiguity, and provide consistent feedback.
  - Lower absenteeism and higher retention

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## Initiatives to Hire Individuals with Autism on the Rise

- **More Innovative Products and Services**
  - Creative approaches – not conforming to social norms or as influenced by cognitive bias – result in new and innovative products and services
- **Through creating an inclusive work culture, companies are also reaching a wider consumer base**

## Searching for Good Employees?

- **U.S. unemployment rate is at 3.8%**
- **Employers are struggling to fill open positions with qualified candidates**
- **Individuals with autism are often qualified and overlooked to fill many of these vacant positions**



# Untapped Talent

Many benefits to hiring individuals with autism:

- Attention to detail
- Good concentration on routine and procedures
- Memory for facts and figures
- Logical approach to tasks
- Honesty
- Loyalty
- Low turnover
- Follow rules
- Positive impact on company culture
- Creative
- Ability to detect patterns
- Bring unique experiences to the workplace

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# Why Are Applicants With Autism Often Overlooked?

- **Many are screened out early in the hiring process**
- **May not answer application properly**
- **Interviewing difficulty**
- **Inconsistencies in employment history**
- **Difficulty understanding training**

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# What Can You Do to Break Into This Untapped Labor Pool and Make Your Workforce More Inclusive?

## What the Law Requires

- **The Rehabilitation Act of 1973**
  - Applies to federal agencies, federal contractors, and recipients of federal funding
- **The Americans with Disabilities Act (as amended)**
  - Applies to private and public employers with more than 15 employees
- **Both prohibit discrimination against a qualified individual with a disability and require an employer provide reasonable accommodations absent an undue hardship**

## Review Your Hiring Procedures

- **Recruiting**
  - Consider partnering with a third-party specializing in hiring individuals with disabilities
  - Develop a plan and train for recruiting individuals with autism
- **Job Descriptions and Postings**
  - Keep them clear and concise
  - Avoid figurative language (“good team player”)

## Interview

- **Decrease number of interviewers**
- **Limit distractions**
- **Offer phone interviews**
- **Share questions in advance**
- **Train interviewers**
  - Eye contact
  - Facial expressions
  - Rate of speech
  - Modify question form
  - Move interview along
  - Consider written questionnaires



## Personality Testing

- **Over 70% of all companies with more than 100 employees use personality tests to screen potential employees**
- **Typically, these tests measure:**
  - Work
  - Ethic
  - Emotional Intelligence
- **Be careful of violating the ADA**

## Challenges for Employees with Autism

- **Social interactions**
- **Trouble with empathy**
- **Intense focus on limited interests**
- **Literal-mindedness**
- **Inflexibility**
- **Anxiety**
- **Sensory challenges**

## Soft Skills: Challenges

- Social interactions
- Non-verbal communication and gestures
- Understanding another person's reaction
- Honest – to a fault?
- Literal mindedness
- TMI
- Appropriate tone and volume
- Eye contact



## Soft Skills: Solutions

- Appoint a coach/mentor to be a resource on handling social issues
- Be explicit
- Explain desired behavior logically rather than emotionally
- Provide concrete examples of accepted behaviors and consequences
- Encourage communication in writing where possible to minimize interaction and ensure clarity
- Respectful, truthful direction is not offense – it's a good management strategy

## Soft Skills: Solutions

- Do not misinterpret a lack of eye contact for disinterest
- Reduce use of figurative language (irony, sarcasm, idioms, and slang) to increase comprehension
- Clarify metaphors and abstract conceptualizations
- Explain or clarify workplace etiquette, unspoken rules of the workplace, standard operating procedures, and inhouse jargon or expressions
- Encourage open and frequent communication

## In Other Words, Say What You Mean

### Commonly Said

- Would you mind taking on this project?
- Can you complete this in the next few weeks?
- Brainstorm some out of the box ideas for this assignment.

### Direct Restatement

- Please stop working on the project you are currently doing and do this project first. Once this new project is complete, finish the other project.
- I need this completed by May 15.
- I would like you to come up with some ideas that are different than those we have been using.

## Executive Functioning: Challenges

- **Organizational skills**
- **Multi-tasking**
- **Time management**
- **Prioritization**
- **Emotional regulation**
- **Transitions**
- **Focus**



## Executive Functioning: Solutions

- **Provide simple, direct instruction and clear expectations verbally and in writing**
- **Provide visual cues, schedules, and supports**
- **Consider providing a smart phone or tablet for reminders and schedules**
- **Enlist a job coach**
  - At work or through a third party
  - Some job coaching supports can be funded through state agencies

## Executive Functioning: Solutions

- Break larger tasks into smaller steps
- Minimize sudden changes in routine or schedule
- Conduct frequent, brief, and specific feedback
- Offer clear and structured on-the-job training
- Anticipate and allow for ample ramp-up time
- Consider shorter shifts to give employee more time to learn the job at a reasonable pace

## Sensory: Challenges

- Sensitivity to light/possible headaches
- Sound – inability to hear one source amidst multiple sources
- Decreased ability to focus when in sensory overload
- Physical irritation to certain smells
- Dislike of touch



## Sensory: Solutions

- **Lighting adjustments**
  - Replace extremely bright, distracting, and fluorescent lighting with natural light or soft LED or halogen lights
- **Workspace adjustments to minimize audio and visual distraction**
- **Noise cancelling technology**
- **Flexible work hours or part-time**
- **Telecommuting**

## Sensory: Solutions

- **Permit employee to record meetings so they can follow-up and reference the recording later**
- **Allow sunglasses indoors**
- **Give advance notice of potential disruptions (alarms, construction, events, etc.)**
- **Advise coworkers to avoid wearing and using intense fragrances at work**
- **No touching**

## Steps to an Inclusive Workplace

- Find a champion in leadership
- Set a goal and monitor it consistently and conspicuously
- Go big with your vision
- Do not underestimate the abilities of employees with special needs
- Maintain high expectations of all employees

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## Steps to an Inclusive Workplace

- Get operations and leadership to drive the initiative
- Manage in the gray
- Use community partners
- Consider using a transitional work program
- Implement training



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## Training: A Two-Way Street

- Understanding and acceptance from coworkers is just as important as workplace accommodations
- Consider sensitivity training by a third-party or conduct it on your own
- Training coworkers on the social interactions and challenges facing their colleagues with autism will make both the employee with autism and his coworkers feel more comfortable



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## Training: A Two Way Street

- Training must address everyone's behavior – not just the individual with a disability
- Train supervisors to learn more about an employee with autism's learning process, preferences, and challenges
- HR must engage in an interactive process with the employee and supervisor to identify the most effective accommodation
- Communicate, communicate, communicate!

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## Resources

- Job Accommodation Network
- Autistic.ly
- ASAN – Autistic Self-Advocacy Network
- Employer Assistance and Resource Network (EARN)
- Autism Speaks
- The Spectrum Careers
- Autism & Disability Visual Integration Company Experience (ADVICE)

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29



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30