

# GUIDELINES FOR SUPPORTING AUTISTIC EMPLOYEES IN THE WORKPLACE

This guidance may be useful for managers, colleagues and supervisors who are supporting autistic staff.

The guidance outlines how to implement supportive strategies for autistic employees whilst awaiting specialist support.

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## Top 5 Triage strategies for supporting autistic employees

### 1) Determine the most effective method of communication for your employee.

Often in the workplace we give quick, verbal information to each other either face to face, or by telephone or sometimes even by using gestures. Autistic people may find it difficult to process information this way due to a number of factors such as obtrusive noise, a processing delay, not picking up on non-verbal gestures and hints, or if they are experiencing anxiety. We have found that a common, preferred way of receiving communication is in writing. This gives the autistic person longer to process the information, and it can be referred back to and easily clarified when needed. Whatever your employee's preferred method of communication, *your* communication will be better understood when it is clear, explicit and direct - using non-emotive language and bullet points, tables, or lists, to separate information and so thereby making it easier to read.

### 2) Use visual materials to aid prioritisation, planning and task completion.

Many autistic people are visual thinkers and have difficulty in intuitively planning and organising. The provision of visual materials, both hard copy and electronic, can be really useful in helping your employee to remain on track and meet deadlines whilst at work. Whiteboards, checklists, calendars, timetabling, using planners, and project management tools could really make a difference. There are also now some excellent assistive technology resources that are available, such as the "*Brain in Hand*" application that can also be used with smartphones in the workplace.

### **3) Don't assume that the unwritten rules of your workplace are understood.**

From knowing what is suitable to wear, understanding that we should offer our colleagues a hot drink when we are making one for ourselves or that it's expected that we contribute to collections for birthday gifts and special occasions – the unwritten rules of the workplace are not always easily understood, or sometimes even known to exist, by autistic people. The unwritten rules can be just as important as the written policies and procedures that we agree to when we start work for an employer, and are vital in helping to build good working relationships with our colleagues and to feel like we fit in as part of a team. Try writing down your workplace's unwritten rules for your employee - this will provide guidance and reduce potential misunderstandings.

### **4) Consider the environment, and also your workplace culture.**

Many workplaces are sources of sensory input that we may not notice on a day to day basis, such as strip lighting and glare from the windscreens of passing traffic, the noise of air conditioning machines, phones or printers, smells from people's lunches or deodorants or changes in air temperature. We may also feel comfortable in workspaces where we have personal effects displayed or if the walls are painted with bright colours. Autistic people may struggle with any or all of these inputs and are can be much more aware of even fairly low levels of inputs. By changing the location of your employee's workspace for example, or providing noise-cancelling headphones or even by considering some home working time, the resulting sensory overload and anxiety can be greatly minimised and your employee's productivity increased. Similarly, your workplace may have a culture where small talk and banter are central to building good working relationships and enjoying the time that your employees spend at work. For an autistic employee, small talk and banter can be confusing and sometimes intimidating and they can end up feeling isolated whilst at work if there is a heavy reliance on social communication. You could consider allocating a buddy for your employee to spend some time with at breaks, lunchtimes and at work social events if they express a desire to join in socially but seem to struggle to know how. Your employee may be good at organising social events, facilities or providing information about social event opportunities. Your employee could be included as part of the team by being responsible for

sharing information and planning tasks around social occasions. You could also consider setting up workplace clubs to take place during lunch times, based around activities such as chess, or film for example, to provide a way for the employee to socialise in a structured way and find other employees with similar interests.

## **5) Find out what specialist autism resources are available to help you support your employee.**

Organisations, such as the National Autistic Society, have many free and downloadable resources available to help employers to support and manage their autistic employees. Similarly, there is helpful information available to autistic people, including signposting to other specialist agencies to help with all aspects of life and work. The Government's *Access to Work* scheme has been set up to consider funding applications for many different types of reasonable adjustments in the workplace including assistive resources, support workers, training and workplace assessments. Find out what is available both within your organisation, and also externally to help you support your employee in the workplace.

**At present, the specialist Workplace Assessment service is going through a period of review and will not be able to book until 2020. However, you don't need to have an assessment prior to booking helpful training for colleagues, managers and your autistic employee which can be very effective and resolve most difficulties. To find out more about these services you can contact the National Autistic Society at [training.enquiries@nas.org.uk](mailto:training.enquiries@nas.org.uk)**

# Putting in structure around management meetings and giving feedback

## Line Management meetings

It is a recommendation that managers and autistic employees develop a proposed agenda for all line management meetings and that managers provide the agenda, with advance notice of when the meeting will take place. The employee should be encouraged to add to the agenda prior to the meeting. This will help the employee to prepare for these meetings, remain focussed and on-track during the meeting and will reduce any anxiety that occurs as a result of not understanding the purpose of the meeting. A summary of any action points from these meetings should be fed back to the employee in a written, bullet point, table form or list format. In order to ensure that the employee gains full benefit from their line management meetings and to minimise their experience of anxiety, we would recommend that the arrangements for these meetings are as follows:

- Frequency: We would recommend that line management meetings are scheduled for a set time and day at regular intervals to enable the employee to plan and prepare for the meetings.
- Format for the meetings: The meetings should follow a clear and consistent format. For example:
  1. Feedback from manager
  2. Feedback from employee
  3. Planning of timetable for the next period
  4. Reporting any upcoming changes or events
- Location of meetings: Meetings should take place in a quiet environment, with low background noise levels and minimal opportunities for interruptions. The manager should take responsibility for finding an appropriate place for these meetings to take place.

## Feedback

It is recommended that clear and instructive feedback is provided on a regular basis. This should include positive feedback in addition to areas that the employee could improve on. When giving feedback it is important that the employee is not expected to provide a solution to what they could do differently next time. All meetings where negative feedback is given should also include positive feedback. To assist with addressing negative feedback, the following format is recommended:

- What the incident was
- Why the incident was not acceptable
- Feedback from the employee on why they believe the incident occurred
- What the employee could do differently next time
- Any potential future action that could be taken if the incident happens again (providing reasonable adjustments have been made and time given to allow for adjustments to settle in)

This will help the employee to develop the tools and strategies to prevent the same thing happening in future. This should also help to minimise the employee anxiety. It is important during feedback sessions that stressors that may be producing anxiety in the employee, and resulting in unacceptable communication or behaviour, are identified and appropriate reasonable adjustments are put in place to help minimise or eliminate these triggers where possible and practical.

## Communication Strategies

Find out the autistic employee's preferred and most effective\* method of communication .

This may be

- Email
- Telephone
- Skype
- Internal messenger service

Ensure that you are using clear and concise communication methods that including:

- Giving time to process information
  - Clear, specific, precise and detailed instructions. Step by step instructions in a numbered or bullet point list format are normally the most effective.
  - Don't assume implicit and non-verbal communication will be understood
  - Prompt the employee to make notes during the conversation
  - Prompt the employee to repeat back their understanding of the meeting/communication and what they take away from it as the most important points
  - Follow up with a written summary of the conversation wherever possible
- Give clear concise written information, use less language but ensure there is no ambiguity. Avoid lengthy paragraphs and "wordy" emails but still remain polite.
  - Provide clear process and "next steps" information to ensure that the employee knows what they are expected to do.
  - When writing use bullet points, lists, tables and other easy to read information such as tables and flow charts

***\*Check verbal understanding by asking open questions eg.,***

***"So that I can check that I've given you all the information, please could you repeat back to me what you expect to happen next and what it is that you need to do "?***

# Strategies to support difficulties with planning, prioritisation and organisation (executive functioning difficulties)

## **Supporting documents and templates**

Autistic people can often have difficulty in one or more aspects of executive function. Executive function are the skills we use to help get things done. Executive function skills include planning, organising, strategising, paying attention to and remembering details, switching your focus between tasks, and managing time and space. Here are some simple strategies to consider:

### ***Scripts***

Scripts may be a helpful tool to develop for a number of workplace scenarios such as answering the phone, greeting customers or asking questions. The best way to do this is think of short phrases or sentences that the employee can write down to use throughout the day in situations they are unsure about. Sometimes, it may be helpful to present this information as a flow chart, for example with telephone answering, this will show a basic greeting and then the flow chart will provide scripts and guidance based on whether the employee is able to answer their enquiry or whether they need to pass them over to a colleague or manager. This can help reduce anxiety and increase confidence and practical workplace skills.

### ***Working file and visual reminders***

A working file could be developed which will help create independence and reduce reliance on colleagues or managers for detailed day to day support. This may include:

- common tasks with clear procedures
- example screen shots could be used for any tasks that involve using the computer
- photographs/video clips of each stage of a task
- flow charts showing who to approach if the employee feels stuck or unsure
- problem solving FAQs

Visual reminders can be used to help prompt the employee in certain tasks they need to undertake – this may be as simple as post it notes stuck to a computer monitor or may be something larger such as a personal whiteboard to assist with task management.

### ***Organisational strategies***

There are many organisational strategies that could be developed. Here are some simple things to consider:

- Help the employee develop a colour coded organisational system within their Outlook calendar or provide them with a colour coded visual timetable which lays out clear weekly tasks and timings. In most cases, these should be developed in collaboration with the employee if they feel it would be helpful. In some cases, the employee may require timetables to be developed for them.
- Use smartphones or watch alarms to set reminders for repeating tasks or to help remind the employee when their break ends and finishes
- Clear to do lists with clear deadlines and assistance with prioritising tasks
- Guidance on how and when to move deadlines and who to contact if they are unsure of which tasks need to be prioritised.

### ***Assistive technology***

You may find that letting your work experience employee know about assistive technology useful. These are often simple ways to develop workplace strategies and create independence. Assistive technology can take many forms, from smartphone apps through to computer software. Some common assistive technology can include:

- To-do list and reminder apps
- Emotional support apps (such as Brain in Hand which connects users to a live support assistance to help in times of heightened anxiety)
- Screen adjustment apps (such as software to tint computer screens to more comfortable shades)
- Screen reader and dictation apps (such as Dragon).

Funding for paid apps may be available from Access to Work.

## Learning new skills and tasks

### ***Training***

All training should be practical and on a 1:1 basis and in an environment that is suitable for the employee's needs and does not cause anxiety due to sensory sensitivities.

Support may include:

- Working through course materials on a one-to-one basis before the course takes place. For some autistic people, this will allow them to attend the course and follow what is being said with more ease.
- Working through the course materials on a one-to-one basis after the course. For some autistic people, this will allow them to review the materials and clarify any areas of uncertainty.
- Utilising alternative methods of training where appropriate such as self-guided study or online learning modules.
- Providing reasonable adjustments in the training session such as additional breaks, not needing to participate in group activities, being able to wear sensory adjusters such as sunglasses or headphones and not being asked to contribute to discussions.

### ***Learning new tasks***

When supporting your employee to learn a new task, the following strategies may be useful:

- Talk through the task in a quiet environment. Break the task down into stages and explain each stage. In addition, explain the purpose of the task and what the output will be used for to enable the person to understand why each stage is necessary.

- Allow the person to shadow or 'buddy-up' with an allocated person to initially observe their completion of the task and then to carry out each stage of the task with increasing independence.
  
- Offer the person the opportunity to ask questions to build their knowledge and understanding of the processes and procedures involved. Materials such as checklists, flow charts and problem-solving 'prompt sheets' should be developed to help the employee to learn and remember any procedures involved and assist them in completing tasks independently.

## Managing sensory sensitivities

Many autistic people experience their sensory environment in a different way to a non-autistic person. This can include being hypersensitive (over sensitive), hyposensitive (under sensitive) or a combination of both.

This can include but is not limited to the way an autistic person may experience :

- Sight
- Sound
- Touch
- Taste
- Temperature
- Body awareness
- Internal regulation (e.g. recognising hunger, thirst or tiredness)

All of the above can have a significant impact on a person's daily activities, productivity and anxiety in the workplace, as well as their general wellbeing. Here are some simple things to consider:

- **Desk position:** Where a person sits in an office can have an impact on a person's performance and anxiety levels. It is important to identify with your employee if they have any sensory sensitivities and plan the desk space accordingly. An autistic person should never be expected to hot desk and should have their own allocated work space. Many autistic people find that having their back to a wall and being placed in a corner near a window can be very beneficial for sensory sensitivities.
- **Equipment:** Equipment can be used to manage sensory sensitivities, increasing performance and decreasing anxiety. For example, allowing a person to wear headphones, have desk dividers or computer screen filters.

- **Quiet space:** It is important that a quiet space in, or near the office is identified for the autistic person to use when they become anxious due to sensory sensitivities. This should be a space that is easily and freely available for the employee and should not be a frequently used meeting room when possible. In cases where this is not available, the employee may need to be allowed to take additional short breaks outside.

## Managing Anxiety

Many autistic people experience high levels in anxiety due to a number of common reasons below;

- Unexpected changes in routine, plans and tasks.
- Processing delays, particularly during verbal dialogues. It is common for autistic employees to mask/mimic understanding, or to feel pressured to respond to early and so not provide a meaningful reply.
- Unclear, indirect or vague instruction or task allocation.
- Sensory sensitivities such as noise, lighting, heat and odours.
- Consequential anxiety or “fear of failure” linked to poor confidence and low self-esteem.
- Emotional reactions from other people to their communications, such as emotive language or physical displays.
- Not knowing what is expected of them or not knowing what to do or say, particularly during social interactions.

**Some ways to help an employee manage their anxiety are:**

1. Provide notice of any changes as early as possible in written form, explaining how they will impact the employee, and explain clearly the reason for the changes.
2. Provide agendas and content for discussion prior to meetings and conversations, to allow additional processing time and thereby more meaningful discussion. Include a time table, detailing start and finish times for the meeting.
3. If ambiguity or uncertainty is unavoidable, provide the reason why clarity or detail can't be provided.
4. Be mindful and flexible about locations and times for discussions and face-to-face communication, taking into account the employees sensory sensitivities. Facilitate frequent and regular, short breaks during long meetings.
5. It is important to always give positive feedback and commendations in a timely way and in writing.
6. Be clear, direct and explicit in all of your communication, avoid emotive language and provide alternative solutions and strategies to the employee wherever possible.
7. Be mindful that your employee may not wish to socialise or may be anxious about doing so and need support, such as offering to meet them prior to an event and walking into the venue with them, or letting them know when the event changes from a structured one, such as eating a meal, to an unstructured one e.g. drinks afterwards.

## Useful resources & links



Network  
Autism

<https://network.autism.org.uk/knowledge/insight-opinion/top-autism-tips-employment-reasonable-adjustments>



<https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work>

## NAS Training and Consultancy

For more information about our range of courses and conferences, please visit [www.autism.org.uk/training](http://www.autism.org.uk/training)

