

Part 2. Support and Accommodations for Employees With Autism Spectrum Disorders

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Autism is often seen as a “hidden” disability and is frequently viewed through a deficit-based lens where an individual’s differences may be considered barriers to gainful employment. Even employers who are looking to create a more inclusive workforce may not know how to accommodate an employee on the autism spectrum. To bridge this employment gap, we need a paradigm shift that focuses on the strengths of the employee with autism.

A Strengths-Based Perspective

Employers would benefit from a perspective that emphasizes the value of a neurologically diverse workforce. An employee with autism can be highly skilled, particularly those with high cognitive abilities, and may show meticulous attention to detail and focused diligence when tackling a problem. Individuals on the spectrum can be logical and independent thinkers, bringing unique perspectives to traditional problems. Companies can benefit from seeing the innovative potential in these employees, who experience the world differently.

These strengths also may come with challenges. Social and communication differences can interfere with a candidate with autism demonstrating his/her competence in an interview and landing a job. Once hired, interacting with colleagues and navigating “hidden social rules” and office politics may be demanding, and the sensory environment of an office may be overwhelming. Juggling multiple projects and managing time effectively may also be difficult, and employees on the spectrum might benefit from supports for organization.

“[Individuals on the autism spectrum] are unique and out of the box. We are the dreamers and the inventors. Without us the world would lose some of its music.”

— *Aspergers on the Job*, Rudy Simone, p. 101

Providing Accommodations

Landmark legislation, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990), required that employers provide reasonable accommodations to employees who disclose that they have a disability. Accommodations may include:

- *Environmental and self-regulation considerations*: limiting fluorescent lighting, or allowing earplugs, headphones, or short breaks for stress management.
- *Social and communication supports*: in lieu of an interview, individuals with autism provide a portfolio describing their skills; diversity training can help employees who do not have autism to understand their colleagues with autism, and mentors can help individuals on the spectrum troubleshoot challenging office situations.

- *Cognitive supports for focus and organization*: explicitly stated directions and expectations for tasks with clear end goals, visual and organizational supports such as written agendas in advance, and utilizing written communication or email rather than oral communication.

The Workforce of Tomorrow

The workforce of the tomorrow recognizes diversity as a driving force for innovation. The landscape is changing. Employers are beginning to see the value in this underutilized population and are benefiting from the expertise and unique perspective that individuals on the autism spectrum provide. The following resources may be helpful to employers exploring ways to actively recruit, train, and optimize work experiences for these potential employees.

Resources for Employers

- [Asperger Syndrome Training and Employment Partnership \(ASTEP\)](#)
- [U.S. Business Leadership Network](#) (national organization and local chapters)
- [Job Accommodation Network \(JAN\)](#)
- [U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy, Employment First State Leadership Mentoring Program](#)
- [U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy, Building an inclusive workforce](#)

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REFERENCES

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