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Training curricula for people starting work with adult people with autism

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Autism and Employment

SECTION 1

Recruitment: the advantages to the employer of recruiting an autistic employee

There are several persistent myths about employing autistic people. These might be collectively termed the ‘*Rainman Fallacy*’: that autistic people never get bored with repetitive tasks, or never make mistakes when repeating them; that they always have one special skill (‘if only you can find it’), are brilliant with numbers, and generally have a preternatural facility for all things IT.

One or more of these things may indeed be true for individual people, simplistic stereotypes are as inappropriate and unhelpful for this group as they are for any other. Nevertheless, it is often the case that people with Asperger’s Syndrome (AS) are of above-average intelligence; and employers *are* frequently struck by their consistent application to their work.

The primary focus should always be on achieving a close match between the CV and job description. When there is an overlap between the skills, abilities and interests of somebody with AS and the requirements of the job, you are likely to be pleasantly surprised by his or her productivity in the role. A good match between someone’s skills and experience is particularly important for autistic people, as a mismatch is likely to leave them struggling to adapt and to demonstrate their ability at the start of the job. The early period for anyone in any job is extremely important because it is when relationships are built, and first impressions formed. Spontaneous flexibility and adaptability are often areas where autistic people underperform compared to their neurotypical peers and a higher-than-typical degree of orientation and coaching might be helpful in the early stages of any new posting. Autistic recruits also tend to be less likely to speak out if they do not feel comfortable with aspects of the role, so if a mentor actively solicits such information it will be advantageous to both the employee and the employer.

When there is a good match then you are likely to find your recruit performing consistently well above average. As noted above, work tends to be even more important to autistic people than it is to the rest of the workforce, as it is likely to be their primary route to social inclusion. It also offers someone with autism an opportunity to engage with his or her skills and interests in a structured environment with clear rules and goals. Coupled in most cases with a preference for known routines and an aversion to change, this means

that autistic people are invariably willing to remain in a role which suits them well and in which they can demonstrate their qualities. They are far less likely than their neurotypical peers to be looking to move on to other opportunities, either within your company or somewhere else.

2. Reasonable Adjustments – recruitment

The statutory requirement to make Reasonable Adjustments for disabled employees mandated by the Equality Act 2010 in the UK applies to recruitment as well as employment.¹¹ An important point for employers to be aware of is that very few of the Reasonable Adjustments required by applicants, recruits or employees with autism cost anything to implement. They are predominantly procedural in nature, and – because these Reasonable Adjustments are invariably aimed at simplifying, clarifying and/or rationalising a process or procedure – they tend to be constructive contributions. Indeed, they are often subsequently applied more widely, simply because they work well: they are invariably examples of good operating and management practice. They improve the procedure for all applicants and recruits, not just for those with autism. For more on Reasonable Adjustments once employees are in a job, please see the ‘Management’ section of this handbook.

In the context of recruitment, Reasonable Adjustments most commonly pertain to details of the interview process, and to the phrasing/wording (not the content or nature) of the questions themselves: this is covered in detail on the ‘interviews’ page. The following section includes some aspects of an employer’s recruitment procedure that could inadvertently exclude autistic people:

Telephone interviews

Some people on the autistic spectrum have an aversion to speaking on the phone, particularly to people they don’t already know. This triggers a high level of anxiety that can prevent them from performing as well as they might otherwise do in a different situation – which makes sense when you recall that autism is above all a communication impairment. If your selection procedure involves a telephone interview, many applicants with autism will fail at this stage. This is not just a significant problem for them as individuals; it is also potentially disadvantaging you, as the employer, because you are inadvertently preventing yourself from accessing the right people. There are some very talented individuals out there, a great many of whom would dedicate themselves single-mindedly to these and other jobs, and as things stand they may find your recruitment process inaccessible.

11. See ‘[Equality Act 2010](#)’ for a detailed overview of this requirement.

Group exercises

People with autism can struggle to read other people's body language and can take longer to think about a (verbal) response to what they perceive. Many are wary and hesitant in any situation requiring interaction with strangers, or in what they perceive to be a competitive rather than a collaborative situation. This means they can struggle to be heard or to assert themselves in group tasks. If your selection process contains any kind of group element – either a group exercise or a group interview – the applicants with autism are likely to be heavily disadvantaged at this stage.

Another option to consider is giving the person your interview questions in advance, so that he or she can prepare a response. This may seem like 'cheating' but it can help to level the playing field, by making the person feel less anxious and akin to their non-autistic counterparts. It also helps you see how the person will function in their job once he or she knows more about what is required.

3. The application stage: being autism-friendly

Job descriptions and job adverts

Job descriptions and job adverts can sometimes inadvertently include content that contains wording which is likely to deter potential applicants with autism. Common examples include 'must be a strong communicator'; 'good communication skills required', or 'excellent written and spoken communication skills'. Many jobs require these; but many do not. Moreover, unless these skills are clearly identified and described (e.g. the ability to speak over the phone, to attend networking events and to speak and work appropriately with people of varying levels in the company), an autistic person will not necessarily know which particular 'skills' are required: the terms are too generic to be meaningful. In which case, he or she won't be able to work towards improving them, or demonstrate them at interview, even if they happen to be very skilled in some areas of communication.

Many job descriptions and job adverts are simply rolled over from one vacancy to the next and are rarely reviewed in depth. It is worth considering on a post-by-post basis whether these qualities are necessary, or even desirable. Even if an autistic person has acquired good communication skills, their tendency to exacting standards of self-reflection would mean they are unlikely to consider themselves 'good' and are frequently put off by such an advert, despite being well qualified and suited to the role. Furthermore, their tendency to take things literally means that they will invariably

assume that they won't be considered for the job if they see this requirement, even though they have all the skills that are relevant to what are actually the essential elements of the job. The job description may even prevent someone from applying who has much stronger aptitude for the work than the majority of the neurotypical team-players who'll be applying. Employers should consider whether a junior IT support post really needs an outstanding communicator, or a back-office data entry role requires a committed team player? The unnecessary inclusion of this communication criterion is probably the biggest single factor which deters jobseekers with autism from applying for vacancies for which they are both qualified and well-suited.

Job applicants

Many jobseekers with autism have had many negative experiences of applying for work, and they tend to be offered fewer interviews if they declare their diagnosis on the initial application than if they don't disclose their disability. Furthermore, many people with autism, particularly those with a diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome or other high-functioning autism diagnoses such as PDD-NOS, do not consider themselves disabled. They view themselves as neurologically different, with this difference conferring advantages as well as disadvantages. This also means an employer should not view an autistic person's not ticking this box as dishonesty if the employee discloses later – many honestly won't view their autism as a straightforward disability.

In any case, many applicants with autism will not have declared their condition at the application stage.¹² However, they may well contact you following their selection for interview, to disclose and to discuss any adjustments they may require at interview. Alternatively, if they have been receiving pre-employment support and mentoring from the third-party organisation, it may be their coach/consultant who contacts you on their behalf to discuss these adjustments.

For a detailed discussion of the reasonable adjustments that are commonly implemented at interview for candidates with autism, go to 'Reasonable Adjustments at Interview'.

4. Unfamiliarity

One of the biggest obstacles that jobseekers with autism face is the recruiting employer's/ interviewer's unfamiliarity with the condition and its highly varied nature – autism is commonly misunderstood. It is important to bear in mind that autism is a spectrum covering a very broad range of abilities

¹² They of course have the absolute right not to disclose at any stage, if they choose not to.

and impairments, ranging from mild to severe. The 'label' in and of itself tells one very little about the individual.

If you are not familiar with the communication differences that are the signature aspect of being on the spectrum, or are unprepared for them, these differences can be subtly but powerfully alienating. This is because we all have expectations – instinctive for the most part – about how the people we meet will act, and react, in conversation and in certain situations. (An interview of course is fundamentally a structured assessment, but one in which these unspoken rules and unconscious expectations are a very significant factor.)

These expectations include eye contact (that it should be neither too hesitant or too sustained); tone of voice (not too high or low, nor not too animated or monotonous; 'normally' modulated, in short); speech patterns (not too halting or too fast); phrasing and terminology (there should be nothing unusual); and the nature of any observations or suggestions (these should be within the range of what is considered normal, and should not be in any way jarring - they should not be too left-field or nebulous). Body language is important too; many would view twitching or an inability to sit still as suggesting nervousness, but such movements could be involuntary.

All our expectations, therefore, tend to be 'Goldilocks criteria': no extremes and nothing out of the ordinary. And this is the problem, because the communication differences that characterise autism are by (neurotypical) definition out of the ordinary. And – particularly because we are for the most part unaware of our expectations – these differences have the capacity to feel uncomfortable.

If as an interviewer you find yourself internally distancing yourself from a candidate, the first thing to do is to recognise that you are developing an instinctive aversion to the way this candidate presents. The next thing to do is to ask yourself why. You should consider whether the person you're interviewing is on the autism spectrum. Here's a quick checklist: do any of the following apply?

- Too much eye contact (*'He just stares at me all the time he's talking – it's making me very uncomfortable'*), or little or no eye contact (*'She won't meet my gaze at all – I don't trust her'*);
- Very little tonal modulation (*'He's really droning on ... What he's saying makes sense, but it's hard to listen to'*);
- Long pauses before answering the questions (*'I can't cope with what feel like long silences – I feel compelled to prompt'*);

- Very short answers – not expanding them with any context or additional information;
- Longer answers than needed – not responding to non-verbal cues or to verbal interjections to move on (*'this person is unbelievably arrogant. They seem determined to finish their point and have the last word'*);
- Contravening the dress code (which is usually unspecified, but nevertheless is always expected to be understood and respected).

5. Recruiting candidates with autism – Reasonable Adjustments at interview

The main elements of autism to remember in this context are the differences in language-processing (taking it literally, and sometimes taking longer than others to process what's been said), and the difficulties that many people with autism experience when trying to imagine themselves in unfamiliar situations. Your key reference ideas throughout should be clarity and directness as is always the case if you want to communicate effectively with someone on the spectrum. The following points constitute the reasonable adjustments that are most commonly required when interviewing autistic candidates. As noted earlier, they work equally well for neurotypical people:

- Avoid open questions – ask closed questions instead. For example, a gentle opening question such as 'Why do you want this job?' will leave some candidates floundering because they either don't know where to start ('Because I haven't got one') or, conversely, when to stop (all the pressing personal and family circumstances that make it imperative for them to find work within the next month). A closed version of the same question would be 'What are the elements of this job which appeals to you?', and this will be much more likely to elicit the information you want;
- Ask single questions; do not ask multi-part questions. A vague and compound question like 'Do you have experience of working in teams and, if so, what do you think makes for good teamwork?' will just confuse. You need to simplify and clarify. An initial single question – 'Do you have experience of working in teams?' ('Yes') – can be followed by another single question, phrased more specifically, e.g. 'What factors do you think make a team work well?'
- Avoid hypothetical questions, or ones involving abstract situations. A question like 'What would you do if you were faced by an angry customer who wasn't happy with the service he received and wanted you to fix it for him?' will leave many autistic candidates

completely stumped, as they will struggle to imagine this;

- Instead, break it down into single questions comprising concrete rather than abstract formulations. To continue this example, you might usefully ask 'Have you ever had to deal with an angry customer?', followed by 'How did you try to calm him down?'
- Give the candidate a few seconds longer than usual to think about their answer. They may need this additional time (and period of silence) to be able to respond. As a rough rule of thumb, allow up to about ten seconds;
- Beyond this interval, be prepared to prompt the candidate gently in order to extract all the relevant information and gather sufficient information. You may need to rephrase the question for them;
- Conversely, stop them if you need to when they've given you enough information: 'Okay, you've told us what we need to know about that, so we'll move on to the next question';
- Any slack phrasing in your questions is likely to be exposed. A standard 'soft' opening question -- 'How did you find your last job?' -- has in the past prompted answers such as 'I looked online,' and 'I planned my route on TfL';
- Be aware that eye contact is likely to be different from that of neurotypical people. Autistic people are likely to make either significantly more eye contact (holding the gaze, staring 'through' people) or significantly less eye contact (occasional and/or fleeting eye contact, or none) than you are used to. It depends on the individual, and it can be unsettling if you're not expecting it. It's a very common aspect of being on the autism spectrum; the person you're with will do this with everybody, not just you;
- Facial expressions: many autistic people are difficult to read facially, and thus may appear to be unengaged or unenthusiastic. This will be misleading. Again, they're probably unaware of this -- try not to be thrown by it;
- Speaking voice: quite a few autistic people have unusual speech patterns, vocal inflections, and/or turns of phrase. They are likely to be entirely unaware of this. Try to listen to what the candidate is saying, rather than the way he or she is saying it.

Interview support

If an interview candidate has been receiving pre-employment support from a specialist agency, they will sometimes request a supported interview from their consultant. This is recognised as a standard Reasonable Adjustment by the

government's 'Access to Work' scheme, which regularly funds the consultant to attend in such circumstances. Their role is not to answer questions on behalf of the candidate. Rather, it is to prompt the candidate when necessary, as the literalness of many people's language processing will often prevent them from understanding the wider context of the question and from realising that more information is required, even if it hasn't been explicitly requested.

Thus, a question such as 'What experience do you have of using Microsoft Excel' may receive a factual but perfunctory answer such as 'I used it at university. And, also, in my last job'. At this point the consultant -- who will know the candidate well -- will intervene to suggest that they talk about their extensive experience of creating pivot tables, graphs etc. Conversely, if the candidate becomes excessively focused on a minor aspect of the question, the consultant may quietly intervene to prompt them to stop and move on.

6. Work trial -- an effective solution for both parties

There are some candidates who will never be able to acquit themselves effectively at interview regardless of how much practice and preparation they do. The ideal solution for these candidates in particular, but also for autistic applicants in general is for the employer to assess their suitability via an unpaid work trial. This typically lasts for a fortnight and gives the candidate the opportunity to show what they can do, not making them talk about it in an interview.

Whilst this is undoubtedly more time-consuming for the employer, it nevertheless confers the significant advantage of enabling the employer to assess, with much greater accuracy than at interview, how effectively the candidate will perform in the role and what, if any, personnel management adjustments might be needed to accommodate them.

From the candidate's point of view, the ideal would be to provisionally 'ring-fence' the vacancy, so that if the candidate performs well in the work trial they will be offered the job; it will not be necessary to interview other candidates. However, this is only likely to be a realistic possibility where there is an existing relationship between the employer and a specialist agency such as [AS Mentoring](#), Autism West Midlands or Prospects Glasgow, who will have prepared the candidate(s) and ensured that they are appropriate for the role. Without such a pre-existing relationship, the work trial will need to conclude at the same time or very shortly before the interviews for the other candidates take place. This will level the playing field with the interview candidates and will, hopefully, enable a fair and objective selection to take place across all the short-listed candidates.

8. Staff buy-in

If this recruitment is part of a company diversity initiative it is important to ensure that all those involved in the recruitment process – especially the recruiting manager – are aware of the initiative, and actively involved in it. There can often be a disconnect between a high-level (board, senior management, head of HR) policy initiative and what happens on the ground. The strategic intention is to recruit an employee with autism; the tactical outcome is that nothing changes, and a non-autistic applicant is recruited instead. Some of this is down to simple inertia: people stay within their comfort zone and do what they usually do, i.e. they recruit the type of candidate they usually recruit. If they're not familiar with autism, they can be taken out of their comfort zone by an autistic candidate – sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously – which is why it is essential to engage them with the process and brief them on what to expect.

It's also important that all those in the company understand the benefits the policy will bring, so that they are all invested in making it a success. This can include the importance of diversity to making good business decisions and therefore the profit of the business. While those who know people with autism likely have a more emotional reason to advocate these changes, many people will not be emotionally invested in this way. If they recognise how they and their business will benefit from these changes, they will be far more likely to personally support them.

SECTION 2 Induction

One of the advantages of an early declaration of the new recruit's autism is that any reasonable adjustments that will be required can be identified and implemented so that they are in place when the recruit starts their new job.

Reasonable Adjustments

Autism, including Asperger's Syndrome, is categorised as a disability under the terms of the Equality Act; the primary duty arising in an employment context is that the employer is required to implement Reasonable Adjustments to neutralise any disadvantages arising from the individual's condition/ impairment in the workplace. These adjustments

are specific to each *particular individual*, in their *particular job*, in that *particular workplace*. The criterion of 'reasonableness' is not defined, as it is specific to each individual situation. An adjustment which may be reasonable for a large corporate employer (e.g. transferring an employee to an equivalent role in a different part of the business if s/he had been recruited to an inappropriate job originally) may not necessarily be reasonable or indeed feasible for a small business with only a handful of employees.

Here's what Reasonable Adjustments are emphatically not: 'If we do it for you, we'll have to do it for everybody'.

Surprisingly, you still encounter managers who refuse to implement a Reasonable Adjustment on this basis; a recent example concerned noise-reducing headphones for an employee with acute auditory sensitivities, an adjustment which was (initially) declined on the basis that all her colleagues would want to wear them in the office.

Essentially, each adjustment is a reasonable response to a specific issue which has been identified as problematic in the context of an employee's disability in the workplace. If you approach the discussion with an open, can-do attitude – a spirit of pragmatism and flexibility ('okay, what can we do to resolve this effectively?') – then you can usually find an appropriate, effective solution.

For instance: in one company, the data-entry clerk sits as part of a large team in an open-plan office with a relatively high level of background noise. Their desk is nevertheless situated next to a large window and receives a lot of natural light. In another, smaller company, the clerk sits in a quiet office in the basement which is lit solely by fluorescent lights. If the recruit in the open-plan office is, like many autistic people, hypersensitive to ambient (background) noise, he or she will find it very difficult to concentrate on their work, and noise-cancelling headphones should certainly be considered as a reasonable adjustment (see for example [here](#)). Similarly, when it comes to someone who is acutely sensitive to fluorescent lighting who is working in an artificially-lit basement, then you should consider letting them move to a desk next to a window or – if this is not feasible – then replace the basement lighting with non-fluorescent units.

Clearly, if the people concerned do not have these sensitivities, no such Adjustments will be necessary. Adjustments may well be required, however to enable each employee to work to his or her potential.

What we find, time and time again, is that:

1. Reasonable Adjustments for employees with autism rarely cost much if anything to implement – they

are usually matters of communication, process and procedure; and

2. What works well for employees with autism, works well for all employees.

An example of the latter is the detailed written breakdown mentioned in the Information Box. It's often been the case when we've provided this for a new employee with autism, the employer has seen how useful it is in enabling the individual to settle quickly into their role. They have then included a copy of this document in the induction material for that role for all new employees.

Be clear about expectations, across the board. The employee will need to know:

- Who they report to (e.g. supervisor or line manager);
- How often their formal support/ supervision meetings will happen;
- Who they approach for informal information, advice and guidance – e.g. a workplace 'buddy' or mentor, whether internal or external to the organisation.

Useful actions:

- Write all such instructions down, so that the new employee has induction documentation to refer to;
- Consider breaking the job description down into bullet-point lists/ flowcharts ('decision points');
- Introduction to colleagues – give the recruit a floor map of who's who/ who sits where/ who does what, together with their formal job title in each case;
- Provide a written schedule, with detailed timings: when you're expected to arrive in the office, when you can leave and when you can take breaks. These are often a source of stress and anxiety otherwise;
- Some autistic people can have difficulties with coordination and remembering the layout of the office/ building – for these people an orientation tour, coupled with a personal map of the area to help them find their way around, are useful;
- The anxiety (and, sometimes, the difficulty) which is triggered in some people with autism when someone speaks to them to give them information and/ or instructions can make it difficult for them to assimilate and/or respond to it. Thus, a new colleague who is on the spectrum may need to have this information and/ or instructions repeated to them several times, often on successive occasions, before they will be confident that they have understood and remembered them. Again, it will be better if these can be written down.

Perfectionism can be a real issue for some autistic people. This can be a positive trait in terms of the quality of their work; but it has the capacity to be disruptive in terms of their productivity and prioritisation. Furthermore, the pressures of work, deadlines and the needs of managers and colleagues to receive completed work within an agreed timescale often make it difficult for the autistic employee to work to the standard they feel compelled to achieve. This can lead to acute stress and anxiety. The most effective way to address this is to give examples of the standard(s) of work they are expected to achieve and state the deadline by which they are required to have completed the work. Out of a desire for perfection, many will also not speak up if they don't quite understand something that's been explained to them. To counter this, let them know they can ask again if they don't understand and that it gets things done quicker if they ask earlier rather than later (or, worse, don't ask at all).

Disruptions to expected routine can also be disproportionately distressing for autistic people. An IT malfunction, an unannounced fire alarm drill, an unscheduled meeting, a cancelled train – all of these have the capacity to affect the employee's capacity to complete their work to the required standard in the stipulated timescale. If there is a practical way around the issue, suggest it in concrete terms ('The server's down and you can't access your working document, but you can boot up the laptop and draft the final section there while you're waiting for the system to come back online'). If there isn't – if, for instance, they've arrived 40 minutes late because of the train cancellation, and are very agitated – then reassurance is the best option ('This happens to everyone sooner or later'). You can again follow this with practical suggestions ('You can make up the time later. Take a shorter lunch break and leaving at 6 pm rather than 5.30').

The general case: If an autistic employee runs into difficulties at work, it is rarely because of the technical aspects of their job. It is much more often the case that these difficulties arise from a misunderstanding with a colleague, or a misinterpreted comment on either side. Some struggle with unstructured time, and the perceived expectation that they should interact socially with colleagues when there is less to do. Many autistic people find informal conversations baffling and unnavigable. 'Small talk', implicitly understood by neurotypicals (non-autistic people) as socially cohesive, is often literally meaningless to someone on the spectrum.

Explain the unspoken and unwritten 'rules': make them explicit. Write them down if necessary. Examples might include:

- A clean-desks policy; all filing to be done by the end of the day; all stationery items to be stored away in desk drawers, etc.;
- The rules around tea and coffee. Does everyone make their own or do people make 'rounds' of drinks? Is everybody expected to take turns? If so, how often should you offer to make them? And where do people drink them? Standing talking in the kitchen, sitting quietly at their desks, or taking them outside the immediate workplace?
- What people generally do for their lunch and other breaks. When do they go? Is it a packed-lunch culture? If so, where do you eat it? Do certain groups tend to sit together (e.g. managers on one table, supervisors on another, general employees on others) or is the culture less hierarchical?

An informal (non-managerial) mentor is often helpful in this unstructured, quasi-social context. Having a person in this role who you can go to – someone who understands autism and who can provide informal support and advice – is another anxiety-reducing measure that is often effective. The mentor can also have a quiet, explanatory word with colleagues to neutralise and resolve any misunderstandings. The mentor/ buddy and line manager should liaise wherever possible, to ensure clarity and consistency of advice and messages. Between them, they need to ensure that the recruit with autism is made aware of anything they're doing that has the potential to alienate colleagues. The recruit will almost certainly be unaware that they're doing this. Common examples include:

- Talking too much, especially about their own special interests;
- Not taking their share of expected tasks (e.g. making tea and coffee – the unspoken rules again);
- Standing too close to colleagues (especially when the latter are sitting at their desks) – and not recognising personal space in general;
- Interrupting excessively. If you do need to intervene to correct this, you will have to try to make clear for them what constitutes 'excessive' in this context. They may think what they're doing is reasonable;
- Not recognising and/or observing the distinction between 'professional' and 'private', either in direct conversation or via e-mail;
- Failing to maintain respectful professional language and terminology;
- Inadvertently causing offence by being very direct/blunt in comments and responses;
- Telling inappropriate jokes or making inappropriate

political comments (trying to fit in with the perceived office culture, but misjudging the tone of it);

- Involuntary communicative acts which seem inappropriate, e.g. instinctively laughing nervously when they hear bad or sad news, but because of their tone of voice it can seem like they are laughing humorously;
- The autistic employee is likely to take what their colleagues say literally and will not necessarily understand that what is being said is sarcasm or banter. If this seems to be the case, just - literally - explain the joke or the context.

It is important to note that the need for such help for an autistic employee is likely to continue. The above issues are a feature of the person's autism, and while the individual may learn several strategies to reduce their incidence, they will be unlikely ever to eliminate them completely. To intervene effectively you will need to be clear and direct in everything you say and make a point of keeping it adult-to-adult: be aware of the risk of patronising your colleague.

Training -- induction and ongoing

- Ensure training is delivered in a format that is fully accessible to the employee with autism. Many (although not all) people with autism have a strong visual learning preference. Employees in this category will find it much easier – or, in fact, completely necessary – to have comprehensive written handouts with the training materials/content in order to be able to assimilate them;
- Be prepared to offer training in a 1:1 taught format for those employees who struggle to receive information in a group-training environment. This will have the additional benefit of enabling the individual to ask questions which s/he may be afraid to do in a group situation.

Individuals: workplace support

Ongoing support and guidance in the workplace, from a provider which specialised in autism employment support, can be very effective in helping to develop the individual's skills, and in providing strategies to enable them to work as effectively as possible. Typical areas covered include stress and anxiety reduction and management, assertiveness, self-confidence, time and workload management, communi-

cation skills, and meetings skills and strategies. The external consultant can also advocate for them with their employer – often, in practice, their line manager/supervisor – and act as a mediator (in both directions, ‘translating’ between autistic employee and neurotypical manager) if appropriate.

Workplace support is very flexible and is often a short- to medium-term measure. These visits usually take one or two hours (depending on what has been agreed), and they will usually be scheduled weekly, fortnightly or monthly, according to individual need. The frequency of support can often be decreased as managers and colleagues become familiar with any reasonable adjustments which have been agreed, and as the employee becomes more familiar with – and confident in – their role.

The employer will often fund these visits as a reasonable workplace adjustment. Alternatively, the government’s Access to Work scheme may fund some or all the costs of this support. It is the individual employee who must make the application: see <https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work/overview>. This is an overlooked source of funding, which always has a surplus left over each year because so few people make applications to it, and it should be seriously considered in cases where your business feels it cannot afford to make adjustments.

Initial briefing/ Q&A Session

It is strongly recommended that you commission an autism awareness session for the new recruit’s line manager and immediate colleagues – *assuming he or she has given consent for the employer to disclose their diagnosis to this specific cohort of colleagues*. More than any other single factor, this briefing has the potential to make the biggest difference to the new employee’s reception, and thus to the accessibility of the workplace overall. It can be the biggest determinant in whether the recruit perceives the employer to be helpful, and whether there is an inclusive culture in the workplace.

It will also be a real advantage to conduct an autism awareness session with relevant colleagues at an early stage. This will ensure that if for instance the autistic employee misjudges the tone of the conversation and says something that is perceived as jarring or inappropriate, their colleagues will understand that this is an aspect of their condition and will hopefully be less likely to take offence and/or withdraw.

Example: because of the communication issues which are at the core of the condition, and which manifest to a greater or lesser extent in different individuals, it is quite possible

that on their first day in the job, the recruit will feel anxious and overwhelmed about meeting their new colleagues and may find it extremely hard to know how or when to greet them collectively when they walk into their office or workplace for the first time. The upshot may be that they blush, put their heads down and lower their eyes, and walk over to the desk and sit down without saying anything.

If these colleagues have not been briefed about the condition, and/ or have no idea that the new colleague has autism and what the implications of that might be, they are likely to instinctively withdraw, without being aware that they are doing so. If they’ve been briefed about their new colleague’s condition and have been told ‘Jess finds it difficult to gauge when and how to say hello to people, particularly when they meet them for the first time, so don’t be offended if they don’t greet you when they first start. It’s nothing personal, she’s just feeling a bit overwhelmed’. The reactions in this case are very different: ‘Oh, okay, the recruitment guide told us this might happen. Give it a few days’. First impressions are important, and the first scenario has the potential to open a small but immediate rift, which has the capacity to get steadily wider with time. The second scenario avoids this and buys time for the new recruit to settle into their new role in a much more tolerant and welcoming environment.

As with all disability issues, the key thing is to get to know the person as an individual. This is the surest route – the ‘secret’, if you like – to all successful diversity practice. People often perceive a person’s disability as an enormous label, as their defining characteristic; but when you start to get to know someone as a person and begin to get a sense of their personality, their likes and dislikes, the quirks and idiosyncrasies, then the disability and the questions around it imperceptibly recede. After a while, you just see the person, just like everybody else.

Autism awareness training: In addition to accessing resources such as this website and reading more about autism, it’s important for employers and fellow employees to receive, wherever possible, autism training to learn more about how autism can affect people in the workplace. Everyone with autism experiences their condition in a specific, individual way, so as wide an understanding as possible is important. Some people will be more affected by social difficulties; others will be more affected by sensory difficulties, such as being over-stimulated by light, sound or touch etc. For these people, other adjustments such as headphones to block out outside noise – even from things like fans which wouldn’t affect most people – or a certain room to work in with bri-

ghter or darker lighting – would be appropriate.

SECTION 3

Management

Let's start with a reminder. Autism, including Asperger's Syndrome, is – in the way that it manifests in the individual – primarily a condition which affects the way people communicate and interact with the people around them. And since the percentage of communication that is non-verbal is significant, this offers ongoing opportunities for mutual misunderstanding – particularly in the workplace. This is because of the host of unspoken rules and conventions that vary from one organisation to the next. This should be the primary consideration in all successful management strategies involving employees with autism.

Communication

The following considerations arise from these precepts, in no particular order:

- The 3 Cs: be Clear, Concise and Concrete in your communication with employees and colleagues with autism. This applies equally to written and spoken communication. Here's an example of how not to do it:

'That, uh, document that I asked you for a while back ... where are we up to with it?'

- How it will be heard by your autistic employee, who will be staring at you blankly while her stress spikes: *'That, uh, document ...'*

What document? Does he mean a report?

Meeting notes?

'– that I asked you for ...'

Did you? Oh God. I don't remember any email –

'– a while back ...'

When? Last week? Month? Year?

'– where are we up to?'

We? Who's we? Must be a team thing. I don't know anything about any team task...

How you should ask the question: 'When we had our 1:1 meeting last week I asked you to prepare a detailed briefing document for this coming Friday's team meeting. How much progress have you made with it?'

The other main considerations in your management strategy are likely to be the employee's stronger-than-usual tendency to acute anxiety, a lack of understanding of the unspoken rules of the office, and (where present) any sensory difficulties.

You should also bear in mind the autistic person's general preference for structure, routine, and familiarity,

rather than change, particularly when any change is unexpected, unannounced or unplanned.

Approach these issues – and indeed all diversity issues – with an open and pragmatic mindset. Much better to have a 'Why not?' culture than a 'Why should we?' response. In practice, at least 90 percent of what many employees with autism need from their line manager is clear communication and clear expectations, together with the opportunity for regular feedback. Some people describe these as 'reality checks', albeit using the term in a much more literal way than is usually the case: to enable them to check that their perceptions of what is required, and of how well they're performing, matches their employer's perception in each case (where 'employer' usually equates to 'line manager').

The unspoken rules of the workplace

These are the social conventions: the collectively-established norms of what constitutes acceptable behaviour, dress, conversational topics, in-jokes, etc. Most of us are not even aware that we share these unspoken standards until somebody fails to conform to one of them, inadvertently or otherwise. At this point, we become sharply aware that somebody has transgressed – that they have said or done something we consider unacceptable. In most cases, when an employee with autism runs into problems at work, it is because they have inadvertently broken one or more of these unspoken rules. We looked at common examples of these in the 'informal mentor' section of the induction chapter.

Unstructured time (tea/ coffee breaks, lunchtimes in particular) can be very stressful. Again, the key is to make the implicit explicit. Explain what people tend to do at lunchtimes, where they go, where they get their food, who tends to go with whom, etc. Suggest what the employee with autism might do, at least in the short term:

'In the summer you can bring a packed lunch and eat outside, the benches in the park. Now, in the winter, you probably want to go to the canteen and get something hearty. The best time to go would be early, around 12.15, so you can choose a table. When the place fills up from 12.30 onwards, people will come and join you, and that's your chance for conversation if you want it. So, I suggest you take your lunch hour from 12.15 to 1.15 and see how it goes. If it doesn't work out, we can think of a different approach for you to try.'

People with autism tend to value clear rules and boundaries, so write as many of these down as possible. To avoid singling anyone out, this document could be designated a Code of Conduct, and form part of the general induction

material for all new staff. Make it clear to your employees that they are required to follow these rules and observe these boundaries, and that there will be consequences if they don't. A strong induction programme – one which makes implicit assumptions explicit and which codified these unspoken rules and boundaries – is the most helpful prophylactic measure which you, as the employer, can implement in developing an autism-friendly workplace and working culture.

Autism awareness briefings for colleagues and managers

If an employee has (1) declared a disability and (2) confirmed that they are content for this declaration to be shared with a group of colleagues, then we always recommend a short autism awareness briefing session for those colleagues. This should be delivered by an external specialist who has a strong understanding of workplace autism issues; it has not generally worked out well in the past when such sessions have been presented by non-specialists, or by trainers from pan-disability organisations. Subsequently, when new recruits join the team, the autism awareness briefing should be part of their induction. This will maintain the inclusive ethos and will help to prevent any misunderstandings arising in the future.

Reasonable Adjustments

People with autism generally find it (much) harder than other people to engage in, and with, team activities. So, whether or not the individual has given their consent for wider disclosure, the line manager should make a point of ensuring that the employee with autism is involved in team activities whenever possible. This precept should be extended not just to work activities but also to any out-of-work social events and activities, to avoid the exclusion that can otherwise take place. While this is often unintentional, it can nevertheless feel like ostracism to the person concerned. A little thoughtfulness and facilitation really do go a long way in these circumstances. There are some persistent misconceptions about what 'Equality' means, and about Reasonable Adjustments in particular. In the context of employment, the objective of the Equality Act is for each employee to have equality of opportunity to achieve his or her full potential in their job. In the specific context of disability – and autism, including Asperger's Syndrome is categorised as a disability under the terms of the Equality Act – the employer is required to implement Reasonable Adjustments to neutralise any disadvantages arising from their condition/disability in the workplace. For a detailed consideration of these, see the 'Induction' section.

These Reasonable Adjustments are specific to each individual person, in their particular job, in that particular workplace. The criterion of 'reasonableness' is not defined, as it is specific to each individual situation. An adjustment which may be reasonable for a large corporate employer (e.g. transferring an employee to an equivalent role in a different part of the business if s/he had been recruited to an inappropriate job originally) may not necessarily be reasonable or indeed feasible for a small business with only a handful of employees.

Structure and routine

Employees with autism need regular, structured feedback. As the Information Box makes clear, it is important to have regular, timetabled 1:1 meetings with their supervisor/line manager. This is the forum where the employee with autism can receive clear and concrete updates on what they're doing well, and on any areas for improvement.

Key points in this area are:

- Put the dates in the diary – *and stick to them!* Never cancel one of these meetings at short notice, unless the building is on fire;
- Always make a point of noticing and praising good work and positive outcomes. If a manager only ever notices and comments upon – criticises – poor work and unwanted outcomes, the ongoing message received by the employee will be unremittingly negative. Do not, therefore, manage 'by exception';
- Always try to find a specific (i.e. rather than general) piece of work, action or outcome to praise. 'Just as flowers thrive when you water them, employees flourish when you praise them' - Richard Branson;
- Many employees with autism have had disproportionately negative experiences both in education and in previous jobs, and their confidence is often low. Help them to build their confidence and you will reap considerable returns both in productivity and employee retention.

Note that everything stated in this section can be seen to apply to all staff. This is another example of 'What works well for employees with autism, works well for everybody'.

Change management

Because of heightened levels of anxiety and a preference for structure, routine and predictability, most people with autism tend to be averse to change, sometimes strongly so. This version is compounded significantly when the changes are unexpected. Of course, it's not always possible to anti-

pate all change, but in those instances where you are aware of upcoming change that will in some way affect the employee with autism, it is important that you manage this change appropriately. Key points include:

- Flag the change up as far as possible in advance. Ideally, sit down with the employee in a one-to-one meeting to talk him/ her through the changes. Their anxiety is likely to spike, they *are* likely to register only some of what you tell them (because they are anxious); so, you should therefore have a pre-prepared briefing sheet to give them at the end of the meeting that sets out the key points of the forthcoming changes;
- Make a point of checking with them a couple of days later that they've understood these key points. Give them an opportunity to talk through any worries. Convene the second meeting in advance, i.e. rather than springing it upon them as an impromptu follow-up discussion. If they know about the meeting in advance they can plan what they want to say. Keep the employee briefed about progress, and let them know at the earliest opportunity about any changes to the plans;
- Be aware that apparently 'small' changes, ones which wouldn't normally be expected to be a problem for somebody, can be highly stressful and disruptive for an employee with autism. The most common example of this is a change of line manager, particularly when the existing line manager is known, familiar and trusted.

Be aware, too, that for the same reasons as set out in the introduction to this sub-section, change in life outside work for a person with autism can be very disruptive in terms of its effect on their stability, and thus their effectiveness in the workplace. If you do become aware of a sudden deterioration in performance which doesn't have any obvious causes at work, it's worth exploring with the employee – again, in a 1:1 meeting – whether anything has happened in their personal life which is having a knock-on effect at work.

What constitutes 'good'?

This is often difficult for employees with autism to assess and is another example of why clear and direct feedback and information is a prerequisite for their effective management. We looked at 'perfectionism' in the section on Induction; this trait often stems from trying to compensate for not understanding (in the absence of explicit instruction) what the expected standard is. Examples of similar work produced by colleagues or by predecessors in the role is very useful in this context. By giving the employee such examples, you are enabling them to see what you want them to produce and are also helping to remove some of the stress and anxiety. Explain clearly that there is always a trade-off, for everybody,

between the standard of work and the time taken to do it. There needs to be a balance. Near-perfect work will not compensate for doing (far) less of it than required. Conversely, a very high production rate will not compensate for poorly-produced and/ or inaccurate work.

The perceived 'slippery' or nebulous nature of this trade-off, this hard-to-define balance, is likely to be a source of anxiety for the employee with autism. Like everybody else, they will have to get a feel for it over time, but unlike most colleagues they will need more, and regular, feedback from their manager on how well they are achieving this balance. Be attentive, be patient, be flexible: once they have settled into their role and are feeling confident, they are likely to be consistently effective.

Prioritising

This is a similar and sometimes linked issue. Particularly in the early stages of the job, an employee with autism – just as any new staff member – may benefit from regular help from you on what they should be prioritising. It is also similar in that respect to delegating: be as clear as possible regarding what you want done, in what order (as far as is reasonable/ reasonable), and by when. It is often helpful to break this latter point ('and by when') down into smaller chunks. Some autistic people struggle to conceptualise time accurately. Five days might initially feel like five weeks – no pressure – until they belatedly realise that there's only five hours left before the deadline. So, if they have 20 different things to do by Friday, and today is Monday, it's worth taking a minute or two to walk them through it. Basically, 20 tasks in five days implies four tasks per day, but you know that seven of the tasks are larger pieces of work, and that three of these are high priority. So, explain that the employee should do to, perhaps 2 1/2 of these things today, and aim to have all three finished by midday on Tuesday. Then perhaps they should aim to do three of the smaller tasks by the end of Tuesday, and five more on Wednesday. Finish the remaining longer tasks on Thursday and complete all the rest on Friday.

If as a manager you are reading this and thinking, 'I don't have time for that', consider:

- you probably already spend several hours each week 'fire-fighting' – trying to sort things out that have failed to go as planned. It is better to invest a couple of minutes upfront and achieve a successful outcome than spending a couple of hours later trying to rectify things;
- an informal workplace mentor may help in this regard;
- 1:1 non-managerial support from a specialist consultant tends to be very effective in addressing this kind of workplace issue.

David Allen's *Getting Things Done* is widely recognised as one of the most effective time- and task-management systems. It has the added advantage, from the perspective of any employee with autism, that when applied properly it can reduce work-related anxiety significantly. It is both clear and structured, which is the type of approach that is closely compatible with the preferences of most people with autism. See www.gettingthingsdone.com.

Workplace organisation goes together well with this. The physical work environment must be well-structured to implement time- and task-management strategies effectively. The employee with autism may need direct, practical assistance to set this up, and may need to have it checked regularly to maintain the discipline. 'Clear and tidy desk' and 'Do filing' should be recurring items on anybody's to-do list, as (at the minimum) weekly tasks.

Once again, these strategies work for all employees, not just those with autism.

Assessment and appraisals

These are often a source of anxiety for employees, autistic or not. But for employees with autism they can be disproportionately stressful, for all the reasons noted previously about predisposition to anxiety, confidence issues, negative experiences in school and/ or previous jobs, etc. Things that you as an employer can do to reduce this stress and make the assessment/ appraisal process as effective as possible for both parties include the following. Send the employee a copy of the appraisal proforma in advance, so s/he can consider their answers

- Explaining the format and process in advance (say, at the 1:1 session which precedes it); make sure they are clear who will be involved, exactly how they will be assessed, what will happen afterwards, etc;
- If they have a workplace mentor will receive specialist workplace support, considering allowing that person to attend the employee's assessment/ appraisal. This is not to answer on their behalf but prompts or remind them when necessary. Again, it is likely to make the process much more effective and satisfactory for both employer and employee.

Check the learning

Whenever you've had any kind of substantive conversation with an employee with autism – delegated a task, given some feedback, asked for some information – check that they have properly understood what you just told

them. If you make the same assumptions about your autistic staff as you do about you and your typical staff in terms of communication and contextualising, you're likely to run into unexpected issues. If what you said to them contained any implied steps (and thus necessarily requires them to make inferences), you will almost certainly be surprised at how different those inferences will be from what you had expected.

Communication is a two-way process: it requires both the transmitter and a receiver. If the message was not received as intended, the problem is at least as likely to lie with the transmitter rather than the receiver. This might include using an incomplete message; an unclear message; business jargon and content-free buzzwords, rather than plain English and an assumption of common but unspoken reference points.

Always think how you can be clear, concrete, concise and direct.

SECTION 4

Ongoing support and problem-solving

Specialist workplace support from an external provider

As we saw in the list of typical Reasonable Adjustments, non-managerial workplace support from a specialist autism employment organisation is often implemented by the employer and funded as a job retention measure by the government's Access to Work scheme. The consultant will provide ongoing support and guidance in the workplace to develop the employee's skills and give them strategies to enable them to work as effectively as possible. Although the need for this varies greatly between individuals, some general points can be made. Typical areas covered include stress and anxiety reduction and management, assertiveness, self-confidence, time and workload management, communication skills, and meetings skills and strategies. Often, a kind of translation function is involved: explaining the actions and reactions of the employee with autism to the neurotypical manager and explaining the employer's/ manager's perspective to the employee. Such intermediation is generally extremely effective in achieving the resolution to issues which arise much more quickly than would otherwise be the case.

Workplace support is very flexible and is often a short- to medium-term measure. The frequency of support can often be decreased as manager(s) and colleagues become familiar with any Reasonable Adjustments that have been agreed with and for the employee; have adapted their communication styles accordingly; and as the employee becomes more

familiar with – and confident in – their role. Others settle into a pattern of regular but less frequent support – say, an hour a fortnight, or an hour a month. This enables them to raise any issues of concern with their consultant, and to identify and tackle any problems at an early stage before they have had the chance to become entrenched.

Ideally, a three-way relationship develops (subject, of course, to the employee's consenting to this) between the employee, consultant, and the line manager. This has proven over the years to be a very effective measure to ensure staff retention.

Dealing with problems – dispute resolution

In any discussion – whether formal or informal – concerning the events and/ or details of a dispute involving an employee with autism, it is important for the employee to be accompanied by a mentor, consultant or colleague who knows them well. As noted above, most of these situations arise from a misunderstanding between the employee with autism and one or more of their colleagues/ managers. These initial misunderstandings are often trivial but can easily spiral and become entrenched. The 'translation function' – from autistic to neurotypical (non-autistic), and vice-versa – is particularly important here.

This is because:

- the individual's rationale for his/ her actions is likely to be entirely rational from his/ her perspective, but to appear notably irrational from a neurotypical perspective;
- the neurotypical (s) involved may well have expected their colleague with autism to have 'filled in the gaps' of what was said to them, or to have drawn a very different inference from the one that they did;
- the employee with autism is most unlikely to be aware of any hidden agendas, office politics, small 't' territorial issues – any sense that someone may feel that their toes have been trodden on, etc. It will be hard to achieve a positive resolution of the issues without someone accompanying them to explain and interpret all these hidden aspects of the situation and, where necessary and where consented to, explaining this on their behalf to the investigating manager. Furthermore, if the neurotypical/s involved it is/are not being entirely honest in their approach to the issues involved, it will be very easy for them to outmanoeuvre the employee with autism in social and emotional terms. For instance, they might play the victim, manipulate events to their advantage,

and attract the sympathy and support of colleagues (and managers) who are not aware of the underlying disability issues.

This is not to say that employees with autism who are involved in workplace disputes are always in the right; this is clearly not the case. It is, however, to state that they are *always* at a disadvantage when it comes to any investigative process in which those underlying issues have not been taken fully into account. It is why, perhaps intuitively, formal processes for dispute resolution tend to be much more accessible (and thus fairer) to them than informal ones. Mediation, in particular, almost always puts the autistic person at a significant disadvantage because they will not be able to 'play the game'. They will always be outflanked by a neurotypical counterparty who is seeking to gain an advantage or, at worst, is seeking to 'win' the dispute resolution process outright.

What if it's the job itself that is problematic?

An imperfect fit between an employee and their job is an issue which can potentially affect all employees, whether they are categorised as disabled or not. In the latter case, though, you with their employer have the duty under the Equality Act to make Reasonable Adjustments.

In that minority of cases where the problematic issue for the employee with autism concerns the job itself rather than a misunderstanding in the workplace, you and the employee should work together to consider what adjustments you can implement to make hundred percent of the role accessible to them. If you have attempted this, and have sought external specialist advice, and there yet remain aspects which – it is clear – will in practice remain beyond the grasp of that employee, you should consider what is sometimes known as 'job-carving'. This entails removing the problem elements from the individual's job description and replacing them with other, equivalent tasks. Such adjustments may necessitate task reallocation between the employee with autism and one or more colleagues within their team. For instance, quite a few autistic people dislike speaking on the phone, particularly when they haven't been able to plan the conversation beforehand. If a minority aspect of someone's job is to take turns answering the phone to deal with external enquiries, it should be a straightforward matter to take that out of their list of duties and replace it instead with the responsibility to answer a fair proportion of the incoming email queries. In the worst-case scenario, where the job itself is simply the wrong one for that individual, and where no amount of Reasonable Adjustments will render it suitable, then you as the employer should consider transferring the employee to a more suitable role. (Subject of co-

urse to your company being large enough, with sufficient appropriate vacancies, for this to be a 'reasonable' rather than an 'unreasonable' adjustment.)

Workplace assessments

A formal workplace assessment conducted by a specialist autism employment organisation can be an effective way to resolve these kinds of problems. They are often commissioned when an existing employee has just declared their diagnosis to their employer for the first time, declarations which in turn may have been triggered by the individual concerned being notified that s/he will be facing a disciplinary procedure. Alternatively, they can be requested to resolve an entrenched and sometimes polarised problem involving an employee with autism, where the employer needs to find a way forward that fully addresses their responsibilities under the equalities legislation. Ideally this kind of specialist intervention will not only enable the employer to be sure that they have met all their Equality Act other statutory obligations but will also enable them to achieve best practice in terms of diversity.

A workplace assessment typically involves a specialist consultant visiting the workplace for a series of one-to-one meetings with all the key players involved in the situation: the employee with autism, the line manager, any other relevant colleagues and managers, and any HR representatives who are involved. The consultant will subsequently prepare a report setting out their assessment and analysis of the issues involved and specifying their recommendations for any Reasonable Adjustments to address those of the issues which are disability-specific. In most cases, this external intervention and advice enables a positive resolution to be achieved. In the minority of cases where this is not possible – where whatever you do as an employer, this will remain the wrong job for that individual – the consultant will enable you to identify this, and thus allow you to action any

appropriate internal transfers or external outplacements. A list of specialist providers can be found in the signposting section.

Checklist

Summarising from the 'Management' and this current 'Ongoing Support' sections, we have the following key points for managers of employees with autism:

- Be Clear, Concise, Concrete, Consistent and Direct in your communications. Remember that people with autism tend to take what you say *very* literally.
- Follow up all spoken instructions and information with written summaries – bullet-point lists are ideal.
- Provide as much structure as possible: timetables, schedules, plans, etc.
- Have regular, timetabled one-to-one support and supervision meetings at an appropriate frequency. Give clear and regular feedback at these meetings, positive as well as negative.
- Provide autism awareness training for the relevant team(s) and, subsequently, for any new recruits to those teams.

Identify and explain the 'Unwritten Rules' of behaviour in your workplace. Write them down for the employee's reference, so that they are no longer unwritten!

Adapt your internal training as necessary for the employee's learning style. Be prepared to provide written versions of all information, and to convene one-to-one training/ learning sessions for the employee with autism if s/he struggles to process learning in a group situation.

Finally, keep a pastoral eye out for your employee. Try to ensure that s/he is consistently included in team activities, informal as well as formal.

