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IMPACT SOURCING IN ACTION AUTISM EMPOWERMENT KIT

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

The Global Impact Sourcing Coalition (GISC) envisions a world in which all people have opportunities to obtain productive employment and decent work. GISC members are committed to increasing awareness and uptake of Impact Sourcing, an inclusive hiring practice that provides people from disadvantaged and vulnerable communities with access to foundational job opportunities and career development, and ultimately contributes to improved social and economic well-being of families and communities.

Finding and maintaining employment in a competitive job market is challenging for any individual, but is especially complex for adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)¹ who struggle with the social interaction and communication skills required in the workplace. To address these challenges, GISC has partnered with GISC members – business leaders committed to sustainable business practices – to publish a series of reports on the inclusion of diverse individuals in the workplace.

This report focuses on workplace inclusion of adults with ASD. It provides employers with guidance, recommendations, and resources for providing support and workplace accommodations to empower autistic employees throughout their employment lifecycle – from recruitment to training and career development.

Note: The goal of this report is to provide helpful information. None of the content in this report should be considered a replacement for professional medical, legal, or educational guidance regarding adults with ASD. The authors of this guide have not validated, nor are they responsible for any information or services provided by third parties. You are urged to use independent judgment and request references when considering any resource associated with the provision of services related to autism.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karen Streeby has over 20 years of experience providing creative staffing services to Microsoft. She has two children, including a son on the autism spectrum, and uses her professional experience and personal passion to advocate for inclusion and acceptance of autistic people in our communities, schools, and workplaces.



INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

Randy Lewis, former senior vice president of Supply Chain and Logistics at Walgreens, and author of *No Greatness Without Goodness*, sums up the employment challenge well.

“As a parent and an employer, I saw the obstacles that people with disabilities face in securing employment. They may not be able to get through the online application process, may not interview well, may not be able to learn the way we are used to training, may have inconsistency in their employment history. They face death by a thousand cuts. And the unkindest cut? The belief by 99.999% of us that people with disabilities really cannot do any job as well as a typically-abled person.”²

This longstanding social bias reflects how little people know about the actual advantages of harnessing the talents of employees with disabilities. Luckily, perceptions are changing and many employers, both large and small, are discovering the benefits of hiring a diverse workforce.

The atypical way of thinking by people on the autism spectrum centers around communication, social interaction, sensory processing, motor coordination, and executive functioning. The ways in which autistic people experience, process, and express information can be

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misunderstood but it is what drives their strengths as well as their weaknesses.

These qualities can leave some coworkers with the perception that an autistic* colleague is quirky, rude, or uninterested even if that's not the case.

Employees need a better understanding of the challenges and barriers that people with autism face, as well as an appreciation for the qualities they contribute toward enhancing business performance. People with autism want to be accepted and fully included in the workplace, but need support to get there.

Media coverage about the benefits of increased access to competitive, integrated employment for individuals on the autism spectrum is increasing.

Large corporations such as SAP, Microsoft, Walgreens, and Freddie Mac have made important advances on this front. It's encouraging that many of these large companies, despite being competitors in other areas, share a common goal and are joining forces to develop best practices to increase employment opportunities for autistic adults.

We hope the best practices and specific guidance provided in this report will help you and your company actively engage in inclusion efforts.

* We have used identity-first and person-first language interchangeably throughout this report. Note that most autistic adults and their family members prefer the use of identity-first language (e.g., "autistic person") rather than person-first language (e.g., "person with autism"). See Kapp, S. K., Gillespie-Lynch, K., Sherman, L. E., & Hutman, T. (2013). Deficit, difference, or both? Autism and neurodiversity. *Developmental Psychology*, 49, 59-71.

AUTISM FACTS

AT A GLANCE

1 IN 68

NUMBER OF CHILDREN NOW DIAGNOSED WITH AUTISM

AN ESTIMATED
50,000

NUMBER OF PEOPLE ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM WHO
GRADUATE FROM HIGH SCHOOL IN THE U.S. EACH YEAR

35%

PERCENTAGE OF YOUNG ADULTS WITH AUTISM WHO HAVE NEVER HELD A JOB
OR RECEIVED POSTGRADUATE EDUCATION AFTER LEAVING HIGH SCHOOL

AN ESTIMATED
50-75%

OF PEOPLE ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM EXPERIENCE
LONG-TERM PERIODS OF UNEMPLOYMENT

163,000

CHILDREN AGED 17 YEARS OR YOUNGER WITH AN ASD IN THE U.S. WHO WERE
LIVING IN POVERTY (AS OF 2009, MOST RECENT DATE DATA IS AVAILABLE)



WHY EMPLOY PEOPLE WITH AUTISM

WHY EMPLOY PEOPLE WITH AUTISM

Evolving Demographics

Our understanding of the demographics of ASD have evolved considerably in recent years. It is now estimated that one to two percent of the US population is on the autism spectrum, and 1 in 68 children are now diagnosed with autism.³

Autism wasn't added as a clinical diagnosis in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Third Edition (DSM-III)* until 1980. Even at that time, a lack of accurate scientific understanding of the disability combined with incomplete diagnostic criteria left a substantial number of individuals undiagnosed.

The modern clinical diagnosis of ASD in the DSM-5 didn't go into effect until 2013. Improvements in diagnostic criteria and growing recognition of the disability contribute to many adults receiving a diagnosis today. Many of these individuals were misdiagnosed with other disabilities as children, or simply undiagnosed. The fact is that people with ASD are an ever-growing percentage of our workforce.

As awareness of autism has increased, many

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DIAGNOSIS IN THE DIAGNOSTIC AND
STATISTICAL MANUAL OF MENTAL DISORDERS

UNTIL 1980

THE MODERN CLINICAL DIAGNOSIS OF ASD
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UNTIL 2013

autistic children are getting adequate support in their K-12 schools and communities. But, upon reaching adulthood, the level of support rapidly dissipates. An estimated 50,000 people on the autism spectrum graduate from high school in the US each year, and enter adulthood with substantial barriers to employment access.⁴ According to recent research, 35 percent of young adults (ages 19-23) with autism have never held a job or received postgraduate education after leaving high school. An estimated 50 to 75 percent of adults with ASD experience long-term periods of unemployment.^{5, 6}

Untapped Talent

When provided with meaningful opportunities to excel, autistic people have regularly proven themselves to be dedicated, loyal, productive, and focused employees. Common autistic traits such as intense attention to detail, affinity for repetitive tasks, and the ability to detect patterns and retain large amounts of information can enhance roles at companies that are otherwise difficult to fill.

Although many autistic workers are highly skilled, they are often overlooked or screened out of the hiring process early on due to the social demands of the process and social deficits inherent in autism.⁷

For autistic people, the social discomfort of the application and interview process may prevent them from securing meaningful employment, even though they want to work. The mere thought of interviewing and the fear of rejection can deter many qualified candidates from applying for jobs.

Business Results: Increased Productivity, Lower Costs, and Lower Turnover

Some initiatives to hire employees on the autism spectrum originate from a familial or personal connection to disability. However, entrepreneurs and business leaders who have launched inclusion initiatives agree that hiring autistic employees is not charity.

Rather, it makes good business sense.⁸ In fact, research and employer experience indicate that using autistic employees in roles for which they are well-suited can lead to greater productivity, fewer errors, and lower costs.⁹

A common trait of autism is highly focused engagement around specific interests. When successfully matched with jobs that align with their interests, autistic employees can often hyper-focus on the task at hand, which enhances performance, workflow, and productivity for the business.

Another potential benefit is an overall increase in morale and productivity for the entire team. After onboarding autistic team members, managers need to adjust their communication styles to support employees on the spectrum. Engaging in more precise communication, setting clear expectations, reducing ambiguity, providing consistent feedback, and checking in frequently helps managers guide autistic employees. These improvements in the overall level of communications on a team can improve the workplace for all employees.

When provided with an encouraging and supportive environment, people with autism can show great reliability, punctuality, conscientiousness, and commitment to their jobs. Managers have frequently observed

lower rates of absenteeism and higher retention rates among employees on the autism spectrum. Because of their preference for maintaining habits and routines that work for them, once they are settled into a job, they will often remain in a role they enjoy for longer than other employees.

More Innovative Products and Services

Companies that hire autistic people have also benefited from their innovative ways of thinking.¹⁰ Diverse employees, including those on the autism spectrum, have different approaches to problem solving and can be instrumental in developing improved product design and service processes.

Studies have shown that autistic people often excel at developing creative and novel ideas,¹¹ probably due to the fact that they do not conform as closely to social norms and are less subject to cognitive bias from prior knowledge and experience.

Companies have realized the advantage of universal design in the products and services that they offer. By embedding inclusivity into the work product and by embracing an inclusive culture, they can reach a wider consumer base. Not only is the autism community (adults with autism, family members, etc.) better served by inclusive product design, but it is generally more usable by everybody.^{12, 13}

Universal design as it relates to disabilities means that a product is usable by all people to the greatest extent possible, based on the following premises:

- Disability is not a special condition of a few
- It is ordinary and effects most of us for some part of our lives



- If a design works well for people with disabilities, it works better for everyone
- Usability and aesthetics are mutually compatible¹⁴

Societal Impact

Increasing access to employment opportunities for adults on the spectrum helps strengthen their self-determination and autonomy, gives them the resources and independence to engage in community-based social and leisure activities, and fosters a sense of belonging and inclusion. These benefits lead to improved health, the ability to exercise choice and control, lower levels of discrimination and harassment, increased chances of economic well-being, and greater personal dignity.

Individuals who support themselves through gainful employment are also less reliant on government assistance.

THE BENEFITS OF HIRING PEOPLE WITH AUTISM



UNIQUELY SUITED TO SPECIFIC ROLES

COMMON AUTISTIC TRAITS SUCH AS INTENSE ATTENTION TO DETAIL, AFFINITY FOR REPETITIVE TASKS, AND THE ABILITY TO DETECT PATTERNS AND RETAIN LARGE AMOUNTS OF INFORMATION CAN ENHANCE ROLES AT COMPANIES THAT ARE OTHERWISE DIFFICULT TO FILL



CONSISTENTLY RELIABLE

MANAGERS HAVE FREQUENTLY OBSERVED LOWER RATES OF ABSENTEEISM AND HIGHER RETENTION RATES AMONG EMPLOYEES ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUMS



HYPER-FOCUSED FOR HYPER-SUCCESS

WHEN SUCCESSFULLY MATCHED WITH JOBS THAT ALIGN WITH THEIR INTERESTS, AUTISTIC EMPLOYEES CAN OFTEN HYPER-FOCUS ON THE TASK AT HAND, WHICH ENHANCES PERFORMANCE, WORKFLOW, AND PRODUCTIVITY FOR THE BUSINESS



UPGRADED PRODUCTIVITY

BY ONBOARDING TEAM MEMBERS WITH AUTISM, MANAGERS LEARN TO ENGAGE IN MORE PRECISE COMMUNICATION, SET CLEAR EXPECTATIONS, REDUCE AMBIGUITY, AND PROVIDE CONSISTENT FEEDBACK. THESE IMPROVEMENTS INCREASE MORALE AND PRODUCTIVITY FOR ALL EMPLOYEES IN THE WORKPLACE



ADDED CREATIVITY & INNOVATION

STUDIES HAVE SHOWN THAT AUTISTIC PEOPLE OFTEN EXCEL AT DEVELOPING CREATIVE AND NOVEL IDEAS, PROBABLY DUE TO THE FACT THAT THEY DO NOT CONFORM AS CLOSELY TO SOCIAL NORMS AND ARE LESS SUBJECT TO COGNITIVE BIAS FROM PRIOR KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE

A photograph of an office environment with a blue overlay. In the foreground, a woman in a grey sweater with a pink collar is looking towards a woman in a dark blazer who is standing and holding a document. To the right, another woman in a blue polka-dot top is sitting at a desk with a laptop, smiling. The background shows other office workers and shelves with binders. The text 'SUCCESS STORIES' is overlaid in white on the left side.

SUCCESS STORIES

SUCCESS STORIES

This section highlights a few businesses that have implemented successful hiring practices and workplace support for autistic adults, including both global companies and small-to-medium-sized, U.S.-based businesses.

A pioneer in autism hiring efforts is SAP. SAP's [Autism at Work](#) initiative, launched in 2013, has a goal of ensuring that one percent of its workforce is comprised of individuals on the autism spectrum by the year 2020. With autistic hires filling roles such as software developer, data analyst and technical support in 16 locations across 9 countries, SAP has proven the worth of this talent pool. Inc.com recently featured this program in an article titled [Why SAP Wants to Train and Hire Nearly 700 Adults With Autism](#).

Another leader in global autism hiring, Hewlett Packard Enterprises (HPE), has developed the successful [HPE Dandelion Program](#). Launched in 2015 in Australia—with plans to expand to North America—Dandelion supports autistic employees in an innovative way. Employees are grouped in “pods” that provide professional development support and assistance in life skills, such as nutrition, managing personal budgets, and navigating public transportation.

HPE has partnered with Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations (ILR) to develop a variety of open-source materials to help other employers develop similar initiatives. [Click here to access materials from the Dandelion program](#).

Further, [Microsoft's Autism Hiring Program](#), launched in 2015, has proven very successful with more than 30 full-time employees hired to date in the United States. Much like HPE's 'pod' structure, Microsoft utilizes workplace Support Circles consisting of peer mentors, human resources and assignment managers, and employee resource groups, while also staying connected with an employee's Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors, family, and friends.

Contributing to the success at SAP, HPE, and Microsoft is their partnership with Denmark's [Specialisterne](#), a leader in disability employment on a global scale. Founded in 2004, Specialisterne has a goal of generating one million jobs for people on the autism spectrum. In addition to assessing, onboarding, training, and supporting individuals, Specialisterne consults with businesses to design and implement successful employment practices.

On the following pages, we offer in-depth profiles of AutonomyWorks, ULTRA Testing, and Northwest Center. The Resources section at the end of this report has links to several additional success stories about companies, both large and small, who have employed a diverse workforce.

SUCCESS STORIES

AutonomyWorks was founded in 2012 by David Friedman, whose son (now an adult) has autism. Of AutonomyWorks' 31 employees, 25 are on the autism spectrum.



AutonomyWorks was founded in 2012 by David Friedman, whose son (now an adult) has autism. Friedman, who previously held executive marketing roles at Sears Holdings, Razorfish, and Andersen Consulting, saw the opportunity to leverage skills in pattern recognition, memory, extreme focus, and accuracy possessed by many people with autism.

AutonomyWorks offers marketing agencies and publishers a pool of workers who can execute highly-detailed, repetitive, technology-based process tasks such as data, analytics, and marketing operations.

By outsourcing these tasks to AutonomyWorks, companies free up their internal staff for more strategic, creative functions.

Of AutonomyWorks' 31 employees, 25 are on the autism spectrum. Employees work onsite in AutonomyWorks' offices in Downers Grove, outside of Chicago. Many factors contribute to its employees' success:

- Consistent and structured instructions and tools
- Well-defined corporate standards and expectations for attendance, interactions, and performance
- Quiet spaces of their own in which to work
- Calming colors on the walls
- A sensory room with texture art to touch, a mat to lie on, and other items used to reduce stress between work activities

- Easy access to public transportation to ease commuting concerns

AutonomyWorks has helped its clients increase productivity in many ways. For example:

- AutonomyWorks was approached by a regional digital marketing agency to assist with client reports that integrate search, display, social, call center, and native data sources into a single tool for decision making.
- AutonomyWorks took over 18 weekly reports within 60 days and now delivers nearly 50 reports per week.
- As a result, the agency attained a 34 percent reduction in reporting costs and freed up their internal analytics staff to focus on more strategic work.

A multi-channel retailer needed assistance with website migration when their own automated attempt at data conversion failed at an error rate approaching 90 percent.

- AutonomyWorks went above and beyond by not only performing quality assurance on thousands of pages of content across desktop and tablet platforms, but also by reviewing navigation, tagging, and other unique types of content.
- AutonomyWorks discovered errors at more than five times the rate of the clients' previous testing team.

AutonomyWorks was hired by a digital marketing agency to support ad operations and trafficking so that its internal media and project management teams could focus on higher value activities.

- The work they submitted included a portfolio of demanding retail and financial services clients, so flawless execution was critical.
- AutonomyWorks took over campaign operations with less than one week of ramp-up time.
- They performed all process steps including campaign setup, tagging, creative swaps, quality assurance, and launch validation.
- AutonomyWorks eliminated 90 percent of the client's errors.

To read more about AutonomyWorks, see:

- [Why this ad ops firm never makes a mistake](#)

SUCCESS STORIES

ULTRA Testing has redesigned every aspect of a traditional workplace, including developing several innovative tools to empower its teams to work together more efficiently.



THE POWER OF NEURODIVERSITY

The diversity of human minds can be a powerful asset in any industry, and tapping into the strengths of autistic individuals can produce extraordinary results. Our differences, far from needing to hold us back, can propel us forward to better ideas, better teams and better organizations.

ULTRA Testing, founded by two Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) engineers in 2013, is a neurodiverse technology company that provides agile, high-quality software testing and quality assurance (QA) services. ULTRA's exceptional teams are 100 percent onshore and include individuals on the autism spectrum, who offer heightened abilities that are an exact match for QA—pattern recognition, logical reasoning, and systems thinking. Today, ULTRA has team members in 16 states across the US, with 75 percent of the team members on the autism spectrum.

ULTRA's mission is to prove that neurodiversity is a competitive advantage by bringing excellence to the software testing industry and delivering consistently superior results. ULTRA's clients include Fortune 500 enterprises, cutting edge software companies, and top-tier advertising agencies. Whenever benchmarked, ULTRA teams have consistently outperformed their QA industry peers.

For example, ULTRA's accessibility testing experts were engaged by Droga5 and its client, Prudential Financial, to ensure their new digital platform would meet the WCAG 2.0, Level AA accessibility standards. Over a two-month period, the ULTRA team integrated seamlessly with the client's development partner, meticulously ensured that all

requirements were met and documented, and increased bug detection by 56 percent over the prior testing vendor.

To recruit neurodiverse talent, ULTRA does not rely on resumes or interviews. Instead, they have developed an eight-step recruitment process that includes an online questionnaire, a pattern recognition test, and a week-long simulation of software testing work. This process assesses more than 20 specific attributes, including cognitive abilities, behavioral traits, and innate interests, that represent the profile of a world-class software tester. An interview is only conducted at the end of the process, after they have gathered as much objective data as possible.

ULTRA has redesigned every aspect of a traditional workplace, including developing several innovative tools to empower its teams to work together more efficiently. These tools include:

- **The Biodex**, a digital user manual to help colleagues understand how to work together
- **The Knowledge Tree**, a GitHub-based process collaboration tool which serves as the single, democratized source of truth in the organization
- **Smilecorp**, a Slack bot that monitors team happiness remotely across multiple dimensions of well-being and publishes the results daily

In April 2017, ULTRA launched the DifferentBetter Challenge, a series of challenges designed to introduce neurodiversity through a gamified digital experience. Each challenge highlights a heightened ability of a member of ULTRA's neurodiverse team—to help shift attention away from generalizations about perceived disabilities towards an appreciation of real abilities.

[Click here to take the DifferentBetter challenge for yourself.](#)

To find out more about how ULTRA's neurodiverse teams excel at what they do, see:

- [Testing firm finds that some workers with autism excel at spotting software bugs](#)
- [Quality assurance firm has an unusual advantage: autistic testers](#)

SUCCESS STORIES

For over 51 years, Northwest Center has been a social justice organization working with children and adults with disabilities to increase participation in society.



For over 51 years, Northwest Center has been a social justice organization working with children and adults with disabilities to increase participation in society. Their equitable programs include access to education, employment and advocacy in the community. They have successfully built and continue to grow their employment opportunities for people with disabilities using proven methods of screening, interviewing, training, and ongoing support.

The first step in their approach to employment is to assess the strengths and challenges of each person by placing him or her into a short volunteer position in the community. Once this community-based assessment is complete, Northwest Center helps prepare the individual for a job search by

conducting mock interviews and providing resume assistance. By working closely with individuals and getting to know their unique skill sets, job matches are tailored to each person's abilities and interests. Northwest Center is available to assist individuals through the entire onboarding process, including such logistics as opening a bank account or ordering a new Social Security card. Northwest Center also provides employer education and management training.

Job coaching is provided, as needed, with a goal of promoting independence by gradually disengaging direct support. For worksites with larger teams, such as distribution centers, Northwest Center provides an embedded job coach who is on site and acts as the liaison between the team

and the client's management staff.

Companies that have partnered with Northwest Center include Microsoft, Amazon, Zulily, Edelman, and PCC Natural Markets.

[Click here to learn more about Northwest Center.](#)

Read about Northwest Center's latest efforts:

- [*Hungry for reliable talent, tech companies are finding employees in unexpected places*](#)





HOW DO I
GET STARTED?

HOW DO I GET STARTED?

Deb Russell, disability expert and former corporate manager of career outreach at Walgreens, states:

“Don’t overthink it. Just do it.”¹⁵

To get started, it may help to first look at others’ successful efforts for inspiration. Walgreens is a front runner in the inclusive hiring space. Randy Lewis led its efforts and shares his knowledge in his wonderful book, *No Greatness Without Goodness*. A partial summary of action items from the book include:¹⁶

1. **Have a champion.** A champion is the leader of the business unit and has the authority and the drive to make the initiative successful.
2. **Set a goal and monitor progress relentlessly and conspicuously.** “What gets measured gets done.”
3. **Go big.** A large-scale vision will signal that you’re serious and will help align the organization.
4. **Have a bias for action, not planning.** Don’t spend much time with what-ifs before you get started. If you do, you’ll never get started.
5. **Don’t underestimate the abilities of employees with special needs.** Not every individual with a disability will be successful, but it will happen more often than you think. If you aren’t failing every once in a while you aren’t reaching far enough.

“

DON'T OVERTHINK IT. JUST DO IT.

”

6. **Apply the same performance standards for all employees.** You're a business, not a charity. People want a chance, not a handout; an opportunity, not pity.
7. **Keep your fear in check.** The biggest impediment to hiring people with disabilities is fear. But the fear can never come close to the sense of accomplishment on the other side.
8. **Start in parts of the organization where the leaders have caught the vision.** Begin with leaders who are on board. Goals are achieved most effectively when they are movements of attraction, not coercion. The skeptics will eventually be overcome.
9. **Make sure operations is driving the initiative.** If your organization were a football team, the CEO would be the coach, operations would be the ball carrier, and human resources or legal department would be the front line that removes barriers along the way.
10. **Adapt a "consistent in objective, flexible in means" attitude towards policies.** Be open to change when a policy or process gets in the way of your objective.
11. **Manage in the gray.** Be willing to overturn or modify rules as particular situations arise.
12. **Provide visible support from the top.** Offer cover for those who are responsible for the success of the program. Let them know that if they make mistakes trying to do the right thing, you have their backs.
13. **Use community partners.** Get help to find, screen, and train people with disabilities. If you wait for them to find you on their own, you'll be disappointed.
14. **Develop a transitional work program.** Consider creating a transitional work program as an additional pipeline into the company.
15. **Unleash peoples' longing to make a difference.** Deep down everyone wants to do something important and leave the world a better place. Let team members know their part is critical.
16. **When you are successful, give it away.** This work isn't only important for the business; it's important for all of us. This may be the most satisfying work of your life. Pass it on.

MORE RESOURCES AVAILABLE!

The Resources section at the end of this report provides valuable information to help you get started. In the meantime, visit these sites!

- [The US Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy \(ODEP\)](#) offers services to employers, free of charge!
- [Job Accommodation Network \(JAN\)](#)
- [Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion \(EARN\)](#)

Recruiting

Consider partnering with a third party or a supported employment agency that specializes in disability hiring. They can help source candidates for you and serve as experts in matching employees with jobs that best fit their skills as well as providing ongoing support to both the employer and the employee.

Your local vocational rehabilitation (VR) agency may also be a good starting point for finding resources in your area. [Click here to find your state's VR agency.](#)

Job Descriptions

Keep your job descriptions clear and concise. Avoid the use of jargon and nonessential language. Many job descriptions include skills or qualities that are not truly necessary for effective job performance, such as “excellent communication skills” or “good team player.” People with autism may consider themselves unqualified for a job requesting these skills, even if they do have the skill set required to perform the *essential* tasks.

For help crafting job descriptions, please see these guidelines on job posting:

- [EARN's Tips on Writing Job Descriptions](#)
- [JAN's Tips on Writing Job Descriptions](#)

Application Process

The first interaction a prospective employee will have with your company is most likely during the application process. At this stage, it is appropriate to inform applicants of their right to request reasonable accommodation to ensure full access to the interview.

Use simple language, such as: “If you require reasonable accommodation in completing this application, interviewing, completing any pre-employment testing, or otherwise participating in the employee selection process, please direct your inquiries to [recruiter name].”

Interview Stage

Interviews are stressful for most people, but autistic people find interviewing even more challenging because of their different communication and social skills. Autistic job candidates may find it difficult to think and respond quickly, especially when asked to examine and analyze hypothetical scenarios.

It can be challenging for them to gauge how much information to share in response, engage and maintain eye contact with multiple interviewers, and respond to several interviewers who are all using different communication styles. Interpreting social nuances of nonverbal cues, maintaining reciprocal conversations, and conveying appropriate degrees of formality are also intense for autistic individuals.

An employer can make numerous adjustments to facilitate the interview process for candidates with autism, including:

- Decrease the number of interviewers.
- Provide a quiet space for conducting the interviews to reduce distractions.
- Offer phone-based interviews as an alternative to face-to-face interviews for individuals who prefer that communication method.
- Share interview questions with candidates in advance of the interview.
- Decrease reliance on figurative expressions, such as metaphors and idioms, to help ensure full comprehension; carefully explain

all acronyms.

- Adjust your rate of speech as appropriate. People with autism may need more time to digest and respond to questions, so it is helpful to expect and allow for pauses in reciprocal conversation. These pauses do not indicate a lack of knowledge, but rather reflect the way autistic people process information.
- Modify interview questions to match the candidate's communication and response style.
- Inform the candidate if they are talking too much, as they may find it hard to judge how much information you require. For example, "Thank you, you've told us enough about that. Now I'd like to ask you another question."
- Prompt the candidate to help uncover all relevant information and gather sufficient information.
- Consider use of a second-chance interview. Some autistic candidates do not fully demonstrate their qualifications and fit for the job in the first interview.
- Consider evaluating candidates' abilities in alternative ways, such as replacing the traditional interview entirely with written questionnaires, short skills-based tests they can complete independently, or a realistic work trial.
- Provide clear expectations on next steps, so that the candidate knows when they will hear from you.
- [Click here to browse the helpful videos JAN has produced to demonstrate some of these interview suggestions.](#)

Ongoing Support and Workplace Accommodations

Successful job application and interview processes are only part of the equation for supporting autistic employees. To ensure full workplace inclusion and to help

employees on the autism spectrum reach their maximum potential, make sure your initiative includes ongoing support. The level of support and the accommodations needed may change over time, so your continued engagement with employees will be critical. Most accommodations are low or no cost, but implementing them successfully is key to an optimal outcome.

Mentors and employee resource groups (ERGs)

Providing on-the-job mentors is integral to ensuring an autistic employee's success at work. Access to mentors who are on the autism spectrum (as well as those who are not) gives employees safe sounding boards to ask workplace questions and seek guidance and advice. Parents and family members of autistic people often have a level of experience that makes them excellent advocates and mentors. They should be encouraged to volunteer their time to help autistic employees integrate into the workplace.

In addition, designate a human resources (HR) contact who can facilitate accommodation requests and other needs that may arise.

Recommendations for workplace accommodations

Once an employee is on board, work with the employee to identify which workplace accommodations will help remove workplace barriers, enhance his or her performance, and increase engagement. It's important to remember that no two individuals on the autism spectrum have the same capabilities and challenges, so it's best to work closely with the employee to determine which accommodations they might find helpful.

Encourage the employee's direct manager to find out more about the employee's learning style, their preferred working environment, and personal strategies for de-stressing during breaks. Here are some specific recommendations for workplace accommodations:

- Offer clear and structured on-the-job training for new tasks; provide training schedules.
- Anticipate and allow ample ramp-up time.
 - Consider starting new employees on shorter shifts to give them time to learn the job at a reasonable pace.
- Support different interpersonal communications styles:
 - Communicate expectations clearly, both verbally and in writing.
 - Use visual schedules and visual supports, for example:
 - AutismInternetModules.org's presentation, *On the Job Social Skills and Visual Support Strategies for Individuals with ASD*
 - AutismNow.org's toolkit, *Planning for Employment – Keeping a Job*
 - Allow the employee to respond through writing, rather than verbally, if they prefer.
 - Do not misinterpret a lack of eye contact for disengagement or assume that the employee is uninterested; autistic people often find eye contact stressful and it should never be forced.
 - Reduce use of figurative language (irony, sarcasm, idioms, and slang) to increase comprehension. Clarify metaphors and abstract conceptualizations, as needed.
 - Be prepared to explain or clarify workplace etiquette, unspoken rules of the workplace, standard operating procedures, and in-house jargon or expressions.
 - Encourage open and frequent communication.
- Structure the work:
 - Provide structured work with explicit, written instructions.
 - Assist with prioritizing activities, organizing tasks into a timetable for daily, weekly, and monthly activities, and breaking larger tasks into smaller steps.
 - Use electronic organizers for scheduling.
 - Minimize sudden changes in routine or schedule.
 - Provide advance notice of meeting agendas.
- Offer and receive feedback:
 - Schedule frequent, brief check-ins to discuss performance and provide constructive feedback in a direct, matter-of-fact way. Don't assume that the employee implicitly knows how well they are doing.
 - Provide positive and specific feedback on employee's accomplishments.
 - Encourage employee to provide direct and open feedback about how the job is going.
 - If a problem arises, tactfully explain what went wrong and carefully explain corrective actions to address the situation.
- Create a welcoming workplace:
 - Provide coworkers with training to increase their understanding of disability issues and prepare them for working with autistic people.
 - Provide access to executive coaching, peer mentorship from both autistic and non-autistic coworkers, and employee resource groups.
 - Allow employees to record meetings for follow-up and reference.
 - Try to make your meetings more inclusive¹⁷ so that everyone can participate, regardless of communication style.
 - Have everybody on the team jot down thoughts before the meeting starts and give the notes to a moderator to read aloud.
 - Use a shared workspace, such as [Microsoft Office 365](https://www.microsoft.com/365), for people to share ideas after a meeting, because they may not be able to communicate during the meeting, and it allows for

easier sharing with people of all abilities using accessibility features.

- Provide or allow noise-cancelling headphones; allow use of sunglasses indoors; give advance notice of potential disruptions, such as loud noises from construction.
- Provide or allow augmentative and [alternative communication \(AAC\)](#)¹⁸, such as picture and symbol communication boards and electronic devices, that help people with disabilities express themselves.
- Phase out extremely bright, distracting, and fluorescent lighting in favor of natural lighting, or softer LED or halogen lighting.
- Advise coworkers to avoid wearing or using intense fragrances (e.g., perfume, cologne or scented candles) in the workplace.
- Locate and design office space that has minimal audio and visual distraction.
- Maintain high expectations. Autistic employees have knowledge, skills, and abilities just like their non-autistic peers. They can—and should—be held to high standards of performance in the workplace.

For more ideas on workplace accommodations, [click here to see JAN's list of recommendations](#).

Sensitivity Training for Colleagues

Ensuring understanding and acceptance from coworkers and supervisors is just as important as workplace accommodations. Management should foster a culture of sensitivity and understanding so that autistic employees feel safe and respected and can reach their full potential in the workplace.

Companies can choose to conduct sensitivity training for employees and

managers and/or bring in consultants who specialize in employment access for people with disabilities to provide guidance. The approach you choose depends on your company's size and resources, but even small companies shouldn't see training as a roadblock for hiring highly-qualified autistic candidates. In fact, companies with successful initiatives for improving access for autistic employees typically decrease their reliance on sensitivity training as their employees adapt over time. Most employees will adjust their interactions as they learn more about their coworkers with disabilities.

As discussed earlier in this report, interpersonal interaction is challenging for those on the autism spectrum. Their coworkers may perceive their atypical communications or actions as rude or lacking warmth when, in fact, these differences reflect substantial differences in how their brain functions. An apparent lack of expression of feelings by an autistic team member doesn't mean that the person lacks emotions or feelings, or doesn't wish to be fully engaged and included.

Training coworkers on these challenges will help them feel more comfortable and better adjust to working with autistic employees.

Bullying and Discrimination

Autistic employees frequently report bullying and harassment by coworkers. They may be more at risk for bullying and harassment because of the nature of their disability and its impact on communication and interpersonal interaction.

It should go without saying that your company should have clear policies and plans in place to address bullying and

harassment in the workplace, including:

- Designated people to contact if an employee experiences any bullying or harassment
- Taking complaints seriously, with a clear escalation path to upper management/HR/legal
- Support from a trusted mentor, advocate, or job coach

It's good business practice to embed workplace inclusion and community integration into the fabric of your company—to ensure the workplace is not only safe for diverse employees, but all employees.

Next Steps

We hope this report will encourage you to integrate opportunities and access for autistic people into your company's workflow. Most of what we suggest here—especially clear communication—is good for all employees. We have provided a list of resources to support your efforts, but the list is growing quickly as the business community's support for hiring autistic people increases.

Regardless of the leadership role you hold at your company, ask yourself, “What can I do to advance this effort?” Every leader in the business community who embraces the idea that autistic people are valuable employees, and implements initiatives to successfully hire them, will have a direct, positive impact on the lives of autistic people.



RESOURCES

RESOURCES

Job Accommodation Network (JAN)

Job Accommodation Network (JAN) is a leading source of free, expert, and confidential guidance on workplace accommodations and disability employment issues. Offering practical solutions that benefit both employer and employee, JAN helps people with disabilities enhance their employability, and shows employers how to capitalize on the value and talent that people with disabilities add to the workplace.

- [Workplace Accommodation Toolkit](#)
- [Accommodation and Compliance Series: Autism](#)
- [Interviewing Tips: Autism](#)
- [Presentation: Disability Awareness to Increase Your Comfort, Confidence, and Competence](#). This 27-minute training module and accompanying transcript provides technical assistance on how to increase your comfort, confidence, and competence through disability awareness.

autistic.ly

Autistic.ly includes excellent pointers on improving workplace culture and increasing awareness and understanding. The site is run by Robert Watkins, an autistic self-advocate and evangelist for workplace inclusion.

ASAN – Autistic Self Advocacy Network

ASAN seeks to advance the principles of the disability rights movement regarding autism. ASAN believes that the goal of autism advocacy should be a world in which autistic people enjoy the same access, rights, and opportunities as all other citizens. The best way to learn about something is from experts and, in this case, experts are people on the autism spectrum. The site includes a helpful resource section with links to accessibility resources and is a great place to educate yourself on policy and other matters as they relate to the autistic community.

Employer Assistance and Resource Network (EARN)

Employer Assistance and Resource Network (EARN) is a free resource that helps employers tap the benefits of disability diversity. EARN educates public- and private-sector organizations on ways to build inclusive workplace cultures, and empowers them to become leaders in the employment and advancement of people with disabilities.

- [Small Business Steps to Success](#)
- [State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies – assistance in sourcing candidates](#)
- [Finding Candidates with Disabilities – assistance in finding candidates](#)

ADVICE

Autism & Disability Visual Integration Company Experience (ADVICE) is a partnership between NEXT for Autism, Autism Speaks, key businesses and community organizations, and a team of national business/disability consultants. ADVICE assists companies with autism hiring initiatives to build a diverse labor and customer pool of dedicated employees and brand-loyal customers, all while providing a huge return on investment (ROI). ADVICE also enhances the workplace and marketplace by improving the experience for all visual learners.

Workplace Initiative

Workplace Initiative provides an easy to follow step-by-step guide as well as fast facts and case studies illustrating the business value of disability inclusion in the workplace.

Autism Speaks

Autism Speaks is dedicated to promoting solutions for the needs of individuals with autism and their families through advocacy and support. By partnering with others who share their goals and values from the community level to the global level, Autism Speaks seeks to increase understanding and acceptance of ASD.

The Spectrum Careers

The Spectrum Careers, created by Autism Speaks and Rangan Consulting, Inc., enables employers to post positions at no cost and recruit individuals with autism throughout the United States. The Spectrum Careers also provides resources to prospective employers on how to create a working environment favorable to people with autism and links to other free employment resources from Autism Speaks.

Northwest Center

Northwest Center is a Seattle-based leader in advancing equal opportunities for children and adults with developmental disabilities. Their services for children provide early intervention, inclusive early learning and after school programs. Services for adults include School-to-Work, vocational training, job placement, and supported employment. They provide an array of outsourcing solutions to meet the manufacturing and service needs of small- and medium-sized businesses, Fortune 500 companies, local government offices, and large federal agencies.

The Campaign for Disability Employment

The Campaign for Disability Employment is a collaborative effort to promote positive employment outcomes for people with disabilities by encouraging employers and others to recognize the value and talent they bring to the workplace.

Growing Up Autistic

Growing Up Autistic was founded by Patty and Lonnie Pacelli, whose adult son, Trevor, was diagnosed with autism at age five. The site lists books on topics such as creating an autism-friendly workplace, growing up with autism, and parenting autistic and neurotypical kids. There are also articles, videos, and other resources available to help those affected by a friend or family member with autism.

Uptimize

Uptimize, an online training source to increase autism awareness, is geared toward all organization members, from human resources to management to peers. There is a cost to access the training modules but it has been developed with known subject matter experts and contains helpful material.

The United Kingdom's National Autistic Society

The United Kingdom's National Autistic Society offers helpful information on how to enhance access for people with autism.

MORE SUCCESS STORIES

- [Companies find fruitful results when hiring autistic workers](#)
- [Inspiring America: Growing car wash company employs autistic adults](#)
- [Autism doesn't hold me back. I'm moving up the career ladder](#)
- ['It's changed his view of life': Companies find hiring autistic employees has vast benefits](#)
- [Unique Microsoft hiring program opens more doors to people with autism](#)
- [Workers with disabilities exceed expectations](#)
- [Microsoft wants autistic coders. Can it find them and keep them?](#)

GENERAL INFORMATION ARTICLES

- [Where is Autism Employment Heading in 2017?](#)
- [Autistic adults find jobs where attention to detail is key](#)
- [Companies see high return on workers with autism](#)
- [15 tips to help employees with autism be rock stars](#)

A stack of books is shown from a high angle, partially obscured by a semi-transparent blue overlay. The books are stacked horizontally, with the top book's pages visible. The blue overlay covers most of the image, with white geometric shapes (circles and a triangle) overlaid on it. The word "REFERENCES" is written in white, uppercase letters across the middle of the blue area.

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