

Briefing

Employment adjustments for people who have a diagnosis of Autism, including Asperger Syndrome

This briefing is not an authoritative statement of the law. While we have made every effort to ensure that the information we have provided is correct, Business Disability Forum cannot accept any responsibility or liability.

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Introduction

What is Autism?

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability.

People with autism may experience difficulties in understanding and interpreting other people's verbal and non-verbal behaviour, motivations and expectations and can find social interaction confusing. Imaginative activities can also be difficult for someone with autism to understand – this can include irony and subtle verbal humour, which people with autism may interpret to have literal meaning. People with autism may also experience sensory sensitivities to light, sound, taste and touch which can be distracting and potentially painful for some.

Around 700,000 people in the UK have a diagnosis of autistic spectrum conditions.

Asperger Syndrome

Asperger Syndrome is one type of autism diagnosis. People with Asperger Syndrome usually have good language skills but can still find social communication difficult for example, reading facial expressions. People with Asperger Syndrome are often of average or above average intelligence.

A diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome and autism usually occurs in childhood, although some people may not be diagnosed until they are in adulthood.

Many people with autism often have highly specialised skills and qualifications. It is believed that over 300,000 people with autism are of average or above average intellectual ability - yet still only 20-25 per cent in the UK are employed.

About Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity is a “new” term originally used by communities of people with autism to move away from the medical model of disability. Now embraced by other communities, it is often used to refer to a wide variety of conditions such as autism, Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs) such as dyslexia and specific language impairments. Specific Learning Difficulties are not discussed in this document and are the topic of a separate Briefing.

Throughout this Briefing, ‘people with autism’ will refer to people on the autism spectrum, including people with a diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome.

Employment and people with Autism

People with autism want to work and are therefore a substantial source of untapped talent.

There is a misconception that people with autism cannot cope with employment or are only able to undertake routine, methodical jobs. However, with the correct training and support they are capable of developing their potential in employment like anyone else.

Many people who have autism will be protected under the Equality Act 2010 but may not consider themselves to be disabled. Nevertheless, employers have a legal obligation to make reasonable adjustments and not to discriminate against employees who might be facing barriers at work because of a disability or long-term condition – even if it has not been diagnosed as a disability or accepted as such by the individual.

Employers should be aware that non-visible disabilities, such as autism, mean that specific barriers can be less obvious. This means reasonable adjustments may be harder for employers to determine and put in place. Employers can seek advice from Work Coaches and Disability Employment Advisers at Jobcentre Plus who refer people with SpLDs for positions. There are also organisations which offer specialist advice and appropriate disability awareness training to help employers ensure that their recruitment process accounts for barriers faced by those with autism – see page 29 for further details.

It is important that employers have an honest conversation with new employees and their support staff about the barriers that may be present in the workplace and what simple measures might help. The best practice approach is to make adjustments for anyone who needs them to work effectively and contribute fully to your organisation.

When making adjustments most employers will want to know what is 'reasonable'. Doing what seems fair for the individual and others who work for you given the size and resources of your organisation is a good place to start.

This guidance will help you deliver best practice.

- You might need to treat people differently to treat them fairly.
- Don't make assumptions about what people can and can't do.
- Ensure that everyone knows who is responsible for doing what and when it must be done.
- Involve the individual in generating solutions and respect their right to confidentiality.

For more detail on the law and making reasonable adjustments contact **Business Disability Forum's Advice Service** on telephone number **+44-(0)-20-7403-3020** or by email **advice@businessdisabilityforum.org.uk** or see the Briefing on The Equality Act 2010.

Reasonable adjustments and best practice

Do not make assumptions about what someone can or cannot do.

A person with autism may have particular talents as well as difficulties, just like anyone in the workplace. For example, the person may be a good problem solver and have great attention to detail. Most people with autism can support with the development of coping strategies that enable them not only to learn and work effectively but also to adopt a fresh approach to problem solving.

Consider the skills, abilities and aspirations of each individual and implement appropriate and reasonable support so that everyone can maximise their potential; this can have a positive effect on an organisation as it unlocks different ways of tackling problems and making decisions.

The impact of autism varies, as do the strategies that help people with autism overcome barriers in employment. Adjustments may well be simple and inexpensive and they make good business sense. Without adjustments, good candidates may not apply for jobs and good employees could be lost.

Precise requirements vary from one individual to another, so you should always ask the person what they need. By talking to employees both at the beginning of employment but also regularly about their work going forward, employers are better able to identify any difficulties that could be attributable to an employee who has autism.

Recruitment and selection

Candidates who have autism may be prevented from demonstrating their abilities and potential by conventional recruitment processes.

You need to make sure that you do not discriminate against a disabled job applicant during the recruitment process. You may also have to make reasonable adjustments.

It is important not to make assumptions about what the applicant can or cannot do; instead, ask applicants about any reasonable adjustments they may require. If you use external recruitment agencies, ask for evidence that they make reasonable adjustments for disabled applicants and work to the standards that underpin this guidance.

Employers should be aware that some potential employees with autism may have in place or need to put in place effective support from a specialist job coach. Local employment support providers can be contracted by Jobcentre Plus staff to support people before, during and after recruitment. The Access to Work (AtW) scheme can help fund adjustments, for example adaptations to equipment.

For more information about who can use Access to Work, visit:
GOV.UK - Looking for work if you're disabled

Further information on best practice for recruitment and selection is also available from the Government's Disability Confident scheme, visit: disabilityconfident.campaign.gov.uk or contact **Business Disability Forum's Advice Service** on telephone number **+44-(0)-20-7403-3020** or by email advice@businessdisabilityforum.org.uk.

Remember that it is unlawful to ask questions about health or a disability prior to a job offer under the Equality Act 2010 unless the question relates directly to an intrinsic aspect of the role for which the person is applying, or is for the purpose of making reasonable adjustments to the application or interview process. Questions about disability can still be asked on equal opportunities monitoring forms.

Job descriptions

Job descriptions can inadvertently place unnecessary barriers in the way of people with autism. When drawing up job descriptions:

- Provide them in easy read format. Ensure that the words or language used cannot be misinterpreted and that all sentences are clear.
- Distinguish between essential and desirable requirements and ensure you present an accurate picture of the job and the key skills actually required, e.g. the essential criteria of a receptionist are to answer the telephone and meet and greet visitors; a desirable skill may be to take notes of meetings.
- Concentrate on what needs to be achieved in a job rather than how it is achieved. People with autism may do things in a different way, e.g. a person with autism may ask questions to be repeated and rephrased many times to ensure that they have processed information correctly.
- Do not ask for educational qualifications that do not relate to the position. This will exclude people with autism who have not been successful in education.
- Accept completed application forms in alternative formats and appreciate that a written application may have been completed with support.

There is no requirement to alter the fundamental nature of a job so that a candidate with a disability can do it.

Advertising and attracting applicants

When advertising a job:

- Use positive wording like “we welcome disabled applicants” or “being part of Business Disability Forum’s membership highlights our commitment to being a disability-smart organisation”.
- Provide a point of contact for people who are concerned about the recruitment process, using a range of contact methods.
- State that applications will be accepted in alternative format, e.g. by email or on a USB stick.
- Display or mention the Disability Confident symbol if you are a symbol holder.
- Be clear that you are willing to make reasonable adjustments.
- Consult your local Jobcentre Plus which can help you make your recruitment process accessible. As well as advising on your recruitment process, Work Coaches and Disability Employment Advisers at Jobcentre Plus will also know of individuals with autism who may be suitable candidates. Business Disability Forum Members and Partners can contact us for help.
- Advertise in more than one medium. In addition to mainstream press, advertise on local radio, talking newspapers and online.

Application forms

To make sure you do not unintentionally exclude a candidate from applying for a post:

- Be prepared to provide the application form by email or in paper format. Better still, offer this facility when the job is advertised. Make sure, however, that you have mechanisms in place for accepting paper applications or applications sent by email. This will mean that the individual need not be concerned about written presentation and can also use a spell checker.
- If recruiting online, ensure that software does not automatically sift out applications that contain spelling errors. Remember most jobs allow people to use spell check facilities.

Adjustments may need to be made to the shortlisting process because an applicant may:

- Apply for a job for which they are over qualified because they need to regain confidence.
- Have gaps in their CV due to their disability.
- Have gained experience outside of paid employment, e.g. work experience and voluntary work.

Application forms should be clear, easy to fill in and as straight forward as possible to improve accessibility. Where possible, an easy read version should also be made available.

Interviews and tests

Ensure that candidates who have autism can demonstrate their ability to do the job and what they can contribute to your organisation. Focus on the person's abilities, not on the person's autism. If you have any doubts about a person's ability to do an intrinsic function of the job, simply ask how they would do it.

If selection normally involves a test, be sure that it does not discriminate against an applicant with autism:

- Discuss the test with the test publisher and seek guidance on possible adjustments including alternative formats.
- Consult candidates in advance so that necessary adjustments can be made.

Remember that different people will have different adjustment requirements. Not everyone will need all or even any of these adjustments but possible test adjustments include:

- Ensuring that any instructions are understood by the candidate.
- Allowing candidates more time and/or breaks to complete the test unless the job requires the task to be completed in a specified time.
- Allowing candidates to enter the test room a few minutes before to get familiar with the environment.
- If adjustments are unsuitable, be prepared to waive the test. There are often equally satisfactory ways of getting the information.
- Allowing the use of a computer if this will be available when doing the job. This will allow the candidate to easily correct their answers when necessary rather than recreate on a separate sheet of paper.

When you invite applicants for an interview, make sure you ask all candidates if they require any adjustments to be made for the interview. With adjustments, the interview allows you to assess the ability of candidates with autism.

- For some people with autism, attending an interview will be a daunting experience. If you do choose to interview, help them feel at ease and allow time to become accustomed to the situation.
- Consider using an informal interview. A more relaxed situation could enable applicants to convey a more accurate picture of their abilities.
- Allow more time during the interview for the applicant to answer questions; be prepared to rephrase the questions if necessary.
- Consider waiving certain aspects of the process, e.g. is a group interview appropriate or necessary?
- Consider sending them photographs of the room they will be interviewed in and photographs of the panel members.
- Consider providing a visual journey map with photos of how to reach your offices from the nearest bus or tube station.

Post job-offer

Once someone has been offered a job, you may need to put adjustments in place to ensure they can perform to the best of their ability.

Start getting the adjustments in place as soon as is practicable after you have made an appointment – it may take time to set up reasonable adjustments and secure Access to Work funding when applicable. Consult the individual and make sure that the employee's manager or supervisor understands the agreed adjustments. Many employees are extremely proactive in managing their own condition and may require few if any adjustments.

Appropriate disability or autism awareness training can be useful for the candidate's team but only if the individual is comfortable with this.

Adjustment reviews

Build in regular reviews of adjustments, for example at the end of the probationary period, in supervisory sessions and performance appraisals to ensure that the adjustments are still effective.

Ensure that you take the same approach to adjustments when a person with autism applies for promotion, again not making assumptions about what the employee can or cannot do.

Completing a 'tailored adjustment plan' with new employees who have a disability or with an employee who develops a disability is a good way of recording and reviewing adjustments that have been agreed and actions that will be taken if the employee is off sick.

To see an example of a tailored adjustment agreement and to download a template, visit **Business Disability Forum's** website at **businessdisabilityforum.org.uk** or contact Business Disability Forum's Advice Service on telephone number **+44-(0)20-7403-3020** or by email **advice@businessdisabilityforum.org.uk**.

Working arrangements to retain employees

Onboarding

Induction is an important part of how any individual is welcomed to their new role, colleagues and organisation.

People with autism often prefer to know about the specific tasks that they need to do as part of their job and to structure their day around these tasks. It can be important for them to maintain routines. Some people with autism can find change upsetting.

Some adjustments that might be needed by an employee with autism:

- Orientation around the building – it may take a while for a person with autism to learn to navigate their way around the building. It might help to take the individual on practice journeys, allowing the person to make their own navigational map if they wish.
- Giving clear instructions about the role and the organisation so that the individual has the best possible understanding of what they are expected to do.
- Producing a timetable or pattern for the working day, including set times for arrival at work, breaks and lunch times.
- A support worker.
- Describing what to do with break times – for example, reading a newspaper or going for a walk, may reduce anxieties about what to do.
- Providing aids to help with organising job tasks – for example, a notebook to write “to do lists” or a wall chart that visually highlights daily/monthly tasks.

Employment adjustments for people who have a diagnosis of Autism

Not all employees will be aware of the characteristics of autism, or how to ensure that they communicate effectively with an individual. It is important that managers are aware of what they can do to support an employee with autism.

Employers can consider providing training for managers and colleagues who work with an employee with autism to secure fellow workers' tolerance and understanding (this should only be done if the individual has given their consent to this information being disclosed).

Further arrangements

Further adjustments to ensure the employee can work effectively might include:

- Developing a work pattern that the person can learn, remember and maintain.
- Being prepared to reallocate some duties throughout the team. This does not mean that the core tasks need to be removed.
- Ensuring that the person is familiar with existing tasks before you look at increasing the pace of the work.
- Ensuring that employees are notified in good time when changes to schedules are made, such as changes to meetings.
- Using an external support worker or job coach if necessary. This can be organised through Access to Work.
- Providing the employee with clear expectations. Outline the job requirements and how they fit into the overall business objective, e.g. show an assembly-line worker the finished product and how their job helps to develop it.
- Allowing flexible working hours, but also be aware that routine is important for some people.
- Encouraging feedback. Praising employees for good work instils confidence. Constructive criticism helps to define boundaries and expectations.
- Appreciating that a person with autism may require extra management support. Allow additional time.
- A lunch break is important for any employee's wellbeing. For people with autism, it should be made clear that this is part of their daily routine.

Communication

Understanding another person's verbal and non-verbal language (including facial expressions) can be difficult for people with autism, as can noticing other people's reactions; for example, being able to tell if a person is too busy to talk.

Some people with autism may rarely make spontaneous attempts at conversation and some can appear indifferent to other people. Some may speak fluently but can sound over-precise or formal.

Clear and open communication is key to successful working relationships.

- Check with the individual how they prefer to communicate and develop a flexible approach to communication. People with autism may prefer verbal instructions when others may prefer written instructions.
- If someone has difficulty with hidden meanings in conversation then give clear, concise and direct instructions. Do not hint or make assumptions that you have been understood.
- Consider giving verbal, written instructions or a mixture of both.
- Allow the person to make notes of instructions given and of one to one conversations or meetings. Alternatively, allow them to record using a digital voice recorder (Dictaphone).
- Be patient. It may take more time for a person with autism to understand instructions and provide responses.
- Encourage the person to ask questions if they need to confirm that they have understood information correctly; repeat instructions again if necessary.
- Keep language simple and to the point. Keeping sentences short or using more direct language, being clear and concise.
- Avoid the use of jokes, exaggerated language, turns of phrase, jargon, sarcasm, irony, metaphors, abstract or ambiguous statements.
- Be aware that some people may prefer responding to closed rather than open questions.
- Regularly ask the individual whether there are any problems you can help with.

Work and concentration

If someone has concentration difficulties or distractions:

- Make sure the workspace is quiet and away from distractions (e.g. away from doors, busy phones, loud machinery) or make sure the employee has access to noise reduction/cancellation headphones.
- Allocate a private workspace if possible.
- Where feasible, allow an employee to work from home.
- Provide training on organisational skills, e.g. mind mapping, note-taking, planning and prioritising.

The employee should be supported if these adjustments are made so they do not feel isolated in the workplace.

If someone finds it difficult coping with interruptions:

- Use a 'do not disturb' sign when specific tasks require intense concentration and allow their telephone to be put on a 'do not disturb' setting or to be redirected to voicemail.
- Encourage other co-workers not to disturb the person unless necessary.
- When interrupting, allow the person to pause and write down what they are doing to refer to when resuming work.
- Organise quiet times for certain hours of the day and discourage interruptions during this time.
- Allow time to prepare before meetings.

Time management and organisation

To help remember appointments and deadlines, you can remind the person of important deadlines and review priorities regularly or:

- Hang a wall planner that visually highlights daily/monthly appointments, deadlines, tasks, projects etc.
- Supply an alarm watch or make use of the alarm and reminders settings present on smartphones and calendar software such as MS Outlook, Google Calendar and Thunderbird.

To ensure that someone can find items easily, ensure that work areas are organised, neat and tidy and that items are appropriately named and kept where they can be clearly seen.

Make sure that the team returns important items to the same place each time. Colour coding items can also help.

To help organise workflows they could:

- Use a wall planner.
- Prioritise important tasks.
- Create a daily dated 'to do' list.
- Use diaries.
- Allow extra time for unforeseen occurrences.
- Decide how long a task should take and use a timer to keep to deadlines.
- Build planning time into each day.

Workplace behaviour

People with autism may on occasion behave in ways that others regard as “strange” (for example, pacing, talking to themselves or rocking) yet do their job satisfactorily.

Some of this behaviour may be unintentionally directed towards fellow colleagues (for example, reading information on colleagues’ desks without asking for permission).

Adjustments that might be needed include:

- Securing fellow workers’ tolerance and understanding.
- If the behaviour needs to be challenged, tell the employee clearly that the behaviour is not appropriate and ask them not to do it again. This may need to be repeated on several occasions if the action is repeated, as it may take time for the employee to learn that the behaviour is inappropriate.

Work and wellbeing

Some people with autism might experience anxiety if there are changes to their work situation or routines. For example, arriving at work late due to transport delays or a computer screen going blank. As routine can be important, some people with autism can feel distressed by unexpected events.

Adjustments that might be needed include:

- Being able to speak to someone about such incidents (for example, the line manager, or a named mentor) who can talk through the problem and assess whether an immediate solution can be found, focusing on the fact that a problem can be fixed.
- Re-focusing the individual on the job on hand.
- Minimising deadlines or transferring the person to a role that is less time critical as pressure can be unhelpful.
- Plan any changes to a routine with the person with autism well in advance of the change, with regular reminders of when it will happen and how it will affect that individual.
- Invite the individual to team social events, explaining why they should attend, and when and where it will be. If the event is during the working day, then ensure the employee is given time to prepare.

Assistive technology

People with disabilities, including people with autism, may find it beneficial to use Assistive Technology (AT).

This can be a piece of equipment or software that alleviates part or all the difficulties they have in a certain area. New pieces of software and equipment are developed regularly but we have compiled a short list of AT that can be considered for people with autism.

The AT set out below focuses on Windows computer software however there are MacOS and smartphones equivalents available.

Recording information

Recording can help people alleviate part of the difficulties they have with processing and memorising information. This can be done using a digital voice recorder, which is a portable piece of equipment. However, as more and more people use smartphones for their personal and/or professional use, dedicated recording apps (inbuilt or downloaded) can be used.

In that case, a dedicated external portable microphone is recommended to improve the quality of the recording. A portable battery pack would also be recommended as recording on smartphones can reduce the inbuilt battery life.

Noise cancelling headphones

Good quality noise cancelling headphones reduce the ambient noise and allow an employee to work without losing their concentration.

This is particularly useful when working in open space environments. Some noise cancelling headphones also allow “active noise cancellation” whereby the user can cancel environmental noises without having to listen to music or other sounds; this can allow an employee to get quietness when their anxiety level is too high and enjoy a comfortable silence, for example the Bose QC range.

Text-to-speech software and ‘SpLD’ software

Text-to-speech software allows the user to listen to written text from either printed documents or book extracts or from documents that have been scanned in or from electronic documents.

Text-to-speech software alleviates the difficulties one can have with accurately processing written information and focusing on written documents. Examples include: ClaroRead Plus and Read&Write Gold.

Induction and training

Disability and the need to make adjustments should be embedded in all policies, for example, policies on sickness, training and performance appraisals.

New recruits should be made aware of these policies during the induction process. People with autism should be made aware that they can ask about any problems they may have, particularly at the beginning of a new job.

It is important that your standard induction and training programme is accessible, so an employee with autism can access the same information as everyone else. You may also want to provide a workplace mentor to ensure supportive training. This can provide another employee with valuable personal development.

Ensure employees with autism also have equal access to further in-house and external training, meetings and career development opportunities.

Teamwork

To maximise the involvement of employees with autism in the business and with their colleagues:

- Ensure that colleagues are aware of any adjustments needed to maximise interaction.
- Do not assume that workplace jargon/abbreviations are understood.
- Always invite them to work social events and make them feel part of the team.
- Ensure that every employee is aware of your organisation's disability and adjustments policies.
- Implement disability and workplace adjustments' training. Remember that flexible working practices can have direct business benefits, encouraging participation and loyalty across the workforce.

Harassment

A person who has autism may be particularly vulnerable to harassment from their colleagues.

As an employer you must take all reasonable steps to deal with harassment. Harassment includes not only physical or verbal abuse, but also anything which violates a person's dignity or creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment.

Harassment stems from stereotyping, lack of understanding, intolerance of difference and fear. To prevent bullying and harassment of anyone you should:

- Ensure your organisation has clear policies on workplace bullying and harassment and that complaints are investigated promptly and effectively. Ensure these policies are communicated across the organisation through campaigns and awareness raising initiatives.
- Make it clear that any harassment, including on grounds of disability, will not be tolerated and that offenders will be dealt with through the organisation's disciplinary procedures.
- Ensure management understands that people who have autism experience increased risk of harassment and provide appropriate training for line managers to help them to identify and manage incidents connected to bullying and harassment in the workplace.
- Ensure employees are aware of their right to equal treatment; their entitlement to make a complaint and to initiate a grievance.
- Allow employees access to support networks internally or externally from work. If possible ensure employees who have experienced bullying or harassment have access to professional and confidential counselling.
- Ensure appropriate disability awareness training is implemented across your workforce to challenge stereotyping.

Further sources of reference

Useful organisations

Business Disability Forum

Nutmeg House, 60 Gainsford Street,
London SE1 2NY

Tel: +44-(0)20-7403-3020

Website: businessdisabilityforum.org.uk

Business Disability Forum (BDF) is a not-for-profit membership organisation that supports businesses to recruit and retain disabled employees and serve disabled customers.

Business Disability Forum provides pragmatic support, expertise, advice, training and networking opportunities between businesses. Our aim is to transform the life chances – and experience – of disabled people as employees and consumers.

National Autistic Society

393 City Road ,
London EC1V 1NG

Tel: +44-(0)20-7833-2299

Email: nas@nas.org.uk

Website: autism.org.uk

The NAS is the leading UK charity for people with autism, including people with Asperger Syndrome. They provide information, support, services and organise campaigns about autism.

Autism alliance

Century House,
Riverside Office Centre,
North Station Road,
Colchester, Essex CO1 1RE

Website: **autism-alliance.org.uk**

Autism alliance is a network of autism charities supporting adults and children with autism across the UK.

Ambitious about Autism

The Pears National Centre for Autism Education,
Woodside Avenue,
London, N10 3JA

Tel: **+44-(0)20-8815-5444**

Email: **info@ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk**

Website: **ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk**

Ambitious about Autism is a national charity for children and young people with autism. They provide services, raise awareness and understanding as well as campaign for change.

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