

NEWS

Providing accommodations for autistic workers benefits everyone

BY KATHERINE BREWARD, THE CONVERSATION

18 JULY 2019



Companies seek a competitive edge by hiring talented people, yet many capable workers are overlooked because they have autism.

THE CONVERSATION

People with autism are **unemployed at disproportionate levels**. As a result, companies are missing out on employees able to make valuable contributions. And society at large is affected because the situation creates inequities and financial dependence.

So why is it happening? Largely because autism is poorly understood and managers are ill-informed about how to accommodate affected workers.

Fortunately, **recent research** has provided us with many strategies to make workplaces more inclusive.

Wide range of abilities:

Autism is a **developmental condition** that people are born with. It is a **spectrum condition**, as it encompasses a wide range of traits and abilities. Each individual with autism is unique, and the way their condition presents itself varies.

Common traits include difficulty 'reading' social-emotional cues and problems with conventional language and communication skills. Some autistic people are nonverbal and use assistive technologies, so it is important to remember that being nonverbal does not mean being incapable.

Another common trait is **repetitive thoughts or behaviors**, including 'stimming.' Stimming may include hand-flapping, rocking or other repetitive motions. It's a reaction to being overwhelmed by a situation or by everyday stimuli.

Stimming helps people cope by focusing intensely on a specific sensation or behavior. People who stim report that they find it embarrassing but critical in order to calm themselves. As such, the lack of social acceptability of stimming can be a greater workplace problem than the activity itself.

Lack of empathy is frequently cited as an autistic trait. This characterization is disputed by the **autism community** and by **evidence from psychologists**.

Both suggest that some people with autism may have excessive levels of empathy that overwhelm them, but the way they express it is not well recognized. Other traits associated with autism include the ability to focus intensively, persistence and high detail orientation.

Navigating social etiquette:

Many barriers that workers with autism experience relate to social and communication difficulties and are affected by how they behave but also how others perceive them.

For example, people with autism are often accused of lacking emotion. They do experience emotions, but tend to express them in ways that are not readily recognized. Socially, they may dominate conversations while focusing on narrow interests, have difficulty understanding variations in tone and reading body language and facial expressions, and they may take things inappropriately literally.

Many find eye contact overwhelming, leading to avoidance that is mistaken for being antisocial.

Norms can be difficult for people with autism to perceive. The unspoken social etiquette that everyone is expected to instinctively know may be a mystery, negatively impacting job performance when expectations are not clearly communicated.

Change can also be anxiety-inducing and lead to challenging behaviors if it happens unexpectedly. Heightened sensitivity to stimuli such as smells and sounds can lead to reactions that can seem extreme. A lack of understanding of those reactions often leads to those with autism being labelled 'difficult,' and those labels create additional problems.

Accommodation strategies:

Many people with autism are able to focus intensively. If a topic interests them, they will spend large amounts of time developing expertise. Attention to detail, combined with heightened pattern-recognition skills, are also common traits, leading many autistic people to become **technical experts** in their fields.

Some people with autism enjoy repetitive routines and can tolerate work that others find monotonous. Others are creative, able to visualize solutions to complex problems and develop unique insights. People with autism are also known for being forthright and are less likely to engage in toxic political behaviors.

There are many accommodation strategies workplaces can adopt for employees with autism. Here are some:

1. Reduce workplace stimuli

There are many ways to **reduce unnecessary stimuli** at work. I'm providing some examples, but this should not be considered an exhaustive list. Solutions are limited only by one's creativity.

Physical blocking of work spaces can decrease distractions. Examples include providing private offices or cubicles that face a corner. Whenever possible, LEDs should replace **noisy and intense**

fluorescent lights. Noise-cancelling headphones can also be used, although some people will not be able to tolerate the sensation.

Similarly, uniforms can be a problem if the fabric is itchy, collars are tight or there are tags that irritate. Wardrobe flexibility may be needed.

Moving beyond the physical, minimizing interruptions can also help. You could encourage the use of email instead of phone calls and ask people to use meeting rooms instead of hallways for conversations lasting more than a couple of minutes. Coworkers could be asked to schedule chats instead of 'popping in.'

Regardless of your efforts, workplaces may still overwhelm sometimes. A **'quiet room' can be very beneficial**. They are darkened rooms in a low-traffic places containing comfortable furniture and a minimum of other sources of stimulation. Spending time in a quiet room helps people with autism cope when they feel overwhelmed, and non-autistic workers also report psychological benefits from quiet spaces.

2. Create a culture of clear communication

The communication and social difficulties that people with autism experience are heavily intertwined. And so resolving communication issues will also help with social difficulties.

First, make unspoken norms explicit. Managers should be trained to provide detailed instructions in writing and avoid ambiguity in task assignments. Things that may seem obvious, such as how to prioritize assignments, should be explicitly explained.

Performance criteria should be clearly outlined and employees should be capable of monitoring their progress. It is worth noting that these steps help all workers, and represent documented **best workplace practices**.

Workers with autism report that their **ability to communicate** increases when they are able to see questions in advance, when people avoid jumping between multiple topics and when their intent is not judged by eye contact or having the 'right' facial expression.

3. Offer social and emotional coaching

Even with the supports already outlined, workers with autism may find the social and emotional behaviors of others mystifying. A coach can be helpful. That mentor could be a trained coworker or an outside expert. Coworkers may also benefit from receiving information to increase their understanding.

These are all simple steps that can help employers leverage the large group of under-utilized

workers with autism in the labor pool. Many of these accommodations could help all workers and represent good business practice. Accommodating autism, therefore, has the potential to make our workplaces more just and productive for all.

Katherine Breward is associate professor of business and administration at the **University of Winnipeg** in Canada.

*This story originally appeared on **The Conversation**. It has been slightly modified to reflect Spectrum's style.*