

Employing people on the autism spectrum: a brief guide for employers

The National Autistic Society Northern Ireland,
the Department for Employment and Learning
and Employers for Disability NI



Department for
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Introduction

This guide has been updated by The National Autistic Society Northern Ireland (NAS), the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) and Employers for Disability NI (EFDNI).

It aims to:

- raise awareness of autism¹ among employers
- outline the benefits of employing someone on the autism spectrum
- help employers understand the adjustments that someone on the autism spectrum may need in the workplace
- inform employers about their duties to people on the autism spectrum under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA)
- provide information about the support programmes available to both employers and people on the autism spectrum
- signpost employers to further information and advice on autism.

It is estimated that more than one in 100 people are on the autism spectrum, therefore, more than 20,000 people in Northern Ireland. Recent research by The National Autistic Society found that only 15% of adults on the autism spectrum were in full-time employment despite the fact that many can and want to work².

¹ The term autism is used to describe all diagnoses on the autism spectrum, including Asperger syndrome, autism spectrum disorder and classic or 'Kanner' autism.

² Redman, S. et al (2009). *Don't Write Me Off*. London: The National Autistic Society, p.6



What is autism?

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects how a person communicates with, and relates to, other people. It also affects how they make sense of the world around them. It is a spectrum condition, which means that, while all people with autism share certain difficulties, their condition will affect them in different ways. Some people are able to live relatively independent lives but others may have accompanying learning disabilities and need a lifetime of specialist support. People on the autism spectrum experience three main areas of difficulty (sometimes referred to as the 'triad of impairments'). These are social interaction, social communication and social imagination (see opposite). Many also have sensory difficulties, meaning they can be over- or under-sensitive to certain sights, sounds, smells, touch or tastes. Some sounds or bright lights, for example, can cause extreme anxiety and sometimes even pain.

Social interaction

People on the autism spectrum may:

- not understand the unwritten social rules that others usually pick up without thinking. For example, they may stand too close to another person or start an inappropriate subject of conversation
- appear insensitive, as they have not recognised how someone else is feeling
- prefer to spend time alone rather than actively participating in workplace banter and social activities
- have difficulty recognising and expressing their needs or feelings
- want to interact with others but be unsure of how to do this.

Social communication

Many people on the autism spectrum have a very literal understanding of language, and can struggle to understand or 'get' metaphors, similes, idioms, irony and sarcasm. For example, expressions like 'it's raining cats and dogs' or 'pigs will fly' can be taken literally. People on the autism spectrum can often appear very blunt, and have difficulty reading another's facial expressions or tone of voice.

Some people on the autism spectrum may not speak but communicate using signs or visual symbols. Others may have extremely good language skills but find it hard to understand the 'give and take' of conversations, and may talk in length about their own subjects of interest and not appear interested in others' interests. It will help when communicating with someone on the autism spectrum to speak clearly and give them time to process what you have said.

Social imagination

Difficulties with social imagination should not be confused with a lack of imagination; some people on the autism spectrum are very creative and are successful musicians, artists and writers.

People on the autism spectrum may find it difficult to:

- understand and interpret other people's feelings, thoughts and actions
- predict what will happen next
- understand the concept of danger
- prepare for change and plan for the future
- cope with change and unfamiliar situations.

Many people on the autism spectrum have one or more special interests, which they often pursue passionately and tenaciously. This can lead to them gaining a vast and detailed knowledge of a subject – something which employers can sometimes capitalise on. Common examples of this are a passion for computers or bookkeeping leading to employment in computing or finance.

The difficulties associated with autism can make it hard for someone on the autism spectrum to find and keep a job. But, with the right support and training for both them and their employer and colleagues, people on the autism spectrum have much to offer employers.





Employing people on the autism spectrum

Why employ someone on the autism spectrum?

People on the autism spectrum can make effective and highly valued employees. As is the case with all employees, it's important to match the person's particular skills to the requirements of the post. People on the autism spectrum are often very focused and have considerable skills in specific areas. Some of the transferable skills include attention to detail, a methodical approach, strong research skills, good long-term memory and excellent record-keeping.

This guide contains a summary of the types of adjustments you could make when recruiting and employing someone on the autism spectrum. More detailed information can be found on The National Autistic Society Northern Ireland website at www.autism.org.uk/working-with/employment

Making adjustments when recruiting and employing someone on the autism spectrum

Although people on the autism spectrum have a great deal to offer employers, getting a job in the first place can be hard. Simple adjustments at the recruitment stage can make the process of applying for jobs much more accessible for people on the autism spectrum.

Job advertisements, descriptions and person specifications

Consider carefully the key skills needed for a job and put these into a clearly worded, jargon-free advertisement, job description and person specification. If 'excellent communication skills' are not necessary for the post, avoid stipulating this as a requirement, as it may unnecessarily deter someone on the autism spectrum from applying.

Application forms

If you don't already do so, include a section on the form for the applicant to provide information about any adjustments they may require during the recruitment process and in the workplace to help overcome potential barriers or disadvantages.

Equal opportunities monitoring

It is good practice to ask job applicants to complete a separate (to the application form) confidential monitoring form. If you provide a tick-list of disabilities on your form, add autism as a separate category, as it is neither a learning disability nor a mental health problem.

Interviews

Interviews can be very stressful for people on the autism spectrum. Difficulties with communication, sensory issues and meeting someone new in an unfamiliar place all present a challenge.

It is good practice to let interviewees know in advance of the interview who will be on the panel (names and job titles), exactly where the interview will be held and what they can expect to happen during the interview itself. The more you are able to tell them, the more they will be able to prepare and the less stressful an experience it will be. It is also good practice to ask the interviewee if they need you to make any adjustments to the room itself – for example, to the lighting.

During the interview it is important to adjust the type and wording of questions you ask in order to give candidates on the autism spectrum an opportunity to demonstrate their ability. Below are some key pointers.

- **Avoid idioms and abstract language**, such as ‘ballpark figure’, ‘blow your own trumpet’ or ‘cast your mind back’, as many people on the autism spectrum interpret language literally and won’t understand what you mean.
- **Hypothetical or abstract questions**, such as “Where do you see yourself in ten years’ time?” can be very difficult for people on the autism spectrum to answer, as they may find it impossible to project themselves into the future.
- **Open-ended questions are also problematic**, as a person on the autism spectrum may find it difficult to talk about their experience, will not understand the concept of ‘selling themselves’ and will simply tell the truth and be factual rather than elaborating and expanding on their good points.
- **A clear and concise interview**, asking for clear concrete examples, together with a work trial or test may be a better way to test a potential employee’s skills and suitability for the job.
- **You could allow the** candidate on the autism spectrum to be accompanied by someone who can rephrase questions or duties to make them easier to understand.
- **Candidates may also benefit** from extra time to complete written tests, which should comprise short and concise questions.

These allowances could be regarded as ‘reasonable adjustments’ under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.



Supporting people on the autism spectrum in the workplace

By making some simple adjustments in the workplace you could provide a person on the autism spectrum with the environment and support they need to excel at their job. The type and level of support required will depend on the person's individual needs, but could include:

- appointing a colleague to act as a mentor to the employee on the autism spectrum, through helping them with any issues that arise and advocating on their behalf if necessary
- bringing in help from external support organisations that offer job mentoring, coaching, and general and specific job assistance to people on the autism spectrum
- arranging general and specific autism awareness training for staff who work with the employee(s) on the autism spectrum
- using a job coach to help both you and the employee to establish a successful employment partnership.

Managing someone on the autism spectrum

Good support from a manager is the key to successful employment for both the employee on the autism spectrum and the employer, and effective communication is central to this support. Some communication strategies for managers include:

- not making assumptions
- using direct and precise explanations
- giving detailed instructions for tasks
- being clear about your expectations of the employee
- avoiding figurative speech or idioms
- showing respect for difference
- using written as well as oral instructions
- checking that you have been understood.

In addition to these communication strategies, successful management of a person on the autism spectrum can include:

- holding regular one-to-one meetings for feedback and monitoring
- making sure that the person is involved in the team
- giving one-to-one training rather than group training
- raising staff awareness of particular strengths, difficulties and needs of the employee on the autism spectrum.

Many of these strategies are applicable to managing any team but will especially contribute towards a successful employment experience for a person on the autism spectrum.

For further information on recruiting and managing people on the autism spectrum, visit www.autism.org.uk/working-with/employment

CASE STUDY

Mark is on the autism spectrum, and attended courses run by a specialist support organisation to help him to develop employment skills. He has a very keen interest in vehicles and was offered a supported work placement with Translink in Lisburn. This has been so successful that he is now in part-time paid employment with the company.

From the outset, the support partnership developed an individual job description that matched Mark's skills and abilities. His employer recognised that Mark learned and worked in a different way and made reasonable adjustments in both his daily tasks and the training processes used to take this into account. The support partnership helped both Translink and Mark gain knowledge and skills through disability awareness training for staff, assistance for Mark during training sessions, as well as ongoing guidance and advice. Over time the support has been reviewed and adjusted to Mark's and Translink's needs.

Mark says, "Getting this job is one of the best things that has happened to me in my life. I'm glad I got the job and someone else didn't get it. I enjoy my job and I like the work I do; it's good to get paid as well."

Mark's employer at Translink, Roy Hamilton, commented, "Mark follows direction well and completes all his jobs to a high standard. At the start, a new job needs to be demonstrated to him but Mark follows a very structured routine, is methodical, and very meticulous. He does things to the letter and is eager to learn new tasks as well. As he got more confident in the job he started to use his initiative and now when it's not busy he will head off and complete his list of duties. Over the time Mark has been with us he has become an asset to our team."



Disability discrimination: autism and the law

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 brought in measures to prevent discrimination against disabled people. Part 2 of the Act prohibits disability discrimination by employers against disabled people.

Under the Act, a person is deemed to be disabled if he/she **has** or **has had**:

- A physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his/her ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities. •

The list of “normal day - to - day activities” which constitute part of the definition of disability in the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 has been amended by the Autism Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. This clarifies that a condition which has a substantial and long term adverse effect on someone’s ability to “take part in normal social interaction” or in “forming social relationships” can constitute a “disability”.

A person on the autism spectrum will be disabled if he/she satisfies the conditions laid down in this definition.

Official guidance, issued by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister in 2008, on matters that should be taken into account in determining questions relating to the definition of disability, includes the following relevant example³ overleaf:

³ www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/disabilitydiscriminationact1995.pdf

EXAMPLE

A man is on the autism spectrum, and this causes him to have difficulty communicating with people. He finds it hard to understand non-verbal communications such as facial expressions, and certain verbal communications such as jokes. He takes everything that is said very literally, and therefore has difficulty in making or keeping friends or developing close relationships. He is given verbal instructions during office banter with his manager, but his ability to understand the instruction is impaired because he is unable to isolate the instruction from the social conversation. It would be reasonable to regard these impairments as having a substantial adverse effect on normal day-to-day activities, which involve the capacity of **“memory or ability to concentrate, learn or understand.”** It would also be reasonable to regard the impairments described in the above example as having a substantial adverse effect on the man’s ability to carry out normal day – to – day activities which involve the capacity to “take part in normal social interaction” or in “forming social relationships”, and that too would be good evidence that the man is disabled.

The duty to make reasonable adjustments

The duty to make reasonable adjustments arises where a provision, criterion or practice applied by or on behalf of the employer, or any physical feature of premises occupied by the employer, places a disabled person at a substantial disadvantage compared with people who are not disabled. Where the duty applies, an employer has to take such steps as it is reasonable for him or her to have to take in all the circumstances to prevent that disadvantage – in other words the employer has to make a ‘reasonable adjustment’. This duty applies in recruitment and during all stages of employment, including dismissal. The duty relates to all disabled employees of an employer and to any disabled applicant for employment.

The extent of the duty to make reasonable adjustments depends on the employment circumstances of the disabled person in question. The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland’s Disability Code of Practice, Employment and Occupation provides detailed advice on employers’ duty on reasonable adjustments.⁴

⁴ www.equalityni.org/archive/pdf/DisEmploymentCOP05F.pdf



Some examples of complaints⁵

Complaints of disability discrimination (including failure to comply with the reasonable adjustment duty) may be brought to industrial tribunal. The following are examples of two such complaints that have been made against local employers.

H v McColgan Quality Foods Ltd (2005)

In this case the employee had a learning disability and worked as a food packer. It was alleged that he was dismissed for being “just too slow” at his work. He alleged that he was not provided with any help or training at any time or was warned that his work performance was poor. He further alleged that he had not been given any opportunity to discuss his performance or needs with management in the company. This case settled for £10,000 compensation and an expression of regret, but with no admission of liability by the company.

H v Marks and Spencer Plc (2007)

In this case the applicant was on the autism spectrum. She applied for a post as a sales assistant and needed a reasonable adjustment in respect of the job interview. The applicant required extra time for the interview and this was not given (although it had been promised beforehand). The applicant was allowed a ‘helper’ to accompany her but alleged that the helper was not permitted to help in explaining the interview questions. It was also alleged that the interview questions were read quickly and only once. This case settled for £2,500 compensation but with no admission of liability by the company.

⁵ These examples are taken from the Equality Commission’s *Decisions and Settlements Reviews* for 2005/06 and 2007/08 (see pages 18 and 45, respectively) and are available from the Commission’s website: www.equalityni.org

Positive action and the Disability Discrimination Act 1995

The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) allows employers to take a wider range of positive action measures than would be permissible under the other anti-discrimination laws. Under the Act, it is lawful for employers to treat people with a disability more favourably than people who don't have a disability. For example, you could reserve a job vacancy for disabled people to the exclusion of people who aren't disabled, or you could operate a 'guaranteed interview scheme' for disabled job applicants. However, employers must exercise some caution because it would be unlawful to treat people with some types of disability more favourably than people who have other types of disability. There are exceptions to this rule in certain circumstances in regard to employment in charitable organisations and in organisations which provide supported employment.

Department for Employment and Learning support for people on the autism spectrum

The Department for Employment and Learning can provide help, advice and support to employers and to people with disabilities, including autism. They also offer a number of work schemes that are suitable for people on the autism spectrum.

If you need specific help because a member of your staff has a disability or health condition that affects the kind of work they can do or their ability to retain work, you may wish to contact an Employment Service Adviser at your local Jobs and Benefits office / JobCentre. The Employment Service Team works with the Disability Employment Service (DES) to offer a range of supports to employers and people with a disability, including those on the autism spectrum.

DES is committed to helping employers recruit and retain disabled employees. It offers a range of practical and financial support to help employers find the right person for vacancies, and works with employers to prevent people losing their job because of disability.

Employment Service Advisers can tell you about the schemes and programmes below.

- **Job Introduction Scheme (JIS).** This scheme allows disabled people to try out a job to find out if it's suitable. Under this scheme, DES will help the employer with wages for the first few weeks.
- **Workable (NI).** This programme gives people with disabilities the opportunity to work in a wide variety of jobs. If the person's disability has a significant adverse impact on their ability to carry out the particular job they are currently doing or the job they are applying for, Workable (NI) can offer a range of supports designed to meet their needs and the needs of their employer.
- **Access to Work (NI).** This scheme offers practical advice and help to unemployed, employed and self-employed people with disabilities. This includes:
 - communication support at interviews
 - advice on adapting premises
 - special aids
 - assistance with travel to work
 - providing a support worker.
- **Employment Assessment and Occupational Psychology Services.** Employment Assessments are conducted by occupational psychologists who specialise in the area of disability and employment. The assessment helps employers and employees to identify the disabled person's abilities and strengths and how the disability could affect employment so that they can get the support they need to find and retain work.
- **Condition Management Programme (CMP).** The CMP is for people in receipt of benefits. Healthcare professionals provide short-term, work-focused support and advice with a view to helping people understand and manage their condition to facilitate their return to work.

- **Vocational training**, such as Steps 2 Success or Training for Success, to help people update or gain new skills.
- **Financial assistance** to help people to return to work, for example, Working Tax Credits and other financial incentives.

CASE STUDY

Gavin, who is on the autism spectrum, has been employed as a skilled sander for over 14 years, and had been secured extra support at work from co-workers through the Department for Employment and Learning's (DEL) Access to Work Programme (AtW). As the firm was going through a redundancy process, the HR department was keen to identify Gavin's potential for undertaking duties in addition to his existing remit. As a result, Gavin was referred for an Occupational Employment Assessment with DEL. An occupational psychologist visited the workplace and carried out a workplace assessment, as well as speaking with Gavin, his line manager and HR. Following the assessment, a successful outcome was obtained where the employer was able to retain Gavin in employment. Gavin was provided with 12 hours' support per week through AtW. This allowed the employer to afford additional time for Gavin to be supported by his co-workers and supervisors. He is also continuing to work in the sanding department, which was identified during assessment as the area he was best suited to. With the additional support, Gavin has also progressed to taking on new duties, such as paint sanding, and is doing well. The employer is very happy with the standard of Gavin's work and continues to review his progress in relation to additional duties.

Useful contact details

The Department for Employment and Learning Disability Employment Service

2nd Floor, Gloucester House

57-63 Chichester Street

Belfast BT1 4RA

Tel: 028 9025 2085 / 2279

Email: des@delni.gov.uk

www.delni.gov.uk

Equality Commission for Northern Ireland

Equality House

7-9 Shaftesbury Square

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Email: information@equalityni.org

www.equalityni.org

Employers for Disability Northern Ireland (EFDNI)

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