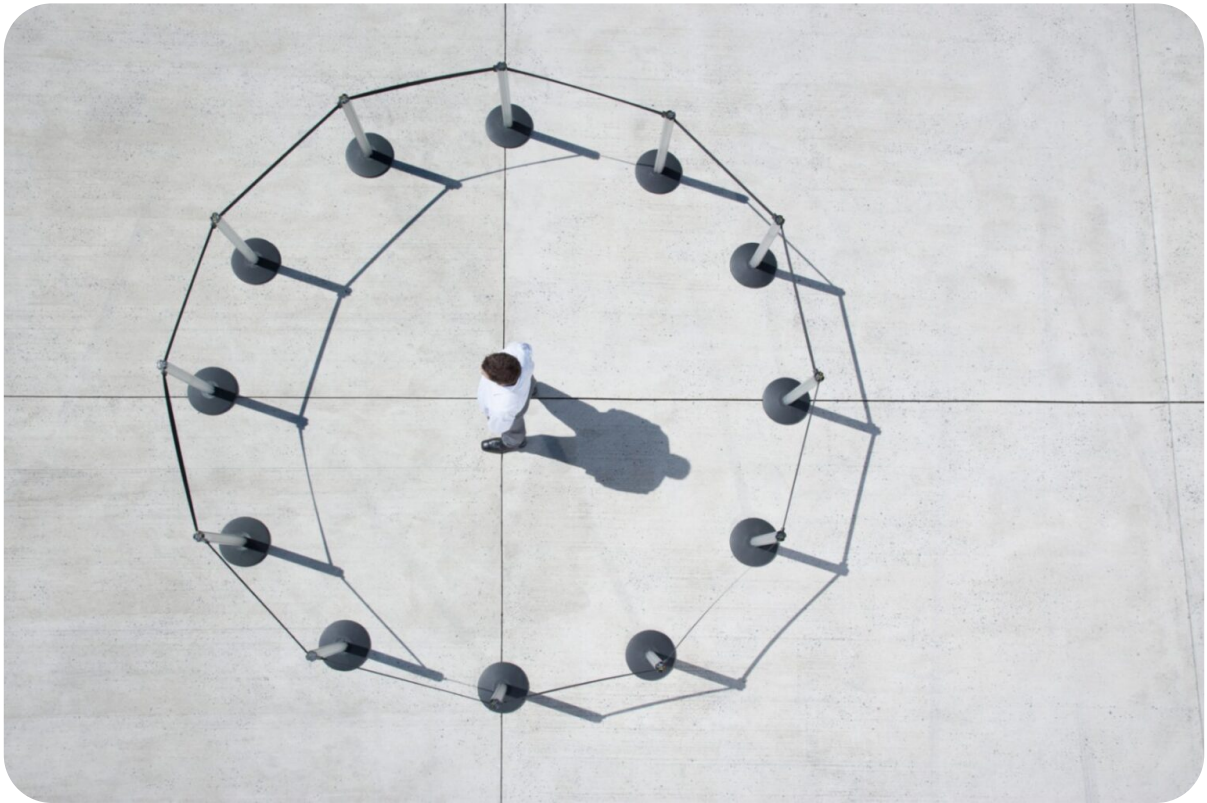


Autism at Work: Overcoming Challenges

By Sheldon Reid



A guide to adult autism in the workplace

For adults on the autism spectrum, searching for a job can be challenging. You might feel confident in your job skills but intimidated by the recruitment and interview process, which is often a test of social skills. Once you land a job, you may face additional challenges remaining employed while maintaining your sense of well-being. You might find yourself in

uncomfortable environments that overload your senses, or end up working alongside people who misunderstand or even discriminate against you.

While it can be frustrating to find that work culture often caters to the preferences of your neurotypical peers, not working a steady job can make you feel unproductive or inhibit your financial independence. The good news is that it's possible for you to find employers who are open to the concept of neurodiversity. These types of employers will often work to accommodate your needs, and, as a result, their businesses will benefit from your unique skills and expertise.

So, how do you find jobs for people with autism? And how can you thrive in the workplace? It helps to identify your challenges, play to your strengths, and know how to navigate setbacks. Armed with that knowledge, you can feel more confident applying to jobs and feel more at ease while working a job.

Choosing and finding work

As with anyone—on the spectrum or not—not every job is going to be the right one for you. To find jobs that are the most suitable, you'll need to consider your personal strengths, weaknesses, and preferences. Many **people with autism** are able to find rewarding employment in a wide variety of fields, ranging anywhere from health care and technical services to education and retail.

[Read: [Finding the Right Career](#)]

Know your strengths

Start by making a list of your personal strengths, then brainstorm some jobs that rely heavily on those skills. For example, do you have strong visual thinking skills? If so, some job possibilities include set designer, graphic designer, or mechanical engineering.

On the other hand, if you have a keen eye for noticing small details and assessing facts, work as a copy editor could be right for you. If you excel at math as well, you may also want to consider jobs in accounting.

Know your weaknesses

List your weaknesses and use that list to brainstorm careers that you want to avoid. For example, if you struggle with multitasking or memorizing items, a job as a waiter could be very difficult.

Acknowledging your weaknesses can also help you narrow down your list of preferred jobs. If socializing isn't your strong suit, a job in stocking shelves, loading trucks, or inputting data where you can work with minimal social interruptions may be a better choice than one in retail, for example.

Consider your preferences

Additional preferences can help determine whether or not a job is right for you. Here are a few questions to consider:

Are you willing to spend more time in school? Some positions, such as customer service representative or warehouse person, have minimal educational requirements, outside of some relevant experience. More specialized jobs, such as a pipefitter or pharmacy technician, for example, require vocational training or even a college degree.

Will the job environment be right for you? Some jobs take place in busy settings with lots of uncontrollable stimuli, such as supermarkets or restaurants. Other jobs take place in quiet offices or even allow you to work from home. Think about what kinds of settings make you uncomfortable.

Will the schedule work for you? In many industries, you might need to cover shifts if coworkers are unable to make it to work. However, certain positions can come with especially erratic hours. For example, nurses and repair technicians may find themselves

frequently on-call, waiting for their services to be needed.

Will your coworkers and supervisors be accommodating? This is a question you probably won't be able to answer until at least the interview process. However, you can always ask friends and family members about their experiences with people in a particular field or company.

Tips for handling interviews

Already identified your ideal job and have an interview date set? The following tips can help you in the interview.

- If you have any atypical habits, such as difficulty with eye contact, consider being upfront about it.
- Look up common interview questions as well as information about the company to help you prep.
- Remember that this interview is also a chance for you to assess the company culture and whether it will be accommodating to your needs.
- Don't be afraid to ask for more time to think about a question. Ask the interviewer to repeat the question, if needed.
- Highlight your skills with a portfolio of past work. Be prepared to explain, in concrete terms, how you can be an asset to the business.
- Make sure you understand the specific job duties as listed on the job description. Ask if there are any other duties that weren't listed.
- Practice your interpersonal skills, including body language, through mock interviews beforehand with a trusted friend.

Read: [Interviewing Techniques and Tips](#).

Coping with common challenges in the workplace

Individuals with ASD experience a high unemployment rate. This could be because many traditional workplaces fail to accommodate some of the more common challenges employees with autism face. These challenges can include:

- Atypical communication style
- Difficulty with time management
- Sensory issues
- Anxiety
- Desire for a consistent schedule

Of course, we're all different and not every autistic person experiences the same difficulties or obstacles. For example, you may have anxiety and sensory problems but no issue when it comes to managing your time efficiently. Just know that many of the challenges you face in the workplace can be minimized or overcome with the right strategies.

Disclosing your diagnosis

While deciding to disclose your ASD diagnosis at work depends on your own comfort level, disclosure can come with both positive and negative repercussions. For example, some research shows that neurotypical people tend to think more favorably of people with ASD after their diagnosis is disclosed. Other research indicates that disclosure might also improve the odds of being employed. However, disclosure can also lead to workplace discrimination for some employees with autism.

Of course, in order to obtain work-related autism accommodations, you'll need to disclose your diagnosis to an employer. But disclosure is more likely to be beneficial in situations where coworkers and employers already have knowledge of ASD, support neurodiversity, and are willing to adapt to accommodate your individual skills.

Coping with common challenges at work tip

1: Improve your social and communication skills

As early as the interview process, you might run into a common hurdle for many individuals with ASD: interpersonal skills. The interviewer will quiz you on your knowledge and experiences, but they'll also be assessing your people skills.

Some adults with ASD experience difficulty reading and responding to social cues, including facial expressions and tonal inflections. This can lead to miscommunication or even awkward interactions. For example, is the interviewer being sarcastic? Are they using nonverbal cues to prompt you to elaborate on something? Or do they want you to stop talking? You might leave the interview with the feeling that you've misunderstood the interviewer or that they have misunderstood you.

Even if you move past the interview phase, jobs that rely heavily on interpersonal skills can continue to be very challenging. For example, you might need to address customer concerns on a sales floor or be expected to participate in lengthy meetings with coworkers. You might find these situations to be stressful and mentally draining.

Identify and practice communication skills

From being more patient with others to maintaining eye contact, interpersonal communication can cover a broad range of skills. Start by deciding which skills you want to improve on and why. For example, you might want to improve your understanding of nonverbal cues so you can tell when another person is disinterested in conversation. Or maybe you want to improve your active listening skills so you can get to know coworkers better.

Once you determine which skills you want to build, begin breaking them down into step-by-step processes. For example, to enhance your listening skills, you can minimize environmental distractions, visualize what the other person is saying, and then ask questions for clarification. Practice these skills with friends or family members who are willing to give you feedback. You can also choose to work with a therapist. Once you're comfortable, start practicing your skills in real-world situations.

[Read: [Effective Communication](#)]

Don't get too focused on perfection. And don't feel pressure to build skills or make changes that you feel are unnecessary. Also, remember that communication is a two-way street. Your neurotypical peers should also be willing to put in effort to better communicate with you.

Adjust your communication methods

Another strategy is to rely on communication methods that reduce misunderstandings whenever possible. For example, if you have a hard time with verbal communication, ask coworkers if you can coordinate tasks and deliver status updates through email. Or if you have difficulty focusing during big company meetings, ask for one-on-one meetings for instructions and feedback.

Tip 2: Better manage your time

Time management is sometimes an area of weakness for adults with autism, and this can be especially important in the workplace. If your boss gives you several tasks to complete, you might have a hard time prioritizing them, switching between them, or estimating how long each will take. In other cases, you might consistently struggle to make it to work on time.

Use time management tools

When it comes to time management, you can use all sorts of tools to stay on track.

Use a wall planner, notebook, or smartphone app to create a list of daily job duties.

Include estimates on how long each task should take by asking your boss for guidelines or simply using your best judgment.

Set a timer. When you start a task, set a timer. When the timer goes off, it's time to switch tasks or take a short break. Use a timer that won't disrupt your coworkers, such as a cellphone set to vibrate. If you're heavily focused on one task and think it's best to stick with that task even after the timer goes off, check with your manager or coworkers.

Tip 3: Manage sensory issues

Many adults with ASD struggle with sensory issues. Certain types of environmental stimuli, including sights, sounds, and smells, can be overwhelming. So, in the workplace, anything from florescent lighting to ringing phones might cause discomfort and distract you from tasks. Noisy, fast-paced environments can be especially uncomfortable.

Ask for accommodations

Dealing with sensory issues in the workplace is easiest when your coworkers and supervisors are willing to accommodate your needs. And before they can accommodate your needs, you'll need to communicate those needs. Explain what sensations are distracting or uncomfortable for you and request reasonable changes. Perhaps you want to sit somewhere that's far from a blinking overhead light or in a space that's away from the smells of the breakroom. Headphones can be useful in managing auditory distractions.

Try mindfulness exercises

Research shows that mindfulness techniques might also be helpful in increasing sensory regulation, as well as easing stress and anxiety. When you're experiencing sensory

overload or overwhelming stress, try out some [mindfulness](#) meditation exercises.

Focus your attention on some aspect of the present moment, such as your deep, slow breathing or a soothing mantra, or listen to one of [HelpGuide's audio meditations](#). Again, work with coworkers and supervisors to designate a space where you can take a break and practice mindfulness in peace.

Tip 4: Deal with anxiety

Research suggests that around 20 percent of autistic adults have a form of diagnosed anxiety disorder. Although most people experience some stress at work, overwhelming amounts of stress and anxiety can put you at a greater risk for burnout. This is when prolonged and excessive stress leads to symptoms such as lack of motivation, feelings of detachment, frequent headaches, and lowered immunity.

Anxiety can also affect your performance in other ways. For example, you might find that your anxiety makes it difficult to form sentences. This can worsen any existing problems with communication and affect your [relationships with your co-workers](#). There are, however, plenty of things you can do to reduce stress and [manage anxiety symptoms](#).

Managing your schedule, [practicing relaxation techniques](#), staying physically active, getting enough sleep, and watching what you eat and drink can all help to ease stress and make you feel less anxious.

Tip 5: Keep work predictable

Individuals with autism often prefer to stick with predictable routines. You might feel overwhelmed when disorganization and surprises creep into your schedule. Jobs that require sudden changes in tasks or procedures can be stressful. Unfortunately, no matter what your job, anything from a power outage to difficult customers to shifting business priorities can disrupt your daily tasks.

Know what's expected of you

Take steps to make your workday more predictable. Start by asking for a comprehensive list of job duties before you take on a new position. For example, if you work at a library, ask for step-by-step instructions on organizing and reshelving returned books. If you know the deliverables and specific expectations, you're less likely to encounter surprises while on the job. Also ask your employer to give you as much of an advanced warning as possible for upcoming schedule and procedure changes.

Tip 6: Handle setbacks at work

Despite your best efforts, you're bound to experience a few setbacks in the workplace. Here are few common obstacles and ways to cope with them:

Discrimination

Discrimination occurs when employers, managers, or coworkers treat you less favorably because you're autistic. Some examples include:

- Your hours are cut or you're terminated due to your ASD.
- You're denied benefits or paid less because you're autistic.
- You're harassed by coworkers.
- You're passed over for promotion simply because of your ASD.

How you should handle the situation depends on the severity and frequency of the problem. First, consider talking to the individual or your employer about the incident. Perhaps the discrimination was unintentional and the person will apologize and agree to remedy the problem. However, note that even unintentional workplace discrimination is illegal in most places.

Depending on your country or state of residence, you may also have a legal right to receive reasonable accommodations to help you fulfill your duties at work. See “Get more help” below for resources to help you research your legal rights.

Overlooked for promotion

Being overlooked for a promotion can be a disappointing experience for anyone. It can rock your self-esteem and make you feel undervalued at work. But it's important to stay composed in the workplace. Take some time to write your feelings down or talk to a friend.

Once you feel more composed, request a meeting with your manager. Ask for feedback, including areas that you can improve in. Using that feedback, come up with concrete steps you can take to enhance your work performance. For example, you might need to contribute more to brainstorming sessions or increase your work output.

Difficulty fitting in

If you feel like you don't quite fit in at work, you might have to put in a little extra effort to make friends. Try to find common ground with the people around you. This can make conversation flow naturally and feel more enjoyable.

[\[Read: Adult Autism and Relationships\]](#)

What counts as common ground? Consider your hobbies, TV shows you've enjoyed, games you've played, or trips you've taken. You can also talk about work, but try not to dwell too much on any negative aspects.

Chronic stress

No matter what type of job you take, you'll experience some good days and bad days. However, if every day is stressful and leaves you feeling unhappy and overwhelmed, you should take steps to guard your mental health.

[[Read: Stress Management](#)]

While looking for a new job is always an option, you can try these steps first:

- If the stress is due to a social or environmental element, such as loud noises or distractions, ask your manager for additional accommodations.
- If the stress is due to current job responsibilities, talk to your manager about reducing some of your daily tasks. Be honest and upfront about your reasons. And be specific about which duties seem the most overwhelming.
- If the stress is due to factors out of the manager's control, ask if you can shift to part-time hours or work from home on certain days.

Tips for employers

If you're an employer who wants to make your workplace more comfortable for an employee with autism, there are several steps you can take. The first is to avoid these common misconceptions about autistic individuals:

Misconception: Autistic employees are unemotional.

Some people with ASD may have trouble expressing emotions. However, they experience the same range of emotions as everyone else, including nervousness, anger, and joy.

Misconception: All employees with autism are awkward in social situations.

Some people with ASD have difficulty communicating or communicate in ways that are unfamiliar to neurotypical people. But this is certainly not always the case. You might even already have employees who have undiagnosed or undisclosed autism.

Misconception: All employees with ASD have extraordinary skills in a specific area.

You might meet autistic adults who are highly knowledgeable or skilled in certain areas, such as art or math. Research shows that 10 to 30 percent of autistic individuals have savant skills — exceptional abilities in a particular field. However, just like neurotypical people, each individual with autism has their own unique set of strengths and weaknesses.

Identifying and utilizing employee skills

It's important for you to identify an autistic employee's abilities, which might exceed those of your neurotypical employees. Again, each individual is different, but some people with autism excel in important areas like persistence, loyalty, and honesty. Others are extremely detail oriented or are creative thinkers who can offer your business innovative solutions. Some have sharp memories or high focus that lend well to technical tasks, such as coding.

If you think an autistic employee could be better suited for a different task, suggest a role change. For example, you might find that an employee is too anxious to contribute to

brainstorming sessions, but they excel at tasks that require sustained focus.

Making accommodations

Employees with autism have plenty to offer your business. But, as an employer, you should be prepared to make accommodations when necessary.

Physical accommodations

Some examples of physical autism accommodations include:

- Headphones to block out distracting sounds.
- One-on-one meetings to reduce social anxiety and distractions.
- Visual aids, such as task flow charts.
- Window-side workstation or dimmed lighting for those with light sensitivity.
- Workstation away from kitchens or breakrooms to avoid distracting smells.
- Written step-by-step instructions for those with memory issues.

You might even find that it's best to allow an employee to work remotely if it improves their productivity and comfort. Check in with the employee periodically to see if there's anything you can do to enhance their work environment.

Work culture accommodations

Accommodating autism at work goes beyond simply adjusting the physical workspace. You'll want to foster an environment that prioritizes flexibility and patience, while demonstrating zero tolerance for harassment.

If you're having difficulty incorporating these changes yourself, you can look for support services that specialize in ASD. You might be able to find on-site job coaches to mentor the employee and offer you advice on supporting them.

Whether or not you bring in outside job coaches, talk to all of your employees about treating one another with respect and embracing different perspectives. Set an example by modeling prosocial behaviors yourself. By doing so, you'll create a space in which neurodiversity can thrive, and a business that benefits from a variety of skills and points of view.

Helplines and support

In the U.S.	Call the Autism Society National Helpline at 1-800-328-8476 or find support groups at the Asperger/Autism Network (AANE) .
UK	Find help and support at The National Autistic Society .
Canada	Find support and programs at Autism Canada or call 1-800-983-1795.
Australia	Find adult community services at Autism Spectrum Australia .

More Information

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