

SUCCESS IN THE WORKPLACE

EMPLOYER TOOLKIT

Strategies from
Autistic Employees

ONBOARDING AUTISTIC EMPLOYEES



The strategies and tools in this section will help you better understand and successfully onboard your new autistic employee so that they get off to a strong start.

The onboarding stage of the employee life cycle is your company's chance to welcome your new autistic employee by providing an experience that is inclusive, welcoming and supportive. By following inclusive onboarding practices, you are setting your employee up for long-term success. To inform the toolkit, **The Sinneave Family Foundation (Sinneave)** in collaboration with **The Centre for Interdisciplinary Research and Collaboration in Autism (CIRCA)** conducted surveys of both autistic workers and inclusive employers.

#1 support request by autistic workers surveyed is a welcoming and non-judgmental environment in which staff and management are knowledgeable about autism.

80% of organizations have provided adjustments and/or supports to an employee.

90% of autistic employees value a welcoming environment

"Accommodations for different work styles/needs being a part of the overall culture so that asking for accommodations does not feel othering/shaming."

autistic employee

Supporting the new employee



Your autistic employee may act differently than other employees. Be curious and ask yourself what drives their unique behaviour. Don't simply draw conclusions that may, in fact, be wrong, and reflect unconscious bias.¹

Providing a mentor

Providing the right support to your new autistic employee is key to a successful onboarding experience. A great way to support your employee during the onboarding process is to **provide an understanding co-worker to serve as an “on the job” mentor**. A mentor can help your new employee in a number of ways, including clarifying company procedures, explaining the culture of that specific workplace, and most importantly, navigating the complex social maze that can challenge any new employee but can be especially challenging for an autistic employee.

“A supportive and understanding person such as a boss or mentor who can ease you into the job and the pre-existing co-worker group situation.

autistic employee

43% of autistic workers said that a mentor would be helpful



For more information refer to [Section 11.1 - The Role of a Mentor and How to Choose One Tool](#).

Providing a job coach

Another great support strategy is to partner with an employment agency to provide the new employee with a job coach. A job coach is an outside person who temporarily supports and assists a new employee during the employee's onboarding with a new job. The job coach does not take the role of the employee's supervisor, but can act as a liaison between the employee and the employee's supervisor(s) and co-workers.

71%

of employers stated they were likely or very likely to partner with a job coach. In most cases, partnering with a job coach comes at no additional cost to the employer.

24%

of employers reported they actively partner with an employment agency to provide a job coach for a new employee.

A job coach can help the employee and employer with problem-solving during the employee's first days on the job, solving little problems before they have a chance to become big problems.

How can a job coach help?

"Having a job coach when I started each new job would have been very helpful to me, as they would be an objective person that could help me navigate the social maze of the workplace."

autistic employee

A job coach can also provide autism training to staff and management, ensuring the entire team is well-equipped to support an autistic employee throughout the employee's entire employment with the organization. Finally, the job coach can provide encouragement to a struggling new employee, motivating the new recruit to persevere and remain in the job, thus allowing the employer to avoid the cost of re-hiring for the same position a short time later.

"I shouldn't have to tell everyone I am autistic to gain respect. If I can be myself without discrimination and drawing attention to myself it would make life easier everywhere."

autistic employee

Why does educating coworkers help?

Planning and implementing adjustments early

A new autistic employee may require some adjustments to their job and/or their work environment, in order to be successful. These **adjustments should not be viewed as special treatment, but simply as a way of levelling the playfield** so that the new employee has the same chance of success as their co-workers.

Most of the time, the adjustments required for autistic employees are relatively simple and inexpensive. Sometimes, they cost nothing at all. As outlined in **Section 7 - Adjustments Not Accommodations.**



Many of the adjustments employers implement in support of autistic employees will actually benefit the rest of the team as well.



See **Section 11.2 - Easy Adjustments for Employees to Make Tool.**

While some adjustments can be implemented after the new employee begins employment, it's important that the employer and the employee work together to plan ahead, so that key adjustments can be implemented ahead of the employee's first day. **An inclusive employer empowers their new employee to request needed adjustments as soon as they're offered the job.**

Work with the employee on the adjustments plan, and involve them in every step of the decision-making process. This will ensure the autistic employee's buy-in to the final plan, and that their needs are being met, while also meeting the needs of the employer.

"An environment that presumes competence and asks what I specifically need to work well."

"Ask your employees what they need. For me, it was the ability to work in the library instead of an office."

"The worst thing that a workplace can do for an employee on the autistic spectrum is to ignore their feedback or their requests to make the workspace more manageable. It's bad enough if you are placed in a work situation that's over bearing for them, it's even worse if they can't do anything about them. Not only does this create a situation where they are trapped in circumstances that are beyond their control, it makes them feel like their voice doesn't matter."

autistic employees

By planning ahead, your new employee can have a smooth start to their employment experience with your company or organization. Remember that first impressions are lasting impressions, and a poor first impression of your company will discourage your new employee from remaining with you for a long time.



Autistic employees are known for their loyalty to one employer, and making a strong first impression is one way to earn that loyalty.²

Finally, it's important to review the adjustments at a later date, to see if they're working well, or if changes need to be made. It's a good idea for both the employer and the employee to agree on a review timeline, and for that review date to be included in the adjustments plan. This will encourage both parties to stick with the original review date.

Supporting Managers and Supervisors

Autism Training for Leaders

While it's important for managers and supervisors to support their new autistic or neurodiverse employee, it's equally important that the managers and supervisors receive support too.

54% of employers surveyed said they were not at all proficient or only somewhat proficient in their understanding of autism & related disorders.

"A better understand[ing] for management of autism, how to best create an ideal environment for autistics to succeed, the impact on organization and culture."

employer

How do we support an autistic employee?



It's important for staff in leadership roles to learn about autism.

Many autism organizations, including local, provincial and national, have resources to help employers better understand autism, so they can better support their autistic team members. Some organizations provide affordable, or even no-cost training to employers looking to become more inclusive. If your nearest autism organization doesn't offer this training, chances are they know someone who does, be it another non-profit organization, a private trainer or a business organization like **President's Group**.

By developing a better understanding of what autism is and how you can support an autistic employee, managers and supervisors will better meet the needs of their neurodiverse team members.

#1 requested support by autistic workers was identified as supportive management. "a supportive manager who understands your difficulties and strengths."

Play to employee's strengths

Like every other employee, each **autistic employee brings their individual strengths to the job.** They also bring a unique lens that can **offer valuable perspectives on their company's work not offered by their colleagues.** Take advantage of this, and look for ways you can play to your autistic employee's strengths which may include attention to detail, systematic approach to tasks, pattern recognition, or sustained concentration. Look for ways their unique lens can be an asset to your organization. Play to their strengths, and allow them to work independently where possible.

What makes a good supervisor?

"A supervisor who trusts me, lets me get on with my work without interruption, does not push me into areas of work I am not good at, and runs interference for me, making sure my work conditions contribute to my doing my best work."

autistic employee

By learning more about autism, and by identifying and playing to your new employee's unique strengths, managers and supervisors will help create a successful onboarding experience for their new autistic employee, equipping the employee for long-term success and encouraging their loyalty to your company or organization.

Supporting co-workers

While supporting both the autistic employee and the staff that supervise or manage the employee is very important, so is supporting the rest of the team. In most jobs, the new employee will be part of a larger team that includes one or more co-workers. Supporting the rest of the team is another key part of the inclusive onboarding process.

Training for co-workers

One of the first things managers can do is to **provide autism and sensitivity training to the entire team,** especially the team members who will work closely with the new employee. Employees can learn about autism, and how they can be sensitive and attuned to their new team members' unique needs. A good trainer will help the co-workers understand that their new autistic employee's differences aren't a bad thing at all.

Our brains are like computer operating systems

"All you know when you first meet an autistic person is that the[ir] brains run on a different operating system. Windows and Mac run on different OS's and they're both good. They both can get almost every job done though each has their strengths and weaknesses. All you know is the OS, not the support needs or individual traits."

autistic employee

By providing colleagues with quality autism and sensitivity training ensures the autistic employee's co-workers are understanding and ready to help their new team member any way they can.

"The people in the workplace are understanding of you."

"Understanding that I have many strengths."

autistic employees

How I feel most supported

Empowering employees

Having an autistic co-worker will be a new experience for many people, and discussing the preferred ways to ask questions about autism or find out more about an autistic employees' preferred adjustments can be helpful. Some autistic employees will like and appreciate their colleagues asking them questions, and others do not feel comfortable. **Supervisors should ensure an autistic employee is not overwhelmed or prevented from completing their work due to an overload of co-workers' questions.** However, if handled correctly and with sensitivity, empowering employees to learn from each other can be a great way for co-workers to learn more about supporting their autistic colleagues. The author has experienced first-hand the value of answering questions and having the freedom to explain his needs to his co-workers.

Autistic does not mean not qualified

One common myth that some employees may buy into is that their autistic colleague is not qualified for the job they're doing because of their disability. This is definitely not the case, as many studies have shown. Managers need to assure the rest of the employees that the new hire, while autistic, is fully qualified for the job, and was hired for the job because of their qualifications, not because they were autistic.

Finding common interests

A final tip to help the new neurodiverse employee build a strong rapport with their team members is for the new employee and the rest of the team to find the common interests that they undoubtedly share. For example, if both the autistic employee and a co-worker share a common interest in ice hockey, they can use that to build a rapport. Even if the new hire doesn't want to attend a live hockey game due to sensory issues, the two employees can spend some of their break times talking about last night's game or which teams they think will make the playoffs. Once they've established a rapport based on common personal interests, they will likely find it easier to work together for their employer's good.

Everybody has a role to play in onboarding a new employee, whether they are autistic or not. By ensuring co-workers are supported and familiar with autism, they can assist the managers and supervisors in welcoming and supporting their new team member. This will help the new hire feel at home in their new job, ensuring they are loyal to their employer and productive in their work.

Conclusion

Whether autistic or not, onboarding any new employee is a challenging but important part of the employee life cycle. However, this is increasingly important for an autistic employee who may take longer to adjust to a new job, new employer, and co-workers. That's why it's so important for the entire team to be knowledgeable about autism and be sensitive to the new employee's needs.

An autistic team member can be a valuable asset to their employer, and keep in mind that most of the adjustments an autistic employee may require cost little or nothing to implement.

For more information on this, refer to ***Section 7 Adjustments Not Accommodations***, which includes a brief business case for hiring autistic employees.

By providing a successful onboarding experience, your new employee will want to work hard for your organization, creating a win-win situation for both the employee and the employer.



REFERENCES

Facts and Helpful Tips – Autism in the Workplace

Focus Professional Services

8 Tips for Hiring and Onboarding an Employee with Autism

American Express