

SUCCESS IN THE WORKPLACE

EMPLOYER TOOLKIT

Strategies from
Autistic Employees

RETAINING AUTISTIC EMPLOYEES



13a Communication supports

Despite everyone's best efforts, misunderstandings and communication breakdowns sometimes occur.

One way to reduce the occurrence of these stressful situations is for employers to learn and respect the communication preferences of their autistic employee(s).

While many autistic employees are visual learners and prefer some form of written communication, others may prefer telephone, face-to-face, or video communication. This subsection provides strategies for managing communication breakdowns, breaking larger tasks into smaller tasks, helping employees prepare for meetings, and helping employees process information.

Autistic communication preferences

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) includes all forms of communication (other than oral speech) that are used to express thoughts, needs, wants, and ideas.¹

"Text to speech software. I like both reading and listening at the same time for better retention."

"Being able to phone people or speak to them in person. (Not everyone with autism hates the phone.)"

"Alternatives to oral communication (e.g. use of an AAC application, e-mails)."

"If instructions are only given verbally - recorded is best. It is most helpful that instructions are given in a written list in the order of priority."

autistic employees



For more information and tips for communication preferences refer to **Section 13.1 Communication Strategies Tool**.

Managing communication breakdowns

Despite an employer's best efforts, sometimes it's not possible to communicate in a preferred manner. For example, an employee may prefer telephone communication with all their supervisors, but if the company just hired a new supervisor who stutters, the supervisor may find it easier and more comfortable communicating by e-mail. When an employer or co-worker is unable to communicate with an autistic employee in the employee's preferred manner, explain the reason(s) for the change to the employee. This will show the person knows and respects the employee's communication style, even though they aren't always able to communicate that way, which may help reduce the employee's anxiety around the change in communication methods.

A good strategy to navigate communication breakdowns is for the autistic employee to have a "go-to" person who can assist both parties in successfully navigating the communication breakdown.

Ideally, this person would be another autistic person (when available), but otherwise, should be an employee familiar with autism, and with how the autistic employee communicates and interprets others' communication.

Also, if the change in communication is temporary, or just one time, reassure the employee that the change is temporary; this may also ease their anxiety. For example, if a co-worker phones an employee who prefers e-mail communication because the co-worker's internet is temporarily down, the co-worker will help ease the autistic employee's frustrations by explaining this and assuring their team member they will resume e-mailing the employee once their internet is working again.

Breaking down large tasks into small tasks

When it comes to communicating large complex tasks, many autistics find it easier to process and follow instructions that are broken down into smaller, individual tasks.



Consider creating checklists for employees to follow for tasks that have multiple steps or components to them. Airline pilots have long followed checklists to safely operate complex aircraft.

"Clean backroom' has too many instructions in one. It would need to be broken down into steps for me to do it correctly."

autistic employee

**How are
checklists
helpful?**

Breaking down large complex tasks into smaller individual tasks not only helps the employee complete the tasks correctly, but it gives the employer a better sense of the size of the task, allowing them to realistically estimate how much time the employee needs to complete the task.

Providing advanced notice of meetings

Meetings are often an essential part of a job, but they can be stressful for autistic employees.

One effective way of mitigating that stress is to provide advanced notice of meetings and also to provide the agenda a few days in advance.

This allows the employee time to mentally and physically prepare for the meeting, making the experience more likely to be a positive one instead of a stressful one.

How does advanced notice help?

"Having advance notice for meetings and an agenda and being able to take notes at meetings or having notes provided. Being able to ask questions during instruction or take notes. Being able to ask questions after instruction."

autistic employee

Processing information

Finally, understand that some autistics process information slower than a non-autistic person does. **It's important that the person communicating with the autistic employee allow them time to process information at their own speed, without pressuring them.** This is especially true if the employee is overwhelmed or upset.

"Slower processing speed in conversation; severe social anxiety and limited oral communication ability when overwhelmed."

"People not being patient with me when they ask a question. I need extra time to process what they've said, formulate a response, and put that response into the appropriate words."

"It's hard for me to communicate when I'm frustrated and not allowed enough time to calm down and think rationally again. At times in the past, my employer didn't give me enough time to calm down before expecting decisions or responses from me, and this was frustrating."

autistic employees

What can cause communication frustrations?

Keep in mind that autism is a highly individualized disability, and every autistic employee will communicate differently. An inclusive employer will ideally be prepared to support a variety of communication preferences if they have multiple autistic employees. While this may require a little extra effort from the employer, it will pay dividends in the long run by having successful, productive employees.



REFERENCES

- 1 **Augmented and Alternative Communication**
AAC. Kennedy Krieger Institute
- 2 **Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association (AOPA)**
Career Pilots: Checklists and Discipline