

# An Employers Guide To Supporting Autistic Employees In The Workplace



# Executive Summary

Autism by its very definition is a complex disability with significant variances experienced by different individuals on the spectrum. With that in mind this report has been written to provide managers and colleagues of those on the autistic spectrum targeted advice on how to understand, manage and get the best out of their employees who are on the autistic spectrum. Almost all the reasonable adjustments and strategies that we recommend for working with professionals on the autistic spectrum depend on understanding why these employees engage in certain behaviours.

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### 1. The Autistic Professional

#### 1.1 Autism in the workplace

Autism is a neurological condition. The brains of individuals with autism are wired differently, resulting in sensory sensitivities, repetitive routines, intense focus on narrow areas of interest, and an inability to read social cues the way the rest of the world does. Colleagues often “interpret” these behaviours as rude, impolite, annoying, or just plain “odd” and assume that they are under the individual’s control. Individuals with an autism spectrum disorder often use the term neuro-typical to describe people who are not on the autism spectrum. Perhaps you have noticed a colleague with some of these behaviours in the following table:

Observed Behaviour	Common Interpretation
Doesn’t want to engage in group activities	Socially “out of the loop”
Can’t tell that you are annoyed with them	Oblivious to social cues
Talks a lot about a specific topic	Limited/odd interests
Problem maintaining eye contact, or awkwardly changes the subject of conversation	Appears uninterested

Refers to themselves, or their needs, more than seems normal	Appears self-centred
Upset by minor schedule changes	Easily flustered/too sensitive/inflexible
Looks out the window a lot, or jerks his head in the direction of any sudden noises	Easily distracted/ day dreaming
Points out others' mistakes	Seems rude/impolite/pedantic

**It is important to remember that not all individuals with autism will display all of these behaviours. Each individual on the spectrum is different, and their challenges related to autism will be unique to them.**

While the behaviours of individuals with autism may seem inappropriate or odd to you, they may not view themselves in the same way. Few people with autism notice themselves avoiding eye contact or abruptly switching the topic of conversation. When asked, they can often give a logical explanation for their behaviour or response to a situation, based on how they processed their thoughts, emotions, and experiences at the time. The overall effect for the individual is somewhat akin to the immigrant experience, where the new immigrant may have ways of doing things that differ from the ways of vast majority in their recently adopted homeland. Similarly, most professional with autism know that in order to succeed, they benefit from using strategies that enable them to accommodate the larger world and the workplace.

## **1.2 Why should your company employ people with autism?**

There is a very compelling reason why companies should be interested in understanding autism and successfully autistic individuals into their organisations: It's good for business!

Specifically, the business reasons for employing individuals with autism include:

- Reduced staff turnover
- Increased Productivity
- Competitive advantage
- Minimal cost for adjustments and hiring

### **Reduced staff turnover**

The amount of money actually spent to replace a worker will differ from company to company, but the Society for Human Resources Management estimates that “ direct replacement costs can reach as high as 50-60% of an employee’s annual salary, with total costs associated with turnover ranging from 90% to 200% of annual salary. A 2010 study conducted by the Kessler Foundation on Disability found that 33% of employers believed

that employees with disabilities were less likely than employees to actively search for, and find, employment. Individuals with autism tend to dislike change and will stay in the same job for a long time if the work and the work environment are appropriate.

### **Increased productivity**

Individuals with autism are known for their focus, attention to detail, accuracy, memory of facts and figures, and ability to concentrate on repetitive tasks and procedures. They are often more interested in completing the task at hand than they are in socialising in the office with co-workers. As a result, they are often highly productive employees, particularly of jobs and tasks that others find boring or repetitive.

### **Competitive Advantage**

A growing number of companies have taken the lead in employing individuals on the autism spectrum. News stories appear almost daily about the efforts of companies such as SAP, IBM and EY who are actively employing autistic individuals into their organisations. Given the size and purchasing power of the autism community, any company that allows its competitors to surpass it in the effort to integrate individuals with autism into their workforce is choosing to cede market share to those who are employing this segment of the population.

### **Minimal costs for adjustments and hiring**

Employees with Asperger's Syndrome do not need costly adjustments in the workplace. Typical adjustments include clear communication, providing social cues, giving notice of schedule changes, providing short breaks and flexible work hours, replacing fluorescent light bulbs with incandescent lights, and developing an understanding of the behaviours you might see in the workplace. The perception that hiring a person with a disability costs more than hiring someone without a disability is simply a myth.

### **1.3 Why should you learn about autism?**

Considering the current incidence rate of autism spectrum diagnoses, if you work in a large company, you already work with and manage individuals on the spectrum. These employees will often be found in jobs that are technical in nature, where they perform well on their assigned tasks, but don't fit in well with their team or the company culture. More often than not, individuals on the spectrum will be terminated from their job for reasons related to fit, rather than job performance. By recognising behaviours in the workplace that could be related to an autism spectrum and utilising the management techniques and strategies in this report, you could maximise the potential of an employee on the spectrum, and possibly avoid a costly and disruptive termination.

### **1.4 Bullying and professionals with autism**

In 2012, The National Autistic Society published a study reporting that one third of adults with autism have been bullied or discriminated against at work. People with autism

spectrum disorders are often victims of bullying in the workplace due to their inability to “fit in” and their apparent lack of understanding of the many forms of bullying that can occur. Bullying in the social environment may include:

- Making rude remarks
- Making jokes at the expense of the individual on the spectrum
- Acting in a condescending or insulting manner
- Humiliating the individual in front of others
- Excluding the individual from team or social events
- Spreading rumours.

Specifically, in the work environment, bullying may also include:

- Supervising in an overbearing manner
- Denying training or promotion
- Constantly criticising performance
- Setting tasks or deadlines that cannot be met
- Assigning insufficient work or menial tasks
- Taking credit for others’ work
- Threatening job security, even though performing well.

If you manage an employee who has disclosed that he or she is on the spectrum, reach out and encourage them to report any bullying to you. If you have an employee who does not fit in with the rest of the team, but who has not disclosed an autism diagnosis, be aware of your team’s dynamics and watch for signs of bullying. It should go without saying, always have a zero-tolerance policy for bullying in your workplace, with safe avenues for employees to report bullying.

If you are reading this report, it is likely that you have an employee or co-worker who has disclosed they have an autism spectrum disorder or you suspect they might. One of the biggest challenges for both employers and employees with autism in the workplace is disclosure.

## **2. Disclosure and Types of Employees on the Spectrum**

### **2.1 Why disclosure is good for companies**

- Employer of choice- You cannot accommodate what you do not know! If an employee is struggling due to challenges related to autism, you may not be able to help that employee be successful without understanding the root cause of their struggles. If you are an employer that encourages disclosure and provides a supportive workplace for individuals with disabilities, you will become known as an employer of choice within the disability community.

- Employee engagement- Not only are individuals on the spectrum your employees, so are many more individuals with a personal connection to autism. Demonstrating your organisation is an autism-friendly employer increases the engagement of all existing employees, particularly those touched by autism through family and friends.
- Risk management- Employers are experiencing an increase in the number of all employees with hidden disabilities. Understanding the challenges related to disability will be key in mitigating risks related to litigation.

## **2.2 The three types of individuals on the spectrum**

Professionals on the autistic spectrum fall into one of three categories:

- Diagnosed and disclosed
- Diagnosed and undisclosed
- Undiagnosed and undisclosed.

### **2.3 Diagnosed and disclosed**

For an employer, this is the best situation. Many individuals on the spectrum will be able to tell you where they struggle at work and what types of adjustments and strategies will help them perform to the best of their abilities. Once an employee has disclosed, the manager and the employee can have an open dialogue about what challenges related to autism the employee may face in the workplace and what is needed for them to be successful in their job. Below are some initial steps to take when an employee discloses to you:

- First, and foremost- do not jump to conclusions or make assumptions about what the individual's particular challenges related to autism may or may not be. Every individual on the autism spectrum is different and will experience the impact differently in the workplace.
- Listen to the employee. Learn why they are disclosing to you and discuss if and how they want to disclose to others at their workplace.
- Check with your HR team to check current legislation and policies and look at what reasonable adjustments you should be making.
- If you are unfamiliar with autism and Asperger's Syndrome this report should help make you more informed.
- Develop a plan for any required reasonable adjustments and additional disclosure to others within the wider HR function.

### **2.4 Diagnosed and undisclosed**

Many individuals who have been diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder struggle with the question of whether or not to disclose, particularly to a potential or current

employer. The decision to disclose is a personal one and driven by many factors. The top five reasons were:

- Risk of being fired/not hired
- Concern that employer may focus on disability
- Risk of losing health care
- Fear of limited opportunities
- Concern that manager may not be supportive.

While many employers assume people don't disclose due to a desire for privacy, that is not the case. Privacy was number nine on the list for reasons for not disclosing, with less than one third of individuals polled citing that as a concern. I believe that it is usually in the best long-term interest of the individual and the employer if an individual discloses. However, we do advise individuals who have been diagnosed with autism that there is no right or wrong answer to the question of disclosure. I would encourage them to talk to those who they know well and who understand the dynamics of the employment world but stress the importance of being comfortable with whatever decision they make.

## **2.5 Undiagnosed and undisclosed**

Obviously this is the most difficult situation for both an employee and an employer to deal with in a work environment. Both parties are trying to manage through the challenges that are associated with autism without understanding the underlying causes of certain behaviours and the best strategies for handling them.

Although I strongly discourage any employer from "diagnosing" an employee he or she suspects is on the spectrum or with any type of disability), he or she can encourage sensitivity and understanding of neuro-diverse individuals in general. An astute manager can learn how to observe the behaviours of his or her employees and compare them to the strategies and behaviours that this report will outline as best practise for supporting undiagnosed employees in the workplace.

## **2.6 How do I encourage someone to disclose?**

Creating an autism-friendly environment is the most effective way to encourage disclosure. Below are ways in which an organisation can strive to be autism-friendly.

- Training- Train HR colleagues, managers, and colleagues about autism spectrum disorders, the unique skill sets of individuals on the spectrum, and some of the behavioural differences they may exhibit in the workplace. This can reassure employees

on the spectrum that their differing behaviours and needed accommodations will not be misunderstanding as a liability by co-workers and line managers.

- Inclusion- Promote efforts to hire diverse individuals, including those with neuro-diverse profiles.
- Employee Resource Groups- Use ERGs for employees with disabilities to participate in driving your disability diverse programs and practices.

Disclosure does not have to be an all-or-nothing decision for an employee either. Partial disclosure to a carefully selected group of individuals within your organisation such as a manager and a few select colleagues may provide the support to an individual on the spectrum that they need while allowing them to maintain some degree of privacy.

### **3. Social Issues At Work**

#### **3.1 The “hidden curriculum” of the workplace**

The hidden curriculum is social information that everyone knows without being taught, and it is the basis for many of the social rules in the workplace assumed to be understood by all. However, the hidden curriculum can be especially confusing to individuals with autism. If you have found yourself thinking any of these when dealing with interacting with a colleague, then most likely you are dealing with a hidden curriculum issue

- “I shouldn’t have to tell you, but...”
- “ I assumed that...”
- “I expected that...”
- “It’s obvious that...”
- “Everyone knows that...”

#### **3.2 Theory of mind**

The hidden curriculum is based on largely on our ability to understand what other people are thinking and to behave appropriately. Effective communication and ease in social interactions depend on theory of mind. Individuals on the spectrum typically struggle in this area and often miss or misinterpret reactions to their behaviour. They may talk nonstop, interrupt, or have difficulty seeing past their own agenda and point of view. Consequently, people with autism may appear insensitive or rude, because they often fail to anticipate the impact of their comments and behaviours or consider the opinions, plans, and points of view of others.

#### **3.3 Typical social challenges at work**

Every job has social aspects related to theory of mind and the hidden curriculum, from informal socialising with colleagues to understanding the nuances of office politics. Individuals with autism may experience challenges with:

- Talking too much or giving too much information
- Saying inappropriate things
- Interrupting or being repetitive
- Making or maintaining eye contact
- Reading facial expressions and recognising faces
- Interpreting sarcasm or idioms
- Dealing with social situations and office politics.

### **3.4 Disclosure and adjustments for social challenges**

When an employee has difficulty with social interactions in the workplace, a manager will need to try different strategies until one is found that works. As with any disability, disclosure allows a manager and colleagues to respectfully engage in an open dialogue with the disclosed person about how their behaviour affects others in social situations and how to most effectively address it. Many individuals on the autistic spectrum who have disclosed their disability are aware of their social challenges and what adjustments they need to be successful. However, the most effective adjustments for social challenges at work is better understanding on the part of managers and colleagues on how people on the spectrum think and experience these social situations, especially if the behaviour in question really does not affect job performance or disrupt the work environment.

## **4. Social Interaction**

### **4.1 Black-and-white thinking**

Literal thinkers tend to view the world in terms of “black and white” or “right and wrong.” For example, the quick pace of project deadlines may sometimes require a deviation from an established rule or method. People with autism often think that there is only one “right” way to do something, so being asked to do it differently is one of their biggest workplace challenges, especially if they are uncomfortable with change in general. Refusing a manager’s request to take a shortcut on an established procedure to move a project along is often perceived as being stubborn, difficult or negative. Theory of mind is a factor in these situations: an employee with autism cannot anticipate the manager’s needs, so “No” is often a defence mechanism for the anxiety of not understanding the manager’s perspective or reasons for modifying the procedure.

### **4.2 Being right**

Individuals on the spectrum tend to place a great deal of importance on accuracy, are excellent at finding errors, and like to share this knowledge. Unfortunately, this sharing of knowledge can come across as constant correcting of others and can be perceived as quite annoying, particularly when the point they are making is irrelevant or insignificant. Individuals with autism may have difficulty entertaining any other viewpoint than their own, especially when it comes to their area of expertise. Colleagues with autism are eager to share their expertise, but their lack of context and inflexibility make it difficult for them to understand that skills, abilities, and knowledge exist in varying degrees. When explaining something to a colleague, an employee on the spectrum may have difficulty assessing how much information the colleague already has, and what new information is needed. As a result, they may become impatient when that person does not immediately grasp “the obvious”.

### **4.3 Accepting criticism**

Individuals on the spectrum tend to be perfectionists, holding themselves as well as others to the same high standards. This makes them valued contributors at work, because they strive to do the best job possible. However, the black-and-white, all-or-nothing thinking of people on the spectrum may make them anxious if they feel their performance is not perfect. This makes them particularly sensitive to criticism, which they may equate with failure.

### **4.4 Literal thinking and figurative language**

Many people on the spectrum think literally, so the figurative language that we use in the workplace presents a challenge to them. They process words at their face value and have difficulty understanding the shifting meanings of sarcasm and idioms, such as “thinking outside of the box.” Similarly, a rhetorical question does not require an answer: when you say, “Would you mind pulling together the sales figures?” you are politely assigning a task, not asking for someone’s feelings on the matter. A colleague with autism, however, may interpret “would you mind?” literally, and might answer honestly, “Yes” or “No”, without registering that they are there to compile the sales figures. Here are some examples of common business idioms that individuals on the spectrum find confusing:

- “The ball is in your court.”
- “We need to be on the same wavelength.”
- “Don’t talk shop at the lunch with Mr Jones.”
- “Pick his brain about the merger.”
- “Bring me up to speed on the project.”

Most likely you instantly got the gist of the above phrases. However, an individual on the spectrum may hesitate to ask for clarification, because they don’t want to seem incompetent. Imprecise directions can also cause confusion. For example, “Go over those figures later” could mean in an hour, a day, or a week, but most people interpret

the request based on past experience and the context of the situation. An individual with autism, however, needs to be told exactly when, how, and how much they need to do, so they can focus on the task rather than the interpretation.

Literal thinking is related to the “black-and-white” thinking discussed earlier in this chapter. Most of us think in terms of “shades of grey,” such as when we apply the same rule or procedure to a current situation that is similar but not identical to one we have encountered in the past. However, an employee on the spectrum may have difficulty knowing how to proceed when instructed to do a task “the same way as last time” if the situation is not exactly the same. Being specific about what procedures will stay the same, while pointing out what may be different, will not only clarify what they need to do, but also help them learn how to approach similar tasks in the future.

#### **4.5 Sarcasm & Jokes**

When you hear a joke or sarcasm, you must integrate multiple channels of input: the meaning of the words, the context of the situation, the intent of the speaker, and in the case of a joke, the mindset of the central characters. All of these depend on theory of mind and therefore can be difficult for those on the spectrum to understand. Sarcastic comments such as “That was fun!” after a long, difficult meeting may be particularly perplexing to someone with autism, since the positive words spoken do not match the negative tone of voice and facial expression.

People with autism do not lack the capacity to make jokes, appreciate wordplay, or see the humour in a situation, although they may have difficulty processing more complex forms of jokes told around the water cooler, which tend to be embedded in social context. Humour involves thinking about something with a different twist, and their unusual way of viewing things can be humorous, although some of the jokes they tell may be funny only to themselves. Nonetheless, some individuals on the spectrum have an excellent sense of humour that they are happy to share.

#### **4.6 Office Politics**

Many aspects of office politics are socially determined and present challenges for people with autism:

- What is the chain of command for addressing work-related issues?
- Who do you “cc” into an email?
- Who gets rewarded and for what?

Every company has an official organisational chart, but many companies also have an unofficial or unwritten chain of command that reflects the actual structure of power and decision-making in each department. While most employees quickly learn who to approach for guidance, whose requests have priority, who to email about project

updates, and who has the final say on a project, the individual with autism may find this confusing.

The style of management of some companies is less hierarchical and more matrix-structured and cooperative in nature. Employees from one department often work on projects managed by people from other departments, creating a chain of command that is confusing to many individuals on the spectrum. For example, an accountant working on an interdepartmental project may not know whether to report to his manager in the finance team or the team leader for the project.

Understanding the office dynamic around why a rule may apply to a colleague but not to someone higher up can also be a challenge. The unwritten rules for who gets rewarded or punished and for what type of behaviour may be confusing or employees on the spectrum, who take great pride in their work and believe strongly in a meritocracy. Employees with autism are motivated by doing a good job, and sometimes their perceived naivety around office politics results in assignment of more than their fair share of work or unfair treatment in other ways.

#### **4.7 Working with teams**

Participation in teamwork can be challenging to employees with autism, who have difficulty anticipating the needs of one person, let alone several. Extreme attention to detail and perfectionism can affect the speed at which a team member with autism completes assigned project tasks, as they can struggle with initiating and organising an assignment in general. They may balk at taking on a task that they believe is irrelevant or they may feel that other team members are not doing their fair share of the work. The members of teams in today's businesses' might include individuals from different functional areas, different geographic locations, or employees from the client side. In general, people on the spectrum have difficulties with change of any kind, and variations in the composition of the team or meeting times and locations may cause anxiety or be met with resistance. They may find the lack of a clear chain of command confusing, as well as shifting priorities between groups.

Teams depend on meetings and the fluid exchange of ideas often presents a challenge to individuals on the spectrum, who have difficulty processing the discussion of issues that are not technical in nature or are outside of their exact area of expertise.

Employees with autism add value to a team by drawing from a highly specialised knowledge base, and their problem-solving nature can lead to innovative solutions. However, an individual on the spectrum values what they see as fact over tact, and their assessment may be blunt "No, we shouldn't do it that way", or "You're making a big mistake", and they may refuse to drop the subject once the meeting has moved to other issues.

As office politics are not part of the mindset of an individual on the spectrum, assessment of a process or procedure is generally without bias. So, while criticism is

unlikely to be universally welcomed, line managers appreciated having a team member who was willing to criticise or point out problems with a particular decision or process or ask questions and articulate complaints that others may be afraid or embarrassed to raise.

#### **4.8 Dealing with an autistic employee who “doesn’t get it”?**

When dealing with a person on the spectrum, always keep in mind that what seems obvious to you is precisely that-obvious to you! An individual with autism needs to be told exactly when, how, and how much you want them to do, so they can focus on the task rather than the interpretation. This requires being specific about project due dates and requirements, and, if possible, providing examples of similar completed assignments, research, or reports so the desired outcome and format is clear.

“Yes or “No” questions such as “Do you understand me?” can be too vague for a person on the spectrum, who will likely answer “Yes” whether they have grasped your meaning or not, because they do not want to seem incompetent. Always take a moment to check for understanding by asking the employee to repeat back to you their interpretation of what they heard you say. Keep in mind that an individual on the spectrum relies on asking questions to understand what another person needs, so give more clarification if they request it and understand that they may need to hear the answer more than once. Giving direct but respectful feedback to individuals with autism is not offensive; it is good management and will be appreciated. If an employee has crossed the line with you or a colleague, keep in mind that they may not be aware of the effect of their behaviour, and may be surprised to learn that they offended. Most people on the spectrum shut down when they are in the presence of strong emotions, so always give feedback in a calm manner. Acknowledge your feelings within the context of the situation by explain how their behaviour in that situation affected the person on the receiving end, and then suggest how they might have acted more appropriately.

Some individuals on the spectrum understand sarcasm and jokes, but many do not. If you are working with someone who really does not understand sarcasm, then avoid using it with that individual. They may also be confused by what others consider “teasing” and may feel very uncomfortable being the focus of it-intervene if necessary. Keep in mind that using sarcasm in the workplace with an individual who clearly has difficulty understanding it might fall into the realm of bullying. The chain of command must be clearly specified for an individual with autism to succeed in the workplace. Clarify who needs to ask for time off, who they should approach for help and guidance on various projects, and the protocol for volunteering for projects or doing non-work-related activities in the office. An individual on the spectrum needs clear rules of engagement within the office, especially as it pertains to office politics and working in a team. They may have difficulty holding on to a thought until someone has finished speaking and might constantly interrupt a meeting to ask questions, so ask them to keep a list of questions for later discussion. Modelling the way to reframe criticism, report mistakes or voice one’s opinion in a less combative, more positive way can help an employee on the spectrum get their idea across without offending or embarrassing other team members.

When working on a team, make sure an employee with autism understands who they should report to for tasks that have been assigned to them, especially if the team members are from different departments or divisions. Clearly outline the requirements, outcomes and deadlines of tasks in writing, providing specific instructions about what, how much, and when work is due. Allow the employee's communications to the team to be written as well and be clear about who should be included in emails.

#### **4.9 Socialising**

For most people, socialising at work is a welcome break that helps them get through the day with less stress and fatigue. For individuals with autism, however, these social interactions may have the opposite effect due to the anxiety created by not understanding the social rules of the workplace, such as:

- How much socialising and interaction in the workplace is expected?
- At what times of day can you socialise and with whom?
- What topics of conversation are considered appropriate?

For many employees with autism, the social interactions of the office that we take for granted are fraught with anxiety because of the fear of making mistakes or the repercussions of unintentionally insulting a colleague. People on the spectrum generally have difficulty remaining flexible when things do not go as expected, so an employee may become upset or anxious in social situations when plans change at the last minute.

#### **4.10 How do you deal with an employee who “doesn't fit in”?**

When social problems occur, understanding the perspective of an individual on the spectrum is key in effectively managing the situation. If you ask the employee to describe what they did and what they were thinking when they did it, you will find in many cases that it is a misunderstanding based on the hidden curriculum. When someone complains that a colleague is “irritating” or “annoying,” ask him to describe how and under what circumstances the employee was bothersome, so you can view the behaviour in context.

Many of the hidden curriculum rules are not explicitly taught but are learned through observing the consequences of breaking or maintaining social rules in various settings. While individuals on the spectrum may try to avoid making social mistakes by following explicit rules, they have difficulty generalising appropriate behaviour from one situation to another, because they focus on the differences rather than the similarities of the circumstances. You can help an employee generalise appropriate behaviour across similar situations by describing it in different contexts. For example, when you intervene because an employee with autism persists in correcting others during casual conversations, you can extend the explanation to not correcting someone during a meeting as well.

Provide specific guidelines for aspects of the company culture that an employee on the spectrum may find confusing, such as work hours, breaks, and volunteer activities. If

necessary, assign a co-worker to act as a reference for questions about office politics, corporate culture or procedures.

Feel free to invite an individual with autism to join a social activity, but do not take it personally if they decline. When attendance is required, allow for more limited participation if possible.

Some employees on the spectrum are eager to participate in social activities, while others may need to be encouraged. Either way, modelling social situations ahead of time will help the individual be successful. You may need to set boundaries for interacting with senior executives or clients and provide strategies for how to initiate, facilitate, and terminate a conversation, as well as suggest appropriate topics for non-work-related conversations. People with autism are frequently thought of as loners, but there are many reasons why they want to spend time away from their colleagues, such as feeling anxious or uncomfortable when socialising, or wanting to focus on their work without interaction or comment from others. Never force the employee to participate; but if he is disclosed, you may ask if there are issues relating to autism that are holding them back from socialising, such as becoming fatigued from daily social interactions. Sensory issues may also be in play and the employee may need to have some “down time” because the office environment is too stimulating or a social venue is too noisy.

## **5. Work Performance**

### **5.1 Executive Functioning**

Executive functioning is an umbrella term for the cognitive processes that help us manage and control our thoughts and actions. However, for individuals with autism, difficulties in executive functioning challenges may be compounded by issues in other areas, such as theory of mind, and they may require assistance and accommodations that can specifically address these issues.

### **5.2 Work performance, the “big picture,” and theory of mind**

In addition to executive functioning skills, the concept of work performance includes specific aspects of theory of mind and seeing the big picture. Researchers refer to the ability to see the “big picture” as central to coherence, and it is an important factor in work performance. Central coherence allows us to shift focus between the big picture and the details, in order to accomplish a goal. People with autism may have weak central coherence, so they may be able to recall the exact details of something yet miss the overall meaning; they typically think about things in the smallest possible parts. Without understanding the context, an employee with autism may fail to see how an assignment relates to the bigger picture of a project and their work may be incorrect, incomplete, or not relevant. Through theory of mind an employee interprets a work assignment by recognising the goals his or her manager wants to achieve, and the manager’s needs. The difficulties with theory of mind that an employee on the autistic may experience in social interactions may become evident in the workplace and result in them misinterpreting assignments or misreading a manager’s intentions.

### **5.3 Work Performance Strengths**

Individuals with autism can sustain their focus during long-lasting routine work, identify logical rules and patterns, process visual information, and remember vast amounts of facts and information from highly specialised areas. They may show specific cognitive strengths such as fluid intelligence, which encompasses reasoning and novel problem-solving abilities that can have useful and creative applications in any workplace.

### **5.4 Typical work performance challenges**

An employee on the autism spectrum with work performance challenges may:

- Miss deadlines
- Have difficulty with organisation and setting priorities
- Interpret instructions too literally
- Need constant feedback
- Act contrarian, stubborn, or refuse to change how they do something
- Be easily frustrated.

### **5.5 Disclosure and adjustments for work performance issues**

The profile of work performance issues for employees with autism will vary sometimes on an individual by individual basis. While many will need adjustments to address issues with executive functioning, others may excel at organising their work and managing their time; their work performance difficulties may be more related to issues with social interactions or sensory challenges.

The biggest advantage to disclosure for an employee on the autism spectrum and their manager is the understanding that challenges perceived as work performance issues are not related to the person's aptitude and ability to do the job. Instead, these issues may be a function of how the work is defined and delivered to that person. The accommodations for work performance issues include understanding how autism affects organisational skills in general, while strategies and rules must involve clarifying instructions and structuring work clearly. A manager must ensure the individual understands the specifics of what they are supposed to do, as well as how and when to deliver it.

## **6. Organisation**

### **6.1 Organisational Skills**

The workplace often demands that you perform a wide range of tasks with varying levels of importance and different time frames. Being organised helps you structure your day,

making you more efficient and less prone to distraction. Challenges with organisations will vary with the individual. A colleague on the spectrum may be good at determining the steps involved in accomplishing a task but may have difficulty determining which are the most important. Another colleague may be good at prioritising, but not follow through on the less important aspects of a project. A researcher might be systematic and detailed when working on an area of interest, yet have difficulty producing organised paperwork or reports.

Organisation helps us create and maintain systems to keep track of materials, information, and time. Yet, an employee with autism may have difficulty determining logical categories or may organise material in a way that seems perfectly logical to them but is confusing to their colleagues. An employee on the spectrum may have difficulty arranging their day so that tasks with a high priority are completed before others. Going over the schedule at the start of the day with a manager or a colleague who understands the department will help an employee learn which types of tasks should come first, as well as how much time should be allotted.

## **6.2 Planning**

Every facet of the workplace involves planning, from daily adjustments to projects and timelines as well as adjustments to them. Time management is an important aspect of planning, as you need to know not only when the work is due, but also how much time you should put aside to complete it. Telling an employee with autism to “make time” in their schedule or to “set aside some time” when assigning work is not sufficient, because they may not be sure where in the schedule they should carve out hours or be aware of how working on this task might impact deadlines for other work. When planning a project, an individual on the spectrum may not consider all of the resources they will need, or how they will get them. For example, creating a report or presentation is not always a straightforward process. Does the receiving audience expect it in a specific format? If so, who do you contact to get a template or sample? If there is no dictated format, who should you contact to confirm how the report should look and what it should contain? What other information besides the data will you need, and who do you contact to get it?

## **6.3 Setting priorities**

Planning efficiently depends on the ability to set priorities for investing time and effort. Individuals on the spectrum typically focus on details at the expense of the “big picture”. Consequently, an employee might be good at analysing a project and laying out the details of what needs to be done, but have difficulty pinpointing those steps that are the most critical, because they view each one as equally important. They also might not recognise that the order in which they complete those parts might affect other aspects of a project, especially if the work will be used by others. On the other hand, an employee might set the proper priorities, but fail to follow up on the less important

items or have trouble maintaining attention to the more mundane aspects of the project. When given a list of tasks to complete, an employee may not be aware of their relative importance, and instead work through the list in sequence. Explaining to an employee on the spectrum why a task or procedure is important will help them learn to prioritise and stay on track. However, some individuals with autism tend to adhere to rules rigidly and may resist adjusting because a priority has changed. They may be confused when asked to do a less important task first to get it out of the way, when there is not enough time to tackle one with a higher priority. When working on setting priorities with an employee on the spectrum, you can provide them with a series of “mini-decisions” to determine if one thing is more important than another:

- Dependencies: Does a task depend on the completion of other tasks?
- Time: Is one task due sooner than another or has someone asked for something to be done immediately?
- Person: Who requested the task?

If people assigning tasks are at different levels within the organisation, the manager should determine whose request the employee will satisfy first.

#### **6.4 Getting started**

To create a plan and prioritise, however, you need to “get started,” which is managed by the executive function of task initiation. An individual on the spectrum, however, might quickly become overwhelmed because they feel the need to create extensive lists of categories, bypassing a rather obvious and easily completed first step.

Organisation and planning involves knowing how to adjust when something does not go as planned. If an individual with autism is persistently late for work, it may be related to a break in the chain of events that they must go through, such as getting up or walking out the door. The employee may also have difficulty starting the process or continuing it when an adjustment needs to be made along the way. Unexpected deviations such as running out of cereal, weather changes, and transit interruptions may make it difficult to move past that part of the routine, because they are unaware of how to work around it.

People on the spectrum are generally very persistent and will follow through on tasks when they are clear about goals, sequence of steps, and resources needed.

#### **6.5 Focusing on details**

An individual on the autism spectrum generally tends to focus mainly on the details and has difficulty “connecting the dots” such as processing facts and bits of information within context. For example, they can recite the names of every character and recount all of the dialogue in a movie but may not be able to give a summary of the plot. Central

coherence is the cognitive style that refers to our ability to pull information from multiple sources into a unified whole, and researchers suggest that this is a key area of weakness for people on the autism spectrum.

People on the spectrum can see the whole, but it might take them longer because of their tendency to process details from the “bottom up,” fitting each piece together until a pattern emerges. To illustrate, most of us build a puzzle by first referring to the picture on the box (the context of what we are building), then assembling the frame, because those pieces are generally the easiest to recognise. Someone on the spectrum, however, may not need to depend on the context of the picture to complete the puzzle. Instead, they will analyse the pieces to see how they relate to each other. An individual on the spectrum might have difficulty focusing on both the overall idea and the small details at the same time, which may affect their ability to plan and prioritise. When working on a project or solving a problem, they may also become overwhelmed when trying to process information from more than one source at a time; this can result in taking an overly narrow focus that may overlook obvious factors or concerns. When working in a team, they may fully understand their individual role, but struggle to understand how they fit into the team’s wider agenda.

Individuals on the spectrum tend to think from the “bottom up,” relying on their exceptional ability to see patterns and find connections in facts and details, which eventually leads to a “bird’s-eye view” of whatever they are studying. To them, every detail is integral to the whole, and their ability to relate multidisciplinary facts and ideas can lead to creative and meaningful insights. Unlike most people, individuals on the spectrum need not rely on a framework or context to process details, so they are less apt to be swayed by convention and assumptions, which makes them excellent proof-readers, error-checkers, and problem-solvers. They may also excel in data analysis, and working with technology, procedures, and programming. Over time an employee can learn to broaden their scope, although a manager or colleague might need to provide context such as “This is important because...” or a cue, such as “As you analyse the figures for this quarter, remember to account for XYZ.” Keep in mind that attention to detail and the ability to perceive what others may have missed are valuable assets in many fields of work!

## **6.6 Providing too much detail**

In the workplace, succinct communication is critical, whether it is summarising a meeting, explaining a process or answering an email. A common complaint about employees on the spectrum is that they provide “too much detail,” resulting in emails or summaries that go on for pages, overly detailed explanations, and rambling answers to

simple questions. While these behaviours all relate to missing the “big picture,” there are differences in how to address them.

Summarising, or extracting the main points, is managed by the executive function of prioritising. However, a colleague on the spectrum may feel every detail is important and be reluctant to leave some out or may omit key points when asked to condense. For example, at a staff meeting where each person has two minutes to provide an update on the project, a colleague spends ten minutes. After the meeting, he is told that in the future he should spend no more than two minutes and include five bullet points. At the next meeting, he speaks for two minutes, but leaves out all the salient information. A more effective strategy involves working with the employee one-on-one to help him figure out the most important information that he needs to convey and how to present it in the allotted time.

The cognitive world of individuals on the autism spectrum is made up of interconnected facts and details that are part of more complex mental models. This makes it challenging for an employee with autism to provide a simple or direct explanation, because in his mind they may be many contingencies; skipping the details is equivalent to ignoring part of the solution. If he works in a technical field, understanding what level of detail is appropriate or what degree of accuracy is sufficient can also be a problem.

This may be due, in part, to theory of mind-not looking at things from the listener or recipient’s point of view and considering how much information they need. Being clear about the length of explanation and level of detail you expect will help a colleague with autism stay within those parameters. Similarly, it may be difficult for the employee to give a definitive answer without a lot of qualification, so explain what type of answer you will need, and give him the opportunity to express any concerns in writing.

Prioritising and summarising information into a general answer may be difficult for an individual on the spectrum to do quickly, since they may need to process the pertinent details first, before they can formulate an answer. For example, when you ask an employee, “Do you think you can get this done by the end of the day?” they might think out loud, going through their entire schedule as they try to process the question, so you might need to give them some leeway while they get to the answer.

## **7. Time Management**

### **7.1 Awareness of time**

The demands of the workplace are constantly changing. Effective time management involves accurately estimating how much time a task will take, deciding how to divide your time throughout the day, and how to meet deadlines. Some people on the autistic spectrum are very organised and have no trouble meeting deadlines, while others may have difficulties with scheduling, because they do not have an inner clock that allows

them to accurately sense the passage of time. For example, when asked to do something in an hour, or whether that time frame is reasonable.

Some deadlines are set in stone, others are approximate. Meetings may start on time or be delayed. The workday might end at 5pm for most employees, yet last much later for managers who are up against a deadline. People on the autism spectrum generally consider time absolute; they tend to be punctual, assuming a meeting will begin at the exact time and may become anxious when it does not. Similarly, they may expect to leave at the usual quitting time, when the rest of the team feels the need to stay later to complete a time-critical task.

The context of time is an important factor in planning, because the time a task requires must fit into the amount of time available. When assigning a task to an employee on the spectrum, being specific about deadlines and time frames, such as “by three o’clock Thursday afternoon” will be less confusing than “by the end of the week.” Providing the employee with an estimate of how much time they should set aside, as well as the priority of the task; will help them know how to fit it into their schedule.

## **7.2 “Simple” tasks**

Another aspect of time management is determining how thoroughly you can do a task, given the amount of time you have; the scope and depth of an assignment will vary with the time frame. Most employees on the spectrum want their work to be at a high level of quality, and they might put more time and effort into a task than is necessary. Because of their perfectionism and attention to detail, they may take an excessive amount of time to complete tasks, even “simple” ones. This is often related to an employee not understanding the context of the request. If a task should take no longer than an hour, specify what the work should encompass (scope) and the level of detail (depth) you expect, given the time frame.

Keep in mind that a task that seems “simple” to you, may not be to an individual with Autism. Any task encompasses input (the request itself), processing (how the request was interpreted), and output (the format and content of the work delivered), and if the employee is not clear about any of these, he may get “stuck.”

## **7.3 Processing speed and learning**

Processing speed is not an executive function per se or related to intelligence, although processing speed does affect a person’s ability to sort through information quickly, such as keeping up with the back and forth flow of conversations. Employees on the spectrum with slow processing speed may appear to be focused, but not get much done. Factors that may hamper their ability to process information include being overwhelmed by too much information at once, needing more time to make decisions or give answers, and having trouble executing instructions when multiple requests are made at the same

time. On the other hand, processing speed is affected by one's knowledge base and experience, and some employees with autism may be able to process certain types of nonverbal information, such as computer code, diagrams, and technical data more quickly than their colleagues.

Individuals on the spectrum may be perceived as unmotivated or lazy when they take longer to initiate or complete simple tasks or respond to a request.

Individuals on the spectrum learn through direct experience and may have to do something repeatedly before it makes sense. They tend to be visual thinkers, and often absorb something new by analysing the details or individual parts that interest them the most and seeing how they fit together. It might take time to integrate those details into a global concept that they can visualise and implement, but once they figure it out, their understanding will be at a high level and they will be able to work very efficiently, because they have already integrated many different contingencies, relationships, and exceptions.

#### **7.4 Transitioning**

Throughout the workday, we constantly “shift gears” as we move between tasks, engage in conversations, begin a meeting or manage interruptions. People on the autistic spectrum can have trouble with transitioning and getting “stuck in a gear,” because they are very deeply involved in what they are currently doing. They may have an intense form of attention, called hyper focus and may need extra time to pull their focus away from the task at hand and refocus it on something different.

For example, a manager assigns three tasks for the day to an employee on the spectrum, with the expectation that each task will take about two hours- a total of six hours. However, at the end of six hours, the work is still not completed. Although the employee can complete each task within the allotted two hours, they might need time in between tasks to transition from one mental set to another, especially if the tasks are not related. An individual that has issues with transitioning will often insist on extending a discussion after the subject has changed, because they are not able to move quickly from one topic to the next. Disengaging from one activity, changing gears, and focusing on another activity requires large amounts of energy and effort. Give an employee on the spectrum a break between tasks so they can fully extract themselves from one task before starting on another. Sometimes physical movement, such as a quick walk down the hall, can help the employee make a mental break from a completed task, so they can start on the next one.

When deadlines are not met, analysing the symptoms of difficulties with time management and getting feedback from the employee as to what might be the problem is key to finding a solution. Ask specific questions, such as “Once you completed this task, how long did it take you to get started on the next one?” or “Are there specific times of the day or types of tasks when shifting gears is the most challenging for you?”

Another type of transitioning in the workplace involves accepting a deviation from what was expected and having the flexibility to adapt one's plans when necessary. Routines and predictability provide structure and security for individuals with autism, so they may have transitioning issues associated with changes in routine or environment, such as planned activities that are cancelled or rescheduled, or organisational, procedural, or location changes. An employee may also become overwhelmed when multiple people assign tasks, because they might assume that everything needs to be worked on simultaneously, or they are uncertain of how to deal with conflicting priorities.

### **7.5 Hyper focus**

Hyper focus is a style of thinking that is very deep, concentrated, and pleasurable to the person doing it. When in a career-related area, hyper focus often translates into excellent problem-solving skills and subject-matter expertise- both highly valued in the workplace. Many individuals with autism consider themselves "information junkies" because of their intense interest in a narrow area and their ability to research, absorb, and retrieve vast amounts of highly detailed or technical information. However, while hyper focus can be a strength, it often presents challenges when an employee needs to transition quickly between tasks, change routines, or multitask. Individuals with autism tend to become absorbed in tasks that they find stimulating and rewarding; in fact, most people can become "lost" in an activity where they feel enjoyment, concentration and deep involvement. You can help an employee productively use his ability to hyper focus by assigning tasks that are in his area of expertise. Depending on the individual, they may prefer to alternate them with other tasks or group them together, so they can work uninterrupted for a longer period.

### **7.6 Multitasking**

Many workplaces assume that employees who multitask are more productive but switching back and forth through tasks forces the brain to shift focus and rapidly turn rules on and off, which drains one's energy and can impact overall performance. Individuals on the autistic spectrum can have challenges with transitioning, because they may be so absorbed in one task that it takes great cognitive effort to pull themselves out of it and turn their attention to something else. If asked to multitask, they will be subject to many more transitions than if allowed to finish one task before working on another, which may make them less productive of the time needed to switch focus.

Individuals on the spectrum can excel at accuracy and quality and are most productive when they can complete one task, no matter how small, before moving to the next. Helping the employee group "simultaneous" tasks into a series of smaller related sequential tasks may reduce problems with transitioning and the tendency to hyper focus.

## **7.7 Interruptions**

Workplace interruptions, such as phone calls, emails, and impromptu conversations, also involve transitioning and serial tasking, because you are putting the incomplete portion of a current task on hold momentarily, then picking up where you left off.

Although people with autism tend to remember a great deal of information, many of them have poor working memory. An employee on the spectrum may find it difficult to continue a task that was temporarily put on hold, because they do not have a “pause” button and may lose the thread of what they were doing when interrupted, and they may need to start the task from the beginning.

## **8. Work Quality**

### **8.1 Working Memory**

Employees on the spectrum take pride in their work, so if you assigned a task verbally and it has not been completed (or it is not what you expect), it is important to find out the cause: Were the instructions not clear? Do they have difficulty planning how to proceed? Or did they forget what you said? Individuals on the autistic spectrum have an excellent memory for detail, but some may have problems with working memory (such as keeping ideas in mind while using them to complete tasks and solve problems).

A person with poor working memory may become overwhelmed if they are given too much information at once and may not be able to follow multi-step verbal instructions. For example, if you tell an employee five things they need to do on a project, the less recent ones may not be retained, and they may just remember the last thing they heard. If an employee asks obvious questions after receiving instructions, it may be due to poor working memory, rather than not paying attention.

### **8.2 Learning from prior assignments**

Individuals on the spectrum may not intuitively learn from prior assignments, because they are more likely to focus on what is different than on what is the same. They do not think of tasks or assignments as template-based, where there is a similarity between something they have done before and what they need to do now. However, an employee with autism can learn to generalise if they are given a framework or examples of what the work product should look like, so that they have a means for comparison. Give guidance, stressing the similarities and suggesting how to deal with any differences, so they can incorporate that as a rule for future tasks of the same type. It is always important to make sure that any employee is in the appropriate job, and a person on the spectrum may not be the right candidate for a job that requires constant decision-making or where every assignment is completely different with little guidance. However, they may be able to handle these demands in areas that are inherently more structured,

such as engineering, programming, finance, and technology, or one where they have an in-depth expertise such as medicine, research, law and filmmaking.

### **8.3 Self-monitoring**

A person with strong self-monitoring will build confidence and need less direct supervision, as his perception of how he is doing matches the quality of his work. Because people on the spectrum struggle with monitoring and assessing their progress in context, an employee may not know if an assignment is on track and he may not feel confident in his work. On the other hand, he may be surprised by a poor evaluation or negative feedback, if he assumed that his work was meeting expectations. An important component of self-monitoring is paying attention to one's own "self-talk" or inner voice; that is, what we think or say to ourselves while solving problems, working on tasks or going through a mental check list. For employees on the spectrum, self-talk may strengthen their ability to self-monitor by helping them internalise the guidance they receive from managers and colleagues. It can serve many functions when working through an assignment, such as defining the nature and demands of a task, maintaining focus and generating a game plan, using a strategy, detecting and correcting errors, and dealing with any problems that arise.

Helping an employee engage in self-talk as a means of monitoring his work can be as simple as suggesting he silently talk himself through a task by using step-by-step reminders at each phase. Self-talk should be direct, specific, and positive. For example, when writing a memo, an employee might give himself silent reminders, such as "First I need to pick out the most important and put that at the top." It is interesting to note that, although one can use either "I" or "you" when self-talking, current research suggests that using "you" tends to be more objective and effective, similar to giving someone else helpful feedback or advice.

### **8.4 Feedback**

Most people know if they are on the right track by paying attention to internal checkpoints, but an employee on the spectrum may need external feedback from a manager or colleague to be assured they are doing something correctly, or because they are not fully confident in the final output required. The employee's anxiety about not wanting to be wrong may also play a part, which can intensify if he asks for feedback and is not sure when he will receive it. If a manager sees that an employee's work product is in the right direction, then a constant request for feedback may be related to anxiety or confidence, and it is appropriate to set a time to meet that is not immediate. Questions that indicate a lack of clarity, however, need to be addressed as soon as possible, because an individual with autism may not be able to continue any part of the project if a smaller part of it is not clear. Keep in mind that an individual with poor self-monitoring might think his work is on target when it is not and may resist advice or overreact to

criticism. However, if a request for feedback is initiated by the employee himself, it generally indicates that he is seeking help, advice or reassurance.

For some people on the spectrum a structured schedule of for feedback sessions would help eliminate the uncertainty of when feedback is coming.

### **8.5 Attitude vs Aptitude**

Our impression of an employee's attitude towards work often influences how well we think they are doing in the job. It's a natural assumption, when an employee does only what he has been asked to do or insists on doing things "his way," that he does not care about the job or has a "bad attitude." However, when dealing with an individual on the spectrum, these assumptions may not be warranted, because his attitude and behaviour might be due to some of the challenges of being on the spectrum. Individuals on the autism spectrum may have difficulty understanding the politics of the workplace regarding advancing one's career and being proactive: that the workplace is an environment where, if you have finished an assignment, you are expected to ask for more work. Because of their tendency toward literal thinking and missing the "big picture," they may not anticipate what other work needs to be done. Consequently, they might appear to lack initiative, which can affect their chances for advancement. Conversely, they may believe certain work should be done and go ahead and do it without asking, not realising that management is holding off on certain projects for reasons not apparent to them. Although professionals on the spectrum may not seem to be motivated by promotions or a bigger pay check, they do care very much about their jobs, and want to perform well and be recognised for their contributions.

A person on the spectrum, however, who thinks literally, may simply conclude that once he completes the task he was asked to do, he should just wait for his next assignment. Similarly, an employee with time management issues may think he is being productive when he rushes to do a week's worth of work in two days, then sits with nothing to do for the rest of the week. A supervisor, seeing an employee sit idly, is likely to think, "Why is he doing nothing?" and might conclude that the individual is wasting time or not doing his job.

A team member on the spectrum who has been assigned a task that depends on work from another team member may sit and wait for that work to be completed, because they do not understand the bigger picture that other team tasks may be dependent on the completion of their work. They may not be aware that it is appropriate to ask when they can expect the work, offer assistance, or explain the situation to the team leader.

### **8.6 Inflexibility**

Inflexibility is part of being on the spectrum; an employee with autism may appear to do what they want, rather than what they have been asked to do. Cognitive flexibility is the

executive function that allows us to do shift thinking or attention in response to context and adapt to changing conditions. An employee who struggles with flexibility may have difficulties with:

- Interpreting information in multiple ways and understanding that there is more than one way to accomplish a task
- Using new strategies to solve problems
- Changing routines
- Stopping one activity to begin another
- Accepting help from others

Black-and-white thinking is associated with lack of flexibility, as is the rigid adherence to rules and routines. Flexible thinking requires the ability to “unlearn” old ways of doing things, but many individuals on the spectrum resist change in general. For example, an employee may appear to be stubborn because they get stuck on a small detail or part of a routine and resists advice, or refuses to use a workaround solution; so, what appears as inflexibility is really their difficulty transitioning to a new way of thinking or different expectation.

## **8.7 Distractions**

There are several reasons why an individual on the spectrum may take frequent breaks, such as the need to physically move about to aid in transitioning. An employee may also not know how to fill unstructured time, and walk around because he has nothing to do, or take breaks too frequently because he is not aware of the passage of time. Also, an employee struggling to begin or initiate a task but afraid to ask directly for help, may be looking for a way to get attention from a manager or colleague to engage their help in getting started. Sensitivity to the noises of the workplace can be a major distraction to an employee on the spectrum. For example, the whirring of the photocopier might cause them to lose focus, so they may frequently leave their desk to escape the noise.

## **9. Emotional Regulation**

### **9.1 Anxiety**

Anxiety creates one of the biggest challenges for individuals on the spectrum. Many of the workplace situations that cause anxiety have already been mentioned but it is worth noting some of them:

- Not understanding what is expected of him
- Not operating as quickly or as efficiently as expected
- Receiving demands from multiple people at the same time
- Receiving criticism.

An employee may also worry about not doing a good job or being terminated, especially if they are new to the workforce or have been terminated in the past. In addition, an individual on the spectrum may feel anxious when someone exhibits strong emotions or when they anticipate their own loss of emotional control. Sensory challenges, such as being exposed to excessive noise, harsh office lighting, and other sensory inputs can also raise anxiety levels. An employee with autism may have difficulty interpreting their own emotions and might not recognise that they are becoming overwhelmed during the early stages, so it is important to intervene if you notice that the person is becoming anxious or agitated. Additionally, when an individual with autism worries over something work-related, they may not have the same ability as their colleagues to de-stress.

Social gatherings often are the source of anxiety for many people on the spectrum; they may want to avoid unintentionally breaking hidden curriculum rules but may have trouble determining which rules apply.

## **9.2 Dealing with change**

Dealing with change in routines or schedules can also make individuals on the spectrum anxious. However, for people on the spectrum, change can be challenging to deal with and deeply unsettling, as it is harder for them to understand that, in the workplace, things do not flow in a natural order or as expected. Changes in schedules can be problematic as well. Most people can easily adjust to a 15-minute delay in the start of a meeting, using the time to answer emails or get another cup of coffee, then leaving the meeting early if there a scheduling conflict due to the change. However, handling this seemingly small change in one's day is not as easy for an individual on the spectrum. If transitioning from one activity to another is a challenge for the employee, they will now have to face two more transitions: shifting to an interim activity, then shifting back to begin the meeting. They may also become anxious if they have scheduled a task to start at a specific time after the meeting, which will now have to be delayed. Most likely they will enter the meeting complaining about the delay, leaving their colleagues to wonder why are they making such a big deal over nothing?

If more substantial change is involved within your organisation such as relocation to another office, an employee on the spectrum may be out of sorts for a while, and more susceptible to sensory overload, such as office background noise. They may also struggle with tasks that are normally easy for them, until they make the adjustment. To help an employee cope with the change, address it in advance, providing as much information as you can. They may also ask for information that might seem inconsequential to you, but keep in mind that they are most likely trying to reconcile how they will deal with all of the differences they perceive, so work with the employee to focus on what is not changing.

Because of their resistance to change, an employee on the spectrum may stubbornly refuse when asked to modify a process or procedure, especially if they think the request is arbitrary or random. Keep in mind that they may not understand how their work fits into the "big picture" or how it will be used and they therefore might interpret the

change as not relevant or feel that it will lead to errors. Individuals with autism generally respond best to solid evidence or reasoning, so explaining why the change is needed will be more effective than saying, “Do it because I asked you to.”

For people on the autism spectrum, routines play a major role in establishing control or managing stress when they are anxious or under pressure at work. They might get irritated when their routine is altered, because it means that they must prepare again or relearn something. Although it is generally beneficial to challenge an employee to try new things, change just for the sake of change may not have the intended positive effect if the employee is on the spectrum.

### **9.3 Emotional control**

When situations such as changes or interruptions upset or frustrate an individual on the spectrum, they may have difficulty regulating their behaviour or controlling their impulses because of challenges with the executive function of emotional regulation.

When the emotional regulation of an individual on the spectrum is weakened, it affects their self-control in general, and may make it difficult to avoid the cumulative effect of small things that grab their emotional attention. Stress, frustration, and anger in reaction to interruptions, a request to change something, or thinking about an incident that took place earlier in the day, can all contribute to the loss of emotional control.

Difficulties with emotional regulation may also result in an overreaction to others’ emotions or a distortion of the magnitude of a situation. An employee on the spectrum may have a tendency to “lose it” when trying to multitask, or when supervisors set contradictory priorities. Sensory overload, such as too noisy an environment may also build frustration and cause the employee to become upset.

Sometimes the emotional reaction of an employee may seem to come out of nowhere, leaving colleagues to ask, “What’s wrong?” An individual with autism may have difficulty identifying their emotions and even more trouble verbalising them. They may not be able to discern subtle differences in their emotional state and may interpret high levels of any negative emotion, including anxiety, as anger. Keep in mind that when someone on the spectrum says that he does not know what he is feeling, it is most likely a literal statement. When an employee on the spectrum gets upset, frustrated or angry, chiding them or commenting that they are making a “big deal out of nothing” or telling him to “calm down” does little to keep him from escalating. Give him time to recoup and reregulate by suggesting they take a brief walk or return to his office. Later, you can calmly discuss the situation and what can be done to prevent it from happening again in the future.

### **9.4 Emotional exhaustion**

Some people with autism put in a great deal of effort trying to “appear normal,” and attempting to hide behaviours that are a part of the individual’s neurological makeup. This is called cloaking, and it can be exhausting for the individual. For example, an employee who has been criticised in the past for excessive smiling or an unusual tone of voice may need to monitor himself whenever he is in meetings. Individuals who engage in stress-relieving repetitive movements, such as excessive chair rocking, may work to

suppress these behaviours, and end up adding to the stress they feel. Providing a space where an individual with autism can express these behaviours in private or allowing them to take a short break may help them remain more relaxed and productive throughout the day. Individuals with autism may become exhausted from many aspects of doing their job, such as focusing intensely on their work or handling frequent interruptions or demands from multiple people at the same time. When dealing with change as discussed earlier an employee on the spectrum may be drained by the mental energy necessary to undo prior learning and formulate a new plan, as well as dealing with any anxiety resulting from anticipation of the change. An employee on the spectrum who already has challenges with emotional regulation may find it even more difficult to “keep it together” when he is emotionally depleted, so it is important that he has a way of removing himself from a stressful situation, such as taking a short walk or going to an empty office. Provide scheduled breaks to avoid mental fatigue, including getting up for a drink of water or rotating through varied tasks.

### **9.5 Shutting down and withdrawing**

People on the autism spectrum tend to have a hypersensitivity to experiences, when everything in their environment can be overwhelming. This is often due to sensitivity to sensory input, such as lights, noises, and smells. Emotional experiences can be intensified as well, leaving the individual feeling overpowered, anxious and fearful. When a person on the spectrum shuts down, he experiences it as a brief interlude when his brain stops processing, causing him to “zone out.” He may not be able to focus on the conversation and may even look blank, frozen, or confused.

Keep in mind that when an individual on the spectrum shuts down, it is a physical response that is not under his control. For example, when the sun is too bright, you close or shade your eyes- to resist shielding them from the sun would be very uncomfortable. When you see an employee shutting down, a natural reaction is to speak more loudly or gesture at the person to get his attention or try to snap him out of it, which generally has little effect. Give him a few minutes to regain his focus.

### **9.6 Inflexible schedules**

Although the corporate world is changing because of globalisation, and many companies conduct business across multiple time zones, the mindset of a standardised “9 to 5, Monday to Friday” work environment is still the norm. For employees on the spectrum who get emotionally exhausted from the demands of the workplace, sustaining the level of energy needed to get their work done for five days may wear them down to the point where they are less productive. Additionally, this sustained but emotionally draining effort may make it difficult to stay on an even keel emotionally. Allowing an employee on the spectrum the opportunity to adjust his schedule so that he arrives and leaves earlier or later than his colleagues may help him avoid the social interactions that start and end the day in many workplaces, or the stress of travelling during peak commuting times. If the employee repeatedly asks to work from home, he may need a break from

the physical work environment in general (although not from the work itself). For example, a researcher working on complicated or lengthy reports may work from home one day a week to avoid the constant interruption at work. Keep in mind that although an employee on the spectrum may perform best when there is flexibility in the way he does his job, once an adjustment is settled upon, it should be implemented in a structured way. For example, if the employee needs one day away from the interruptions of the office, designating a specific day of the week and what work can be completed within that time frame is more effective than merely instructing him to “Take a day off to work at home.”

### **9.7 The right person for the right job**

Every job has a social component and a work performance component, and addressing the issue in these areas for an employee on the autism spectrum might lead a manager to ask, “Is this the right person for the right job?” In many respects, the answer is no different for someone on the spectrum than it is for someone who is not: are the requirements of this job in alignment with the competency and skills of the individual? “Can the employee’s challenges related to the autism spectrum be reasonably adjusted?”

Autism truly is a “spectrum” of strengths and challenges of various natures and degrees, so there is no single “profile” that fits all individuals. There are people on the spectrum who are quite outgoing and in many respects effective communicators, and those who work best when limited social interaction is required. There are people on the spectrum who are highly organised and detailed-oriented, and those who are not. Others may struggle with the flexibility required for ever-changing schedules, a high amount of team interactions, and shifting project requirements and priorities. When a manager notices challenges within a particular area that impede the job performance of an employee with autism, a natural reaction is to assume that job is not a good fit, such as a customer service position, where an employee may have to deal with dissatisfied customers or simultaneously listen to customers while logging details of the issue into a computer. As with all employees, the right job for the individual’s expertise is critical to having a successful employment relationship. Employees with autism can be invaluable contributors in all types of jobs; however, it does not benefit the employee or the employer to have someone in a job where they will continue to struggle, no matter what adjustments and management strategies are implemented. That said, sometimes it may be necessary to assess if the employee’s challenges related to autism significantly impact his ability to meet the essential requirements of the job, and if so, determine how to deal with it. If you determine the employee does not meet the essential requirements of the job, take an inventory of the employee’s skill set and look elsewhere in your organisation for the employee in question for an appropriate position for the employee in question. If no other appropriate position exists, be sure to follow the stated policies and procedures your company has in place for terminating employees and explain to the employee the gaps in skill sets resulting in your decision.

## 10. Useful Resources

### 10.1 Useful Links

<https://resourcesforautism.org.uk/>

[https://www.autism.org.uk/?gclid=Cj0KCQjwiILsBRCGARIsAHKQWLPPP\\_LaOdQXia\\_JPdsFwzYNW1X3maXm-dp7\\_1caWNgUATH2-0y-N48aAo8yEALw\\_wcB](https://www.autism.org.uk/?gclid=Cj0KCQjwiILsBRCGARIsAHKQWLPPP_LaOdQXia_JPdsFwzYNW1X3maXm-dp7_1caWNgUATH2-0y-N48aAo8yEALw_wcB)

<https://www.specialistautismservices.org/useful-websites/>

<https://sites.cardiff.ac.uk/warc/contact-us/useful-links/>

<https://sites.cardiff.ac.uk/warc/information-for-parents-and-adults/parents-individuals-asd/useful-links/>

<https://www.autismspeaks.org/>

<https://www.autism-anglia.org.uk/useful-links>

<https://www.gosh.nhs.uk/conditions-and-treatments/conditions-we-treat/autism>

<https://www.family-action.org.uk/what-we-do/children-families/send/send-info/useful-links/>