

Briefing

Employment adjustments for people who have a diagnosis of Autism, including Asperger Syndrome

Abridged content for sample purposes

This briefing is not an authoritative statement of the law. While we have made every effort to ensure that the information we have provided is correct, Business Disability Forum cannot accept any responsibility or liability.

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Introduction

What is Autism?

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability.

People with autism may experience difficulties in understanding and interpreting other people's verbal and non-verbal behaviour, motivations and expectations and can find social interaction confusing. Imaginative activities can also be difficult for someone with autism to understand – this can include irony and subtle verbal humour, which people with autism may interpret to have literal meaning. People with autism may also experience sensory sensitivities to light, sound, taste and touch which can be distracting and potentially painful for some.

Around 700,000 people in the UK have a diagnosis of autistic spectrum conditions.

Asperger Syndrome

Asperger Syndrome is one type of autism diagnosis. People with Asperger Syndrome usually have good language skills but can still find social communication difficult for example, reading facial expressions. People with Asperger Syndrome are often of average or above average intelligence.

A diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome and autism usually occurs in childhood, although some people may not be diagnosed until they are in adulthood.

Many people with autism often have highly specialised skills and qualifications. It is believed that over 300,000 people with autism are of average or above average intellectual ability - yet still only 20-25 per cent in the UK are employed.

About Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity is a “new” term originally used by communities of people with autism to move away from the medical model of disability. Now embraced by other communities, it is often used to refer to a wide variety of conditions such as autism, Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs) such as dyslexia and specific language impairments. Specific Learning Difficulties are not discussed in this document and are the topic of a separate Briefing.

Throughout this Briefing, ‘people with autism’ will refer to people on the autism spectrum, including people with a diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome.

Employment and people with Autism

People with autism want to work and are therefore a substantial source of untapped talent.

There is a misconception that people with autism cannot cope with employment or are only able to undertake routine, methodical jobs. However, with the correct training and support they are capable of developing their potential in employment like anyone else.

Many people who have autism will be protected under the Equality Act 2010 but may not consider themselves to be disabled. Nevertheless, employers have a legal obligation to make reasonable adjustments and not to discriminate against employees who might be facing barriers at work because of a disability or long-term condition – even if it has not been diagnosed as a disability or accepted as such by the individual.

Employers should be aware that non-visible disabilities, such as autism, mean that specific barriers can be less obvious. This means reasonable adjustments may be harder for employers to determine and put in place. Employers can seek advice from Work Coaches and Disability Employment Advisers at Jobcentre Plus who refer people with SpLDs for positions. There are also organisations which offer specialist advice and appropriate disability awareness training to help employers ensure that their recruitment process accounts for barriers faced by those with autism – see page 29 for further details.

Employment adjustments for people who have a diagnosis of Autism

It is important that employers have an honest conversation with new employees and their support staff about the barriers that may be present in the workplace and what simple measures might help. The best practice approach is to make adjustments for anyone who needs them to work effectively and contribute fully to your organisation.

When making adjustments most employers will want to know what is 'reasonable'. Doing what seems fair for the individual and others who work for you given the size and resources of your organisation is a good place to start.

This guidance will help you deliver best practice.

- You might need to treat people differently to treat them fairly.
- Don't make assumptions about what people can and can't do.
- Ensure that everyone knows who is responsible for doing what and when it must be done.
- Involve the individual in generating solutions and respect their right to confidentiality.

For more detail on the law and making reasonable adjustments contact **Business Disability Forum's Advice Service** on telephone number **+44-(0)-20-7403-3020** or by email **advice@businessdisabilityforum.org.uk** or see the Briefing on The Equality Act 2010.

Reasonable adjustments and best practice

Do not make assumptions about what someone can or cannot do.

A person with autism may have particular talents as well as difficulties, just like anyone in the workplace. For example, the person may be a good problem solver and have great attention to detail. Most people with autism can support with the development of coping strategies that enable them not only to learn and work effectively but also to adopt a fresh approach to problem solving.

Consider the skills, abilities and aspirations of each individual and implement appropriate and reasonable support so that everyone can maximise their potential; this can have a positive effect on an organisation as it unlocks different ways of tackling problems and making decisions.

The impact of autism varies, as do the strategies that help people with autism overcome barriers in employment. Adjustments may well be simple and inexpensive and they make good business sense. Without adjustments, good candidates may not apply for jobs and good employees could be lost.

Precise requirements vary from one individual to another, so you should always ask the person what they need. By talking to employees both at the beginning of employment but also regularly about their work going forward, employers are better able to identify any difficulties that could be attributable to an employee who has autism.

Recruitment and selection

Candidates who have autism may be prevented from demonstrating their abilities and potential by conventional recruitment processes.

You need to make sure that you do not discriminate against a disabled job applicant during the recruitment process. You may also have to make reasonable adjustments.

It is important not to make assumptions about what the applicant can or cannot do; instead, ask applicants about any reasonable adjustments they may require. If you use external recruitment agencies, ask for evidence that they make reasonable adjustments for disabled applicants and work to the standards that underpin this guidance.

Employers should be aware that some potential employees with autism may have in place or need to put in place effective support from a specialist job coach. Local employment support providers can be contracted by Jobcentre Plus staff to support people before, during and after recruitment. The Access to Work (AtW) scheme can help fund adjustments, for example adaptations to equipment.

For more information about who can use Access to Work, visit: **GOV.UK - Looking for work if you're disabled**

Further information on best practice for recruitment and selection is also available from the Government's Disability Confident scheme, visit: **disabilityconfident.campaign.gov.uk** or contact **Business Disability Forum's Advice Service** on telephone number **+44-(0)-20-7403-3020** or by email **advice@businessdisabilityforum.org.uk**.

Remember that it is unlawful to ask questions about health or a disability prior to a job offer under the Equality Act 2010 unless the question relates directly to an intrinsic aspect of the role for which the person is applying, or is for the purpose of making reasonable adjustments to the application or interview process. Questions about disability can still be asked on equal opportunities monitoring forms.

Job descriptions

Job descriptions can inadvertently place unnecessary barriers in the way of people with autism. When drawing up job descriptions:

- Provide them in easy read format. Ensure that the words or language used cannot be misinterpreted and that all sentences are clear.
- Distinguish between essential and desirable requirements and ensure you present an accurate picture of the job and the key skills actually required, e.g. the essential criteria of a receptionist are to answer the telephone and meet and greet visitors; a desirable skill may be to take notes of meetings.
- Concentrate on what needs to be achieved in a job rather than how it is achieved. People with autism may do things in a different way, e.g. a person with autism may ask questions to be repeated and rephrased many times to ensure that they have processed information correctly.
- Do not ask for educational qualifications that do not relate to the position. This will exclude people with autism who have not been successful in education.
- Accept completed application forms in alternative formats and appreciate that a written application may have been completed with support.

There is no requirement to alter the fundamental nature of a job so that a candidate with a disability can do it.

Content has been removed for sample purposes. Pages 11 to 30 are available in the full booklet.

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