**Business Disability Forum**

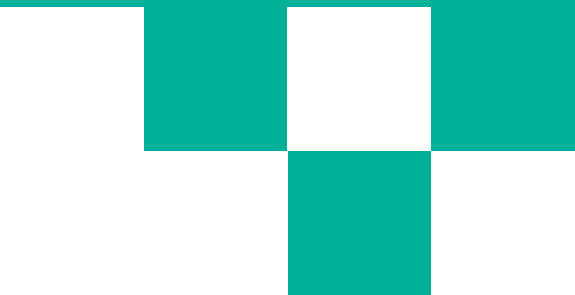**Building disability-smart organisations**

# Supporting employees and candidates with autism

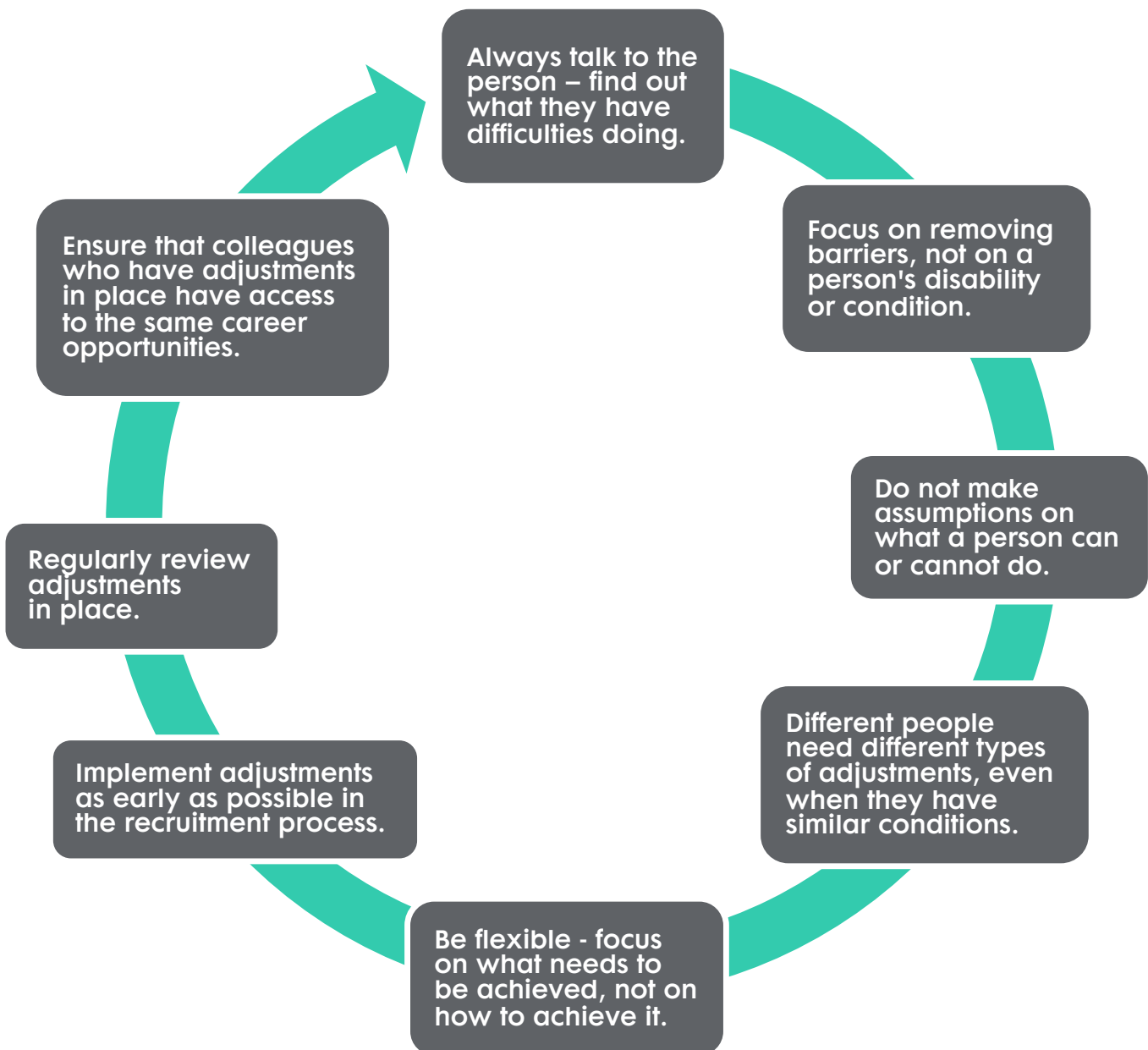Sponsored by

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Abridged content for sample purposes

# In this guide:

# Making adjustments — top tips

Always talk to the person – find out what they have difficulties doing.

Focus on removing barriers, not on a person's disability or condition.

Do not make assumptions on what a person can or cannot do.

Different people need different types of adjustments, even when they have similar conditions.

Be flexible - focus on what needs to be achieved, not on how to achieve it.

Implement adjustments as early as possible in the recruitment process.

Regularly review adjustments in place.

Ensure that colleagues who have adjustments in place have access to the same career opportunities.

# Introduction

# This guide aims to give a general introduction to how autism might impact someone at work and provide good practice tips on how to support them.

Diagnosis, treatment and cultural perceptions of autism vary between countries. Similarly, legal requirements will also differ: in some countries, autism may not be legally recognised as a disability whereas in other countries, people with autism may be protected by local legislation.

Ensuring that you support your candidates and employees with autism will help you create a more diverse workforce. It's often the case that when a Line Manager is confident managing a person with autism they become more effective managers for all employees.

## Language

### Talking about autism

There is no single term that everyone prefers to describe a person with autism. However, there has been a shift towards more positive and assertive language, particularly among autistic people themselves. In practice this can include terms such as 'on the autism spectrum'. Some adults with autism prefer to use the identity-first term 'autistic' whilst others prefer to use the term 'autism spectrum disorder' (ASD).

## Talking about disability

In this guide, we use the term 'disabilities' in the sense of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD) [1] ratified by over 175 countries. The UN CRPD Article 1 provides a definition for 'persons with disabilities':

**"Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others."**

This definition is broad enough to cover a wide range of physical and mental impairments including autism.

## Talking about adjustments

Adjustments (in some countries referred to as 'accommodations') remove or reduce the effect of the barriers experienced by candidates and employees with disabilities.

Examples of adjustments might include providing a ramp as an alternative to stairs or an electronic version of paper document so that an employee with a visual impairment can use screen reader software to access the information. Working hours and locations can be made flexible, and managers can agree different ways to communicate with their employees e.g. over the phone, via email, face-to-face or in writing.

These are small changes that can remove barriers that stop someone from doing their job and can support good performance. In this guide, we refer to these types of changes as 'adjustments'.

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[1] United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

# 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 are also difficult for them to understand – this can include irony and subtle verbal humour, which people with autism may interpret to have literal meaning. Some may experience anxiety or stress when having to change their set routine, even when those changes seem minor to others. People with autism may also experience sensory sensitivities to light, sound, taste and touch which can be distracting and potentially painful.

According to the World Health Organisation [2], the prevalence of autism spectrum disorders is estimated to be one person in 160 globally. This prevalence is higher in some countries: 1.1% of the UK population and 1.7% of the USA's population; however, figures are yet unknown in many low and middle-income countries.

# Asperger Syndrome

Asperger Syndrome is a type of autism. People with Asperger Syndrome usually have good language skills but can still find social communication difficult; for example, reading facial expressions.

A diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome or 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.

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[2] Autism spectrum disorders and other developmental disorders, World Health Organization, 2013

## About neurodiversity

Neurodiversity is a "new" term originally used by communities of people with autism in an attempt 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, Tourette Syndrome, ADHD or dyslexia. 'Neurodiversity' can also describe people who experience a change in cognitive functioning though injury, accident or illness. For example, stroke, epilepsy or brain injury. These other conditions are not discussed in this document.

## Internal and external sources of help

There may be sources of help and advice that you can access for detailed information about autism in your country. Internally, you should speak to your own manager or to your local Human Resources (HR) team. Your organisation may also have diversity and inclusion officers or a disability liaison officer you can ask for help and advice.

Externally, there may be local organisations that can provide you with expert advice and information about autism in your country. The International Labour Organisation's Global Business and Disability Network's website [3] contains some useful information about local requirements and the availability of disability support in countries all over the world.
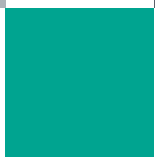
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[3] ILO GBDN website: businessanddisability.org/country-profiles/
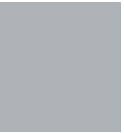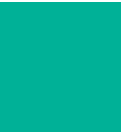
# Employing people with autism

Content has been removed for sample purposes. Pages 11 to 31 are available in the full booklet.

**Business Disability Forum**

# Contact us

**Business Disability Forum
Nutmeg House
60 Gainsford Street
London
SE1 2NY**

**Tel: +44-(0)20-7403-3020
Fax: +44-(0)20-7403-0404
Email: enquiries@businessdisabilityforum.org.uk**

**Web: businessdisabilityforum.org.uk**

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