

Myths

Employment

This resource highlights common myths relating to autism and employment.

Hiring an autistic person creates a health and safety issue

A broad assumption that an autistic employee will be a health and safety concern, creates an unnecessary and discriminatory barrier to accessing employment and work experience. Autistic people may have differences in their communication, socialisation and perception of sensory input but these differences can often be managed with minimal adjustment. For example, communicating in a more direct manner, or allowing the use of headphones, fidgets or active seating. Employment can be made more sustainable by having a conversation with the employee to find, and implement suitable accommodations.

An autistic person may also have challenges with sudden changes or disruptions to their routines or plans. Depending on the role, this can often be managed by giving notice ahead of any meetings or letting the individual know the plan at the start of the day rather than springing something on them at the last minute. Obviously, there are some roles where changes and disruptions are part of the job and in this case the suitability of the position depends on the individual and what their particular challenges are.

Some autistic people may have additional challenges and higher support needs and in these cases you'd need to assess whether your organisation can provide the necessary accommodations to maintain a safe workplace. However, once again, every person's needs are different so there is no cookie-cutter rule on what would be required.

Autistic people, and the unique skills they bring can be real assets to your workplace. For example, some can pick up problems and details you may not have noticed. This can then contribute to creating safer or even more efficient processes. As well as this, learning to communicate

well with an autistic or neurodivergent employee can result in improved communication throughout the organisation.

Having a good understanding of autism and neurodivergence can help ease concerns about health and safety around neurodivergent employees. Autism, as a whole, is not a cause for concern in regard to employment. Just as it would be with any other person, individual challenges and abilities are what should be accounted for when deciding whether health and safety can be maintained.

Autistic people cannot be employed because they will have meltdowns

Meltdowns can be part of being autistic but if they are, they will be different for every person. While not all emotions can be kept in control 100% of the time, autistic people do develop tools and strategies around emotional regulation and management or prevention of meltdowns.

A meltdowns in an adult is not necessarily going to look the same as a meltdown in a child. For some adults a meltdown may be expressed by crying or a temporary loss of ability to function. For others it can be more intense or not something they experience at all.

If the person's autism is well understood and accommodations are put in place, there is less chance that a meltdown will happen while at work. This may be related to sensory input or challenges with miscommunications. In many cases, minor adjustments can be enough to support the person in employment.

If an autistic person does struggle with meltdowns, having a quiet space they can escape to and deescalate can be advantageous.

Autistic people can't get or keep a job

The typical workforce is certainly not a place designed to recruit or maintain autistic employees but, with some understanding, autistic people do actually thrive in employment. The recruitment process is one of navigating neurotypical social rules and communication and that can be very difficult for an autistic person and is obviously one of the first big barriers. Having an employer or workplace that understands neurodivergence and is willing to make accommodations makes a huge difference. Accommodations usually aren't major either; sometimes it's just a matter of being a bit more direct in your communication or allowing the person to use headphones or earplugs to manage overstimulation.

Autistic people can work and they can be fantastic employees, it's just that society makes it difficult for us to access and remain in the workforce. Many autistic people will have multiple qualifications but lack the work experience because they simply cannot get past the recruitment stage. They have the skills to do the job if they were given the chance!

Autistic people are not good at communication

Autistic people communicate differently to non-autistics, but that doesn't mean they are bad at it. Autistic people can be very literal and direct, and some may not understand implications or metaphors used in everyday language. Learning to adjust to the communication needs of the autistic employee can actually improve communication throughout the organisation. It can minimise unspoken requirements, reduce confusing and unnecessary information, and create clarity around people's intentions and expectations. It is something that requires all parties to be willing to learn and have patience where miscommunications occur.

It is also important to remember that every autistic person is different. Some may be quite happy following neurotypical communication rules and others may find this impossible. There is no fixed rule on how much an autistic person's communication may differ from the norm.

It can help to communicate with the employee and ask what they might need in terms of communication of tasks and expectations. However, autistic employees, especially those who have perhaps struggled to get into the workforce, may not know what they can ask for or what might be helpful. They may not know what communication looks like in your workplace or if there are going to be any challenges. They may also want to avoid appearing difficult in fear of risk of losing the job. Because of this, it can be helpful to provide a list of some adjustments that you can offer. For example, providing verbal and written instructions when assigning tasks or offering alternative communication modes such as email or Trello.

Autistic people can't talk

Again, autism is a spectrum. Some autistic people can't or don't talk, some can talk sometimes but not other times. Some autistic people talk via devices, text, writing or even pictures. Some autistic people talk just as much as the average person and some autistic people are hyperverbal. We're autistic but we're also human; we are all different. We have different personalities, different challenges, different strengths and different presentations. Speech is just one part of that.

A 'lack' of speech (if this is the case) does not define their ability to do (or not do) the job.

Autistic people can't learn or understand

Autistic people (without co-occurring learning/intellectual disabilities) are perfectly capable of learning new skills. While they may need extra accommodations, or different teaching methods, it is essential that they are not held back and prevented from learning new tasks or skills due to an assumption that they are incapable.

Autism affects intellectual ability

It is often believed that all autistic people are geniuses, or conversely, that autistic people must have a learning disability. Neither of these are true. Autistic people can have significant strengths in some areas and difficulties in others but it is a spectrum, and everyone is different. Generally speaking, intellectual ability is not impacted by being autistic. It may be common for there to be co-occurring conditions or disabilities that impact this but that does not mean it is because they are autistic. Intellectual or learning disabilities are in addition to being autistic, they are not part of being autistic.

Autistic people lack social skills

Autistic people do not lack social skills, we are simply on a different operating system. Think of it as though neurotypical people run on an android system and autistic people run on an apple system. When either system interacts with its own type, there are generally fewer issues. It's when the two try to interact with each other that issues can start to arise.

It's not that autistic people lack social skills, it's that autistic people aren't wired to follow neurotypical social rules and the same could be said for neurotypicals in an autism context.

There are some neurotypical rules and skills that we need to learn to get by in life but both neurodivergent and neurotypical people can learn to understand each other and work around the varying challenges rather than blaming one group for lacking the ability to be something they're not.

All autistic people are antisocial or prefer to be alone

This is a very common myth. In fact, a lot of autistic people feel very lonely because they do want friends but often aren't sure how to make friends, or it is assumed that they prefer being alone. Autistic people are often misinterpreted or misunderstood and told they're rude, and it's rare to have social contexts that are intentional about considering sensory needs.

Another challenge is that invitations to social gatherings may be missed. For example, "we're all going out to lunch". This doesn't tell the autistic person that they are included. Another example is "you can join if you want to". This isn't a direct invitation and can make the autistic person feel unsure if their presence is wanted or not.

Just because an autistic person isn't talking or initiating the interaction, does not mean they are antisocial or do not want your company. Autistic people may socialise differently. Sometimes simply existing in the same space or doing the same activity separately is enough.