

# Creating Inclusive Workplaces: A Guide to Supporting Employees with Autism

**Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurological condition that affects social and workplace interactions differently for each individual. This guide provides managers with practical advice and strategies to help employees with ASD succeed in the workplace.**



**Embracing Neurodiversity and Equal Opportunity** At the heart of supporting employees with ASD is the concept of neurodiversity. This idea encourages us to value and respect neurological differences, recognising that people with autism bring unique strengths to the workplace. By offering equal opportunities, we foster an inclusive environment where everyone can succeed.

## Understanding Common Traits of Autism

While each person diagnosed with autism is unique, some common traits may include:

- **Social Interaction Difficulties:** This can include avoiding eye contact, struggling with small talk, or missing social cues.
- **Literal Thinking:** Autistic individuals may interpret language literally, leading to misunderstandings in communication.
- **Repetitive Behaviours:** Repeating movements or routines can be a way for individuals with ASD to cope with stress or sensory overload.
- **Sensitivity to Sensory Input:** Some may be overly sensitive to lights, sounds, textures, or smells.
- **Focus on Details:** Autistic employees might concentrate on specific tasks or details at the expense of the bigger picture.
- **Need for Routine:** Consistent routines can be a stabilising force, and disruptions might cause stress or anxiety.

Understanding these traits can help managers support employees with ASD in the most effective way.

## A Strengths-Based Approach

Supporting autistic employees starts with understanding that they often know what they need to succeed. Approach them with curiosity, empathy, and flexibility. A simple way to show support is to ask them directly about their needs. For instance, you might say: "I thought you might prefer a quieter workstation, I'm not sure if the lighting is right or if you'd prefer more personal space. Can you let me know if you'd like any adjustments?" This open conversation helps build trust and boosts confidence.

## Structuring a Comfortable Work Environment

Routine can play a significant role in helping employees with ASD feel calm and organised. If possible, try to avoid 'hot-desking' and offer a consistent workspace to help them feel grounded. Ask your employee about their preferred work routines and be open to experimenting with different approaches to find what works best.

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### **Clear Communication and Setting Expectations**

Clear, honest, and simple communication is essential when working with employees diagnosed with ASD. Avoid using ambiguous language or colloquialisms that could lead to confusion. Share your experience (or lack thereof) in managing autism, and invite the employee to guide you in how you can best support them.

Understanding their preferred learning style is crucial. For some, hands-on demonstration works best, while others might prefer written instructions or time to practice with guidance. Some may feel more comfortable with alternative methods, like submitting a pre-recorded presentation rather than speaking in front of a group.

Additionally, encourage ongoing communication and create an environment where employees feel safe sharing their thoughts or concerns. Make sure to set clear norms around communication styles—both verbal and written—so everyone knows what to expect.

### **Leveraging Their Strengths**

Autistic employees often excel in areas that require attention to detail, precision, and logical thinking. Assign tasks that align with these strengths to increase job satisfaction and productivity. When creating job descriptions, consider how the role can be tailored to highlight these skills and give them the opportunity to shine.

### **Time Management and Deadlines**

Transitions can be tricky for employees with ASD, so it's helpful to give them as much notice as possible when routines or deadlines are changing. Visual aids and reminders, such as calendars or countdowns, can assist with managing these transitions. Gradually introducing new procedures can also help ease the shift and ensure they have time to adjust.

### **Creating a Sensory-Friendly Workspace**

Sensory sensitivities are common among those with autism. If possible, adjust the lighting to make it more comfortable by replacing harsh fluorescent lights with LEDs or allowing natural light with appropriate shading. Reducing ambient noise can also help; noise-cancelling headphones can be a useful tool if noise is unavoidable.

If your workplace can't accommodate these changes, consider alternative arrangements such as flexible work hours, the option to work from home, or a hybrid model. These options can be more productive and supportive.

### **Building Strong, Inclusive Teams**

A diverse team benefits from the unique strengths of every member, including employees with ASD. By fostering an environment where everyone's contributions are valued, you create a more collaborative and harmonious workplace.

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### Creating a Supportive Environment

Cultivating an inclusive culture that values neurodiversity is crucial. Consider offering autism awareness training to your team, so they're better equipped to understand and support their colleagues. Organisations like [Aspect](#), [Amaze](#), and [Autism CRC](#) provide helpful resources. Also, familiarise yourself with the Australian Government's National Autism Strategy (2025-2031) [here](#) to further your understanding and support for neurodiverse employees.

### Supporting Mental Health

Autistic employees may experience heightened stress due to the social and sensory challenges of the workplace. If you notice that an employee is struggling, remind them of the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) available to them. They can access confidential support through AWS by calling 1300 66 77 00. These services offer face-to-face, telephone, or online appointments.

If needed, you can also refer the employee for coaching through AWS's "Manager Initiated Referral" service. This service provides tailored support to address performance or behavioural concerns, including mid-way updates and a final report with strategies to maintain positive changes.

Offering mental health resources and creating a supportive atmosphere can make a significant difference to your employee's wellbeing and can improve their performance and longevity within their role.

### References

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