

# BREAKING DOWN THE BARRIERS

Helping Employers Understand Autism



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# WHAT ARE AUTISM AND ASPERGERS SYNDROME?

**Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD, Autism, and Aspergers Syndrome)** is a developmental disorder that is reported to be a lifelong condition. It affects how a person:

- Communicates and relates to other people
- Relates and makes sense of the world around them
- Forms and maintains friendships
- Reads emotions displayed by other people

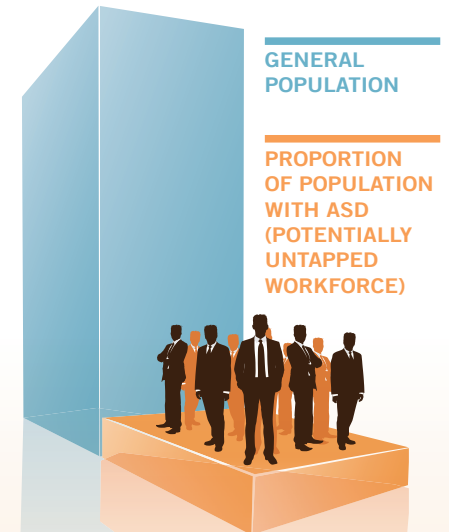
As a spectrum disorder, each person diagnosed with an ASD will be affected in different ways.

Some people will be able to live independent lives with the minimum of support required and have average or above average intelligence whereas others may have associated learning difficulties, which may require more intensive support and intervention.

One of the most common misconceptions surrounding individuals with an ASD diagnosis is that they behave in a manner similar to the Dustin Hoffman character in the movie "Rain Man". These 'savants' are very rare and don't make up the general autism population.

Recent statistics in the United States put the current prevalence rate of children being diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum Disorder at 1 child in 68 (<http://www.cdc.gov/Features/CountingAutism/>).

Therefore this would suggest that there is a large 'untapped' workforce available with unique skill strengths that could benefit your setting.

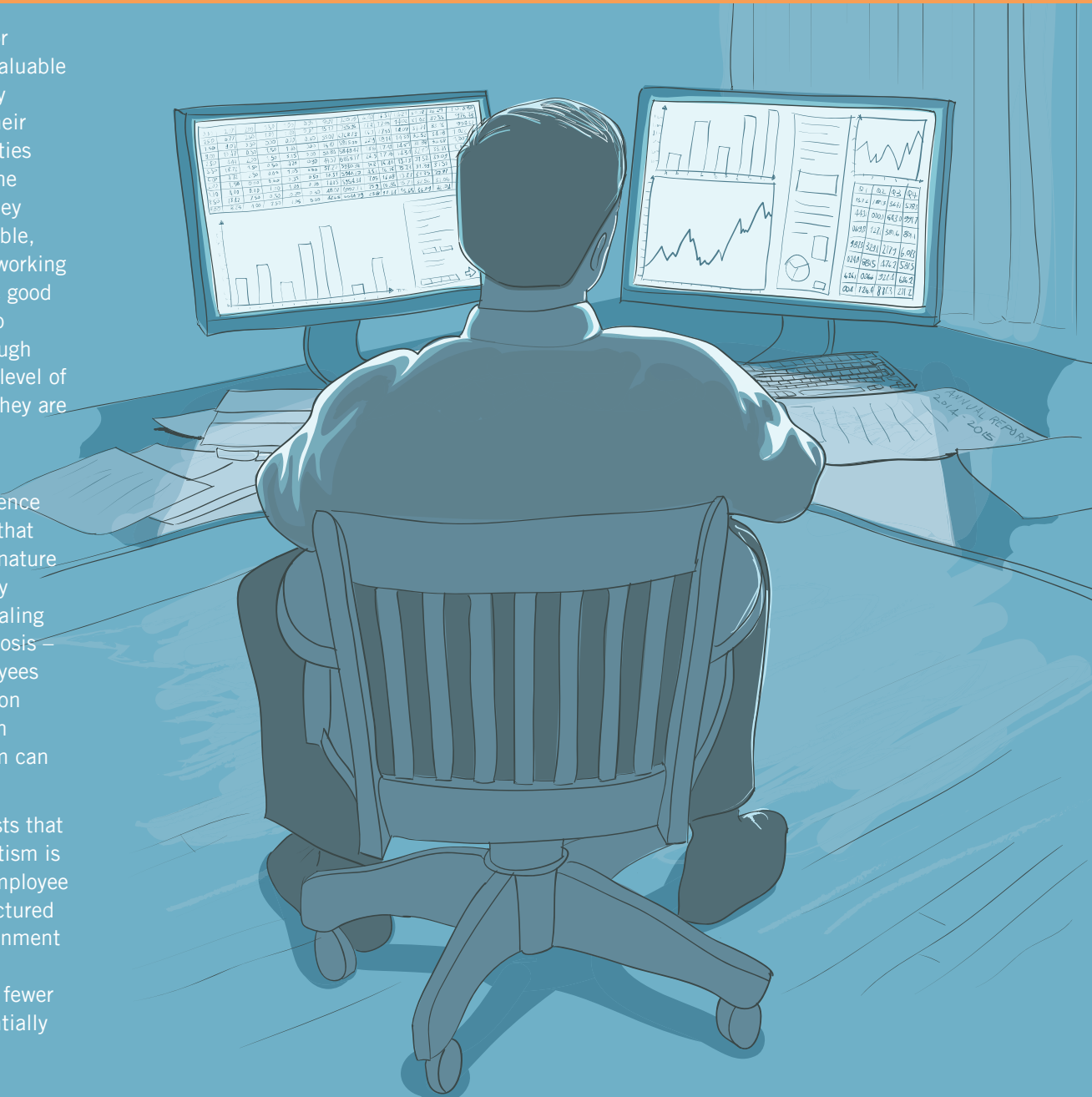


## THE BENEFITS OF EMPLOYING SOMEONE WITH AN AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

People with autism or Aspergers can be a valuable asset to any company bringing benefit to their employers with qualities that can help drive the company forward. They very often make reliable, conscientious, hard-working employees. Many are good at paying attention to detail, are very thorough and maintain a high level of accuracy in any job they are asked to do.

As many people with autism have a preference for 'sameness', jobs that may be repetitive in nature (either basic or highly skilled) may be appealing to those with a diagnosis – whereas other employees may lose concentration or interest in tasks an employee with autism can excel.

Evidence also suggests that an employee with autism is an extremely keen employee who thrives in a structured well organised environment leading to a high attendance rate with fewer 'sick' days and potentially lower staff turnover.



As autism is a spectrum disorder each individual will have skill strengths specific to them (as would any employee) but common characteristics or traits that may be displayed by someone on the spectrum include:

- Identification of errors that may be overlooked by others
- Excellent memory recall
- Technical abilities – IT skills and associated qualifications are often excellent
- Longer periods of focus on tasks with minimal distraction
- Reliability – once job expectations are explained these tend to be met
- Conscientiousness and persistence to complete work
- Attention to detail and accuracy (nearing 100%) to the task

It may be that employing someone with an ASD may be more beneficial to the company than not employing them. Once an employee with an ASD settles into their job and is aware of the expectations and their responsibility they often become a very highly valued member of the team.

## WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS FOR ME AS MANAGER AND MY OTHER STAFF TO EMPLOYING SOMEONE WITH ASD?

It would be beneficial to all who would be working with the individual with ASD to attend autism awareness training. This type of training will allow any misconceptions and preconceived notions around ASD to be addressed and dispelled, alleviating other staff members concerns. PEAT can offer workplace based autism awareness training (See contact details & the section on disclosure for information surrounding staff training).

Managers who have employed someone with an ASD have reported that it has improved their personal management strategies, they communicate more succinctly to their team

(more precise in their instructions) and knock on benefits have seen them organise their own workload better.

Immediate colleagues can also directly benefit from working alongside their ASD colleague similar to those reported by the management thereby producing a more positive, productive working environment.

### Fulfilling Legal Obligations

#### The duty to make reasonable adjustments

Equality law recognises that in order to ensure that there is equality for disabled people in the workplace employers may need to make reasonable adjustments such as removing physical barriers and/or providing extra support for a disabled worker. The adjustments put in place are to ensure that the employee with a disability has the same access to all work related equipment and environments as those without a disability enabling successful job completion and retention of employment.

'Reasonable' ensures that you are not required to do anything more than what is reasonable for you, as an employer, to do – there are a number of variables that depend on this such as the size of your organisation or the nature of your organisation.

Doing nothing however, is not acceptable.

If an employee with a disability can demonstrate barriers that were in place which could have been identified and

reasonable adjustments made that weren't then they can claim against you in the Employment Tribunal. This may result in you being ordered to pay compensation and make the reasonable adjustments. You should make the adjustments whenever you become aware of an employee having a disability. Remember that individuals with similar disabilities can be affected in different ways therefore sitting down and discussing the adjustments with the individual could help ensure success. (Source: <http://www.equalityhumanrights.com>)

One such strategy that you can adapt with the individual is a '**Tailored adjustment agreement – individually tailored reasonable adjustments**'. A free template is available from the *Business Disability Forum*. This tailored adjustment agreement is basically a living record of reasonable adjustments between a disabled employee and their line manager.

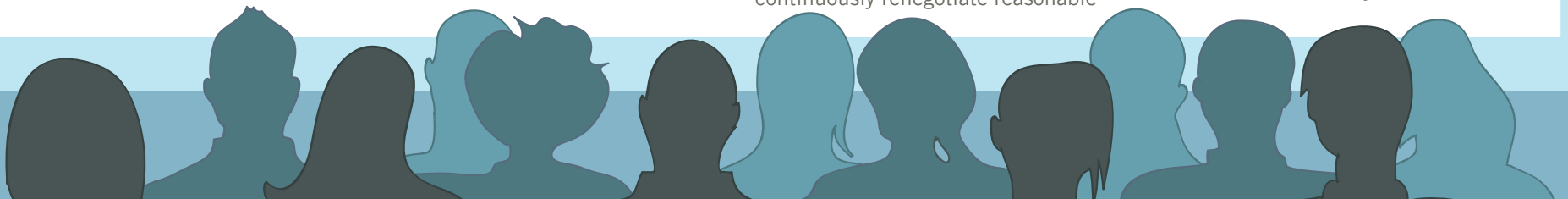
This agreement is to help ensure that both the employee and employer have an accurate record of what has been agreed as reasonable adjustments. It also helps reduce the need to continuously renegotiate reasonable

adjustments following a change in job, relocation within the company/organisation or following a new line manager taking post. Also, further discussions regarding reasonable adjustments later on can also be addressed using this as the baseline. This document should be regularly reviewed by all involved and any amendments included and implemented as soon as possible thereby complying with equality law.

### Strategies to help someone with ASD in your workplace

If you are interested in employing someone with an ASD you may have to make some minor adjustments to ensure that they are able to adjust to the environment as well as understanding the job expectations, thus fulfilling their job role. Strategies can include:

- Extending the orientation time for the employee to adjust
- Being clear with your language, try to avoid using 'slang' words and idioms – people with ASD may take things literally and may not understand the sarcasm or humour entwined within your words



## STRATEGIES TO HELP SOMEONE WITH ASD IN YOUR WORKPLACE (CONT.)

- Being precise telling the employee what they are expected to do – don't assume that the person will use their initiative, you may need to outline the complete task
- Using written instructions to compliment the oral instructions
- Ensuring that the employee understands their role by checking for understanding
- Setting aside a brief amount of time monthly (or more regularly if required) for the employee to discuss their work, successes and concerns
- Providing regular feedback – individuals with an ASD may assume they are doing well unless explicitly told otherwise also providing time to reinforce appropriate working behaviour/skills
- Providing constructive criticism when required – many ASD individuals have been bullied and may feel threatened if this is done incorrectly
- Being patient – many individuals with ASD can find simple everyday tasks harder to grasp – but once these are understood the proficiency at which they perform the tasks is accelerated. Conversely, it has been noted that more complex work related tasks may be understood and mastered quite easily
- Providing reassurance that there are reasonable errors that are accepted – many ASD individuals may get upset or frustrated if they are unable to complete a task within the working day or panic if public transport prevents them from getting to work on time. By providing this reassurance you can help the employee understand that situations such as these are not a problem
- Explaining office/work based unspoken rules – many individuals with ASD don't pick up on the unspoken social etiquettes that many people follow. Therefore you may have to explain that certain areas are restricted or that it may not be acceptable to log on to someone else's pc. Once these 'rules' are explained the employee will understand and follow them diligently
- Making allowances for ritualistic/inappropriate behaviours – some people with ASD can behave in ways that may not be acceptable in a work environment. These behaviours can include excessive talking and pacing. Excessive talking can be reduced by explaining to the employee that talking about TV or non-work related topics are to be restricted to break or lunch-times or at the beginning of the shift. To reduce pacing it may be beneficial to the employee to determine whether there are anxiety issues related to the pacing and whether reasonable adjustments can be made to help

## What to do if problems arise?

Problems may arise, either with the individual themselves or in relation to colleague interaction. People with a diagnosis of autism may find it difficult to understand another person's feelings and at times may accidentally say something that may appear to be 'rude' and lacking in empathy. Always remember, if this happens, that this is not deliberate, it could just be that they are unaware that this could upset or annoy someone. The skill deficit of being unable to accurately read body language can contribute to these misunderstandings. Therefore it is important to have general autism awareness training for the rest of your workforce to help address these potential problems.

Any problems that can potentially arise within the work environment with an individual with autism can quickly be dealt with. Simple requests or general work based civilities (tea making for the colleagues, or apologising for being late) can cause ill feeling amongst other employees. Explaining in concrete terms the structure of the environment and the general expectations of colleague interaction can help reduce these problems.

## Disclosure

Autism awareness training for all staff has been alluded to quite a lot within this booklet and whilst this would help everyone in their daily interaction

it would need to be addressed appropriately as some people with autism may not wish for their disability to be disclosed.

Many people with autism understand that if they are to receive adequate support within their workplace the general manager and direct supervisory staff would need to be made aware of their diagnosis. A minority would allow for their colleagues to be told of their diagnosis. There is no formula for disclosure and if it is not necessary for other people to be made aware of the diagnosis then it is best to keep it private. Discrete structure changes and support networks in place that allow for the individual to successfully function within the workplace can ensure that other employees don't really need to know of an individual's diagnosis.

## Further information

If you require any further information on any of the points raised within this booklet or wish to avail of training tailored specifically for your information please contact:

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