

The Benefits of Employee Collaboration in Autism Acceptance

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is an emerging public health challenge bringing to light glaring inequities including disability awareness. ASD is a neurodevelopmental disorder that affects roughly 1 in 54 children and more than 5.4 million adults in the United States. Autism has emerged as a major public health concern as recent decades' research shows the initially-believed rarity to be a false perception. The primary symptoms of ASD are social communication challenges, restricted or repetitive behaviors, and sensory sensitivities.

Only a small percentage of autistic people have long term employment - only about 58% ever work after high school. This number decreases even further among Black and Hispanic autistic people at only 37% and 34%, respectively. However, autistic people bring creative and diverse solutions to new and growing problems.

Pima County wants to bring to your attention some resources and knowledge regarding ASD in our communities and work spaces to create more equitable services and inclusion so that individuals can fully participate in our social fabric. Autistic individuals face health equity issues including job access, educational opportunities, housing and healthcare. We hope to inform you about ASD to increase awareness and provide you with the tools to create positive environments and change.

This statement from the supervisor of an autistic employee in Pima County details the importance of autism acceptance:

"This is an incredible experience. The extra time put into understanding and implementing strategies for management totally pays off. The attention to direct and co-developed feedback plans are critical for a successful working relationship."

"Coming out" as autistic has many implications in a workplace - legally, socially, and in many other ways. Do not share a coworker or employee's diagnosis. Allow the autistic person to decide for themselves how and when they would like to share that information, if at all.

It is not enough to simply employ autistic people. In order for equitable employment to occur, we must have a space that is appropriate and conducive to autistic people.

Strengths of People on the Spectrum:

- **Punctuality** - structure means autistic people are rarely late to work or on deadlines and can be extremely reliable and loyal.
- **Productivity** - autistic people can be extremely productive when set up for success and given clear direction.
- **Passion** - autistic people are often extremely proud of and passionate about their work.
- **Patterns** - autistic people can pick up on patterns more quickly and can help to problem-solve before an issue becomes apparent to others.

Communication Strategies:

- **Write:** Autistic people may have more trouble receiving verbal instruction. Whenever possible, communicate how and when work is to be completed via email. Provide visual supports whenever possible (scratchwork diagrams or outlines of work to be completed).



- **Ask:** Allow for extended processing time and clarify by using phrases like “Do you understand?” Clearly identify when and how work is to be completed, especially with new styles of projects.
- **Know:** Be aware that autistic people will likely take things literally, especially when using sarcasm or metaphors. Obvious active listening strategies (nodding, saying “I understand”, etc) can help autistic people to be secure in their communication.
 - ▶ Autistic people do not always “learn by doing” and this is not necessarily an effective strategy.
- **Avoid:**
 - ▶ **“We’re all a little autistic”**
 - ◆ There is no such thing. This is dismissive of the ASD experience.
 - ▶ **“But you’re so high functioning”**
 - ◆ This is inaccurate and problematic and diminishes the realities of ASD.
 - ▶ **“You don’t look autistic”**
 - ◆ Autism doesn’t have a look and ASD can affect anyone.

Workplace Strategies:

- **Sensory Considerations:** Many autistic people experience sensory difficulties including tactile, visual, auditory, taste and smell. Sensory difficulties are often articulated by autistic people in terms of physical pain. A common coping method is stimming (short for self-stimulation) - repeated movements or the repetition of sounds or words to self-regulate and self-soothe.
 - ▶ Provide an independent work station (cubicle or office) with as little sensory input as possible (placed away from busy or loud areas).
 - ▶ Autistic people may find the close proximity of others disturbing. They may feel anxious as to what they are expected to do socially when other people enter their space unannounced.
 - ▶ Whenever possible, warn the person of imminent sounds or other sensory input and consider off-site projects that may be too overwhelming. Be aware of the person’s response to touch and responses to changes in food (team lunches, department sponsored events with a meal, etc).
 - ▶ Dedicate a quiet, closed-door office space for regulation of stimulation.
- **Organization:** Help autistic coworkers to make use of a calendar and central system of organization (ie. navigating Teams).
 - ▶ Autistic people may be extremely attached to routines. This does not just mean eating lunch at a specific time, but also taking the same route to another floor of a building or performing a task in a specific manner. Routines help to reduce an overwhelming social world. When it comes to change, communication is key.
- **Interpersonal:** Eye contact can be difficult for autistic people. Some of the best listening done occurs when not looking in the direction of the person speaking. Autistic people are not ignoring you.
 - ▶ Allow enough time for processing of each statement, especially during fast-paced meetings. Recommend use of the chat and turning off of camera in video-conferencing to ease stress.
 - ▶ For more information on video conferencing with autistic people, here is some [in-depth information](#) (Managing Stress: The Needs of Autistic Adults in Video Calling).