

Autism and Employment

WHAT IS AUTISM?

Autism is a lifelong condition that affects how a person communicates and interacts with others, and how they experience the wider environment. Autism affects people in different ways, with most people experiencing differences (to a greater or lesser extent) in the areas of social communication, social skills and routines and sensory processing.

1 in 24 children and young people in Northern Ireland have a diagnosis of autism¹ and we estimate that 30,000 people are affected by the condition in NI. The term Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is used because autism varies from person to person. Only 20-25% of autistic individuals will have an accompanying learning disability.

Autistic individuals can be highly skilled and valued members of a team. However, we know that only 16% of autistic individuals are in full time employment², even though the vast majority want to be employed and have the skills to be successful in employment. Like with most people, it is important to match the job role with the person's strengths, skills and areas of development.

Autism and Employment: A legislative Perspective

The Autism Act (NI) 2011 classifies autism as a Social Communication Disability. This means that existing disability and equality legislation (such as the Disability Discrimination Act 1995) protects autistic individuals from discrimination based on their disability. Employers have a legal obligation to provide reasonable adjustments to an autistic person and to ensure equality of access to employment opportunities. This includes throughout the application process, induction and while maintaining employment.

What is a reasonable adjustment?

A reasonable adjustment is a change that employers must make under the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). The law says that disabled people should be treated fairly at work and that employers:

- must not discriminate against a current or potential employee based on their disability
- must make changes to help an employee/prospective employee if they are at a disadvantage because of their disability

References:

¹DHSSPS NI, 2020. The Prevalence of Autism [including Aspergers Syndrome] in School age Children in Northern Ireland.

²National Autistic Society, 2016. 'The Autism Employment Gap' Report.

AUTISM AND WORK

Common Strengths:

Autistic individuals make excellent employees and are an invaluable asset to a team or organisation. Depending on the individual, they can often demonstrate strengths in the following areas:

- Detail orientated
- Accurate and precise
- Hard working, honest and loyal
- Reliable
- Enjoy structure and repetition in work
- Creative thinkers who often view problems from a different or innovative perspective
- Knowledgeable about a particular interest

Providing reasonable adjustments makes **good business sense**:

- Ensures that your organisation is compliant with all equality and disability legislation (including the Autism Act (NI) 2011).
- Enables employees to perform their duties efficiently and effectively, increasing productivity.
- Ensures employees feel valued and supported at work, which reduces stress, improves motivation and reliability.
- Promotes an inclusive and diverse workforce ensures that staff can bring their varying experiences and expertise to the team, which can have a substantial positive impact for everyone within the organisation.

SUPPORT AT WORK

As autism affects people in an individual way, autistic employees may experience challenges in social communication, routines and sensory processing (to a greater or lesser extent).

There are many ways to support autistic people in the workplace. These are often minor, low-cost adjustments and considerations which can improve the workplace for all employees.

SUPPORT AVAILABLE TO EMPLOYERS

Autism NI recommends that organisations consider investing in **high quality autism employment training**. This training will support their staff in understanding more about autism, reasonable adjustments and build confidence to support autistic employees, creating an inclusive workplace.

As Northern Ireland's only autism specific, accredited training provider, we have several training options available for businesses. For further information about training options and support available, please contact Autism NI's Training Department on 02890 401729 option 4 or email info@autismni.org.