Tools & Strategies
for Managers and Supervisors

**Working with
People who have
High Functioning Autism
and Asperger's Syndrome**

Disability Overview, Instruction Methods, Tools and Accommodations for Managing Employees with Autism Spectrum Disorders

Contents

Working to Your Employee's Strengths

Individuals with autism spectrum disorders have the potential to become valued employees. And as with most employees, they have areas where they excel and areas where they need assistance. Strategies presented in this book are meant as guidelines to help your organization capture the talents, skills and aptitudes that people with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) bring to the job while minimizing areas that can cause difficulty.

Managing for Productivity

People do better when you play to their strengths. Despite their abilities, individuals with ASD also have unique needs and vulnerabilities that can interfere with their performance unless modifications are made. Their "hidden disability" was, until recently, widely misunderstood. This lead to frustrations and loss of productivity for both the employer and employee.

Making accommodations and finding how you can best work to their strengths will create a more smoothly-running organization. Accommodations needed by employees with autism spectrum disorders vary. Often a minor change makes a big difference. Other challenges due to this disability may require more support.

Why Accommodations are Needed

Autism is a neurobiological condition. People with ASD perceive the world in ways that are unique, different and sometimes surprising. Not all people are affected in the same way. And just like everyone, each person has a personality, temperament, experiences and abilities that make them one-of-a-kind.

All the suggested modifications in this guide may not be as effective -- or needed -- for the person you hire as they would be for someone else with ASD. Recommended strategies starting on page seven will help most people who are on the spectrum. Choose and adapt these strategies and modifications in ways that best fit your employee's and organization's needs.

Developmental Differences

ASD is complex. You will see its effects manifested on the behavioral level. Professionals also try to understand root causes -- why and how the brain's structure is different in people who have autism. A researcher at Yale University, Ami Klin, believes that typically-developing infants become "experts on people" because their brains are set up to see faces. A person with ASD becomes an "expert on objects." This is where their strengths lie; their difficulties are in social cognition.

**Experts on
People**   **Experts on
Objects**

Typical Development   **ASD Development**
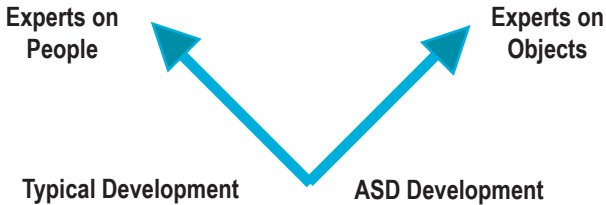
Deeply-Rooted Perceptual Differences

Since the brain is structured differently, perception, behaviors and learning also differ. These differences enable a person with ASD to think outside-the-box, which can benefit your organization because it can result in unique solutions to problems. On a psychological level, however, these differences are often viewed by others only in negative terms as "deficits" since social expertise follows a different pathway than the general population.

It is important, however, for managers to understand some of the areas where a person with ASD may be more challenged so that appropriate accommodations can be made. Three psychological theories help explain the underlying reasons why social and organizational issues require different approaches.

Researcher Dr. Simon Baron-Cohen of Cambridge University has done extensive research on a concept called **theory of mind**. Most people develop the ability to understand the internal mental and emotional states of others -- their beliefs, intentions, wants and needs.

People with ASD learn this at a later age and may have a more limited, less intuitive understanding of other peoples' true intentions. They may be less able to quickly understand another person's body language, gestures, voice tones or to use context to more easily inform social meanings.

Different Perspectives on the World

Weak central coherence is a second psychological theory used to describe how people with ASD do not easily

Understanding autism on different levels

Genetic

Biological

Psychological

Behaviorial

Three theories provide understanding of the differences in development on a psychological level.

Theory of Mind
The ability to understand another person's needs, wants and intentions.

Weak Central Coherence Theory
Integrating information holistically to form a gestalt or "big picture".

integrate information into context to see the "bigger picture." They do not see the forest for the trees. So, rather than see a face as a whole entity, for example, they may just see a nose, a mouth, or two eyes. This can be problematic because in some situations it can lead to misconceptions or misunderstandings, especially when communications are not clear.

A third psychological difference is called **executive function.** Some people with ASD have difficulty holding more than one mental image in mind in order to plan, problem solve or self regulate. This makes it more challenging for them to organize or initiate plans. Other people, however, have learned to compensate and to become highly organized.

Equally Valid and Valuable Employees

A person with ASD can become a valued, if not outstanding employee. Psychological theories explain thinking patterns in terms that may be different from what is considered "typical." A person with ASD has a valid point of view even if it is not the commonly shared point of view.

It is also important to note that a person with ASD *does* wish to have friendly, mutually-beneficial relationships with others and to be treated with due respect. Just as with all employees, they have the potential to develop warm and rewarding connections to those around them. Understanding these differences and making appropriate modifications help managers and co-workers bring out the best in employees who have ASD.

Workplace Supports and Accommodations

Starting a new job is a growth experience. We develop a new network of colleagues, mentors, superiors, subordinates, and alliances. It's a natural support system of people we can go to for questions, friendships or just to bounce off ideas.

However, since people with ASD have difficulties with social cognition and sensory processing, they initially need a more formalized network of support, structured teaching of tasks, ample time to learn the job, and accommodations for sensory differences.

Following are recommended training methods and strategies to use.

Clarify Job Expectations

Persons with ASD tend to think in more concrete ways than most people. Since they perceive so many things differently, the analogy of teaching them as if they were foreigners is more appropriate. Respect their intelligence, but point out necessary details that may seem obvious to you; it may not be that way to them. If a task is a crucial part of a job, teach it systematically by breaking it down into smaller sub steps. Plan ahead and write down each step. Make sure that you have included all the important aspects of the task before attempting to teach it.

- Teach Systematically

- Break tasks into smaller steps

- Include all parts of the task

- Specifically state desired outcomes

- Allow extended training time

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Point out in specific terms the outcome you expect. Initially this may seem time consuming, but you will be happier with the results and it will prevent frustrations and time wasted in having to un-learn/re-learn the task. Identify exactly what you want. This may also include expectations for behaviors.

Use Visuals to Instruct and Organize

When thinking, most people "process" information in words. The majority of people with ASD process visually. Some refer to this as thinking in pictures. Write down important job information, such as a step-by-step set of instructions for a task. This will also provide a reference for your employee's future use. It helps compensate for short-term memory difficulties or any possible misconceptions.

Issues with executive function and central coherence may mean that your employee can have trouble knowing how to start a new project, break it into smaller steps, logically sequence the steps, or manage time effectively.

If this is the case, use highly structured routines and schedules. Write down task goals with expected timelines for completion. Encourage the use of graphic organizers, calendars and schedules to help with organization.

Communicate in a Direct Manner

Use directive statements and avoid instructions that have double or implied meanings (such as idioms, cliches or sarcasm). For example, rather than say "these reports will be included in tomorrow's meeting," state directly,

"you need to photocopy these reports by 9:00 a.m. tomorrow for the morning meeting."

Include all specific details -- the who, what, where and deadlines for a particular task. Also state directly the company rules and behavioral expectations. Tell your employee if you expect a particular script or phrase used when answering the phone, for example, or what type of clothing is appropriate for the work setting. Explicitly state any unwritten rules that are part of your organization's culture.

Structure the Workplace to Avoid Distractions or Sensory Overloads

Often the sensory systems in persons with ASD do not work in an organized fashion. Persons with ASD can be hyper-sensitive to sounds or bright lights, which cause them to lose focus. They can be tactile defensive -- extremely sensitive to touch or certain smells which can overwhelm their nervous system.

Some people see the "flickering" in flourescent lighting or computer screens. They may hear the buzzing sounds emitted by lighting. If possible, change to 100-watt incandescent bulbs or move their desk to a window where there is enough natural lighting.

Auditory sensitivities are the most common problem in ASD. Sensitivities vary from person to person and symptoms can range from mild to severe.

Minimize Multi-task Assignments

People with ASD are often highly focused and can concentrate on tasks they are interested in for extended periods. Over time, this can enable them to overcome their initial steeper learning curve. The flip side is that

- **Avoid slang, idioms, or statements with imlied messages**

- **State the obvious**

- **Point out written and unwritten company rules or policies**

- **Create a work space in a quiet, low traffic area**

- **Turn the desk to face a wall**

- **Use high cubicle walls**

- **Allow the use of ear plugs or head phones**

- **Use small fans for "white noise"**

- **Turn down the ring volume on the phone**

- **Replace fluorescent bulbs with 100-watt incandescent ones**

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they often have more difficulty working in a fast-paced environment that requires quick switching between tasks. Assignments that place a high demand on efficient short-term memory is a problem. Diverse examples of jobs requiring rapid processing include work as a waitress, futures trader, receptionist, or cashier in a busy market. These types of activities are highly stressful because they all require rapid switching of attention and quick judgments.

While these may not be typical assignments in your organization, think of similar activities that require interactions or continuous partial attention. Consider delegating these tasks or redistributing job duties.

Sensory sentivities and demands on short-term memory can lead to increased stress levels, confusion and anxiety.

Roles, Teamwork and Job Positions

Some people who have ASD describe an ideal assignment as one that allows them to work as independently as possible. Since this is a hidden disability, co-workers may not offer the understanding or compassion given more obvious visible challenges. As a result, the worker with ASD can be put in a position of becoming harassed or exploited by more sophisticated employees, or they can become isolated.

People with ASD are often without guile. They are honest and kind, but can also be overtly direct and lacking in discretion when making critisms. Being socially naive, they may need help understanding the unwritten rules when relating to superiors, subordinates and clients.

Working with a job coach or assigning a mentor are ways to support more vulnerable workers and help them develop mutually beneficial relationships.

Establish Job Routines

Having structure enables your employees to best do their job. Written directions with sequential steps provide a reference and minimizes interruptions of co-workers. For each job responsibility, have your employee keep a document that can be assembled into a three-ring binder. This binder can be used for assembling a variety of needed reference information such as company policies, hours, and names and positions of employees. It is a tool that can help your employee become a more independent worker.

Work With a Job Coach

Modifications and accommodations go a long way towards helping a person with ASD become more productive. However, situations arise that are not easy to predict and you may want a more neutral, objective perspective.

A job coach can address concerns that relate to attitudes, grooming, general appearance and demeanor, handling interpersonal relationships, help with self-regulation issues, or any other behavior issues that interfere with job performance.

Ideally, you will find someone who understands social cognition and is knowledgeable about autism spectrum disorders. This person can develop a personal relationship with your employee, which allows supervisors and others in positions of authority to maintain their professional distance.

Assemble a reference binder that includes:

- **Job duties**

- **Sequential job steps**

- **Company policies**

- **Names of key co-workers**

A mentor or job coach can help employees understand social expectations and unwritten company practices.

Recommended Resources on Autism and Employment

Books

How to Find Work That Works for People with Asperger Syndrome by Gail Hawkins (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London)

Careers for Individuals with Asperger syndrome and High-Functioning Autism by Temple Grandin (Autism Asperger Publishing Company, Shawnee Mission, Kansas)

Asperger Syndrome by Tony Attwood (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London)

Websites

www.autism-society.org -- Autism Society of America

www.udel.edu/bkirby/asperger -- Online Asperger Syndrome Information and Support

www.asperger.org -- The Asperger Syndrome Coalition of the U.S.

Organizations

Autism Society of Minnesota
2380 Wycliff Street
St. Paul, MN 55114

Telephone: (651) 647-1083
FAX: (651) 642-1230
Email: info@ausm.org
Website: www.ausm.org

Information on Americans with Disabilities Act

ADA Minnesota
1600 University Avenue W. #16
St. Paul, MN 55104-3825

Voice: (651) 603-2015
TTY: (651) 603-2001
Toll Free: 1-888-630-9793
Website: www.adaminnesota.org

The Great Lakes ADA and Accessible IT Center

Telephone: 1-800-949-4232
Website: www.adagreatlakes.org