

Neurodiversity Celebration Month 2024

Improving employment outcomes for autistic people

March 2024



1 Introduction

Neurodiversity Celebration Week is a worldwide initiative taking place from 18th to 24th March 2024. The observance aims to transform how neurodivergent individuals are perceived by challenging stereotypes and misconceptions about neurological differences, while creating more inclusive and equitable cultures that celebrate differences and empower neurodivergent individuals.

At Cordis Bright, we are extending the observation internally for a whole month to mark Neurodiversity Celebration Month, which will run from 18th March until 18th April. This month represents an opportunity to celebrate the strengths and advantages that come from having a neurodiverse workforce, and to ensure that Cordis Bright is an accessible and inclusive place to work for neurodivergent individuals.

We have produced this short blog post on improving employment outcomes for autistic people as part of our activities for the month. This blog post explores the barriers to employment which autistic people face, and a range of ways in which they can be supported in the workplace. These findings draw on a rapid review of existing academic literature and examples of organisations actively supporting autistic people in their workforce.

What is autism?

Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition which affects how people perceive, communicate and interact with the world. It is estimated that around 1% to 2% of the UK population are autistic. There are various characteristics which are associated with being autistic ([Autistica 2024](#)). These include:

- Differences in social and communication preferences, such as being direct or preferring to avoid eye contact.
- Experiencing strong preferences for routine, sameness or certainty.
- Enjoying focussed or intense interests, which can result in being particularly knowledgeable about certain topics.
- Experiencing sensory differences, including being hyper- or hypo- sensitive to sound, touch, taste, smell or light.

- Delayed or absent speech, with one in four autistic people speaking few or no words.

However, no two autistic people are the same, and not every autistic person will relate to all of these characteristics. Every autistic person has different strengths, as well as areas where they could benefit from additional support. In addition, autism often co-occurs with other conditions, such as ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, learning disabilities, speech and language difficulties and mental health conditions. These can all affect how each individual experiences their autistic traits.

2 Background

Autistic people bring a wide range of strengths and talents to the workplace. These include creativity or “out-of-the-box” thinking, a high attention to detail, a strong work ethic, an ability to focus and maintain productivity for long periods of time, values-led decision-making including honesty and dedication, and the advantages of incorporating autistic voices and perspectives to avoid cognitive biases ([McDowall et al 2023](#)). Embracing neurodiversity helps to create stronger, higher skilled, more innovative and higher performing organisations, and the new perspectives, insights and skills offered by autistic people (and neurodivergent people more widely) should be valued and celebrated.

However, despite having the necessary skills, abilities, and desire to work, autistic people experience extremely low employment rates, second only to people with learning disabilities. The [Buckland Review of Autism Employment \(2024\)](#) states that only 3 in 10 autistic people are in any form of employment, defined as at least one hour of paid work a week. This difference in employment outcomes applies to all autistic people: data shows that autistic graduates are twice as likely to be unemployed after 15 months as non-disabled graduates, with only 36% finding work in this period. In addition, autistic people are more likely to be underemployed: they face the largest pay gap across all disability groups, and experience the worst outcomes across a range of measures used by the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS).

The UK government’s [National Autism Strategy 2021](#) aims to tackle the employment gap for autistic people. It emphasises the importance of:

- Closing the employment gap for autistic people.
- Focusing on improving employers’ confidence in hiring and supporting autistic people.
- Improving autistic people’s experiences of being in work.

To work towards the roadmap set out in the strategy, the government recently launched the £7.6 million [Local Supported Employment \(LSE\) initiative](#) which aims to support over 2,000 adults with learning disabilities and autism into work through approaches including vocation profiling, employer engagement and providing in-work career development support.

3 Which obstacles to employment do autistic people face?

Autistic people face a wide range of obstacles which can prevent them from obtaining and retaining employment. These include:

- Lack of knowledge by employers of the skills autistic people can bring to their workplace.
- Failure by employers to implement the necessary accommodations for employees who are autistic.
- A need to develop a person- and employer-focused approach to ensure that autistic people are employed in appropriate workplace environments.
- Discrimination and stigma associated with autistic people.

[Research from Autistica and University College London's Diverse Minds Employment Survey \(2023\)](#) found that autistic people often have negative experiences of interviews, group tasks and psychometric tests. Autistic jobseekers navigate vague, generic job descriptions, ambiguous interview questions and challenging sensory environments, often with an emphasis on social skills rather than job skills. Many feel they must mask their autistic traits to succeed.

For autistic people who do find work, many also face barriers to maintaining employment. These include not receiving the necessary support to fulfil their role in inaccessible sensory and social environments. Many autistic adults may not be aware of their rights around reasonable adjustments, or may be reluctant to ask for them for fear of discrimination. Access to reasonable adjustments is still variable, with the onus often on the autistic individual to identify and advocate for their own reasonable adjustments. [Research from the Diverse Minds Employment Survey \(2021\)](#) found that only 35% of autistic employees were fully open about being autistic across their organisation, with 1 in 10 not disclosing to anyone at work. Those who do disclose usually do so after starting a job, which highlights a fear of discrimination during the recruitment process. Only 4 in 10 participants who disclosed to their employer said this had a positive impact on their wellbeing and ability to maintain their role. Autistic people are also more likely to lose their employment for behavioural and social interaction reasons rather than their inability to perform work tasks ([Fong et al 2021](#)).

4 What can employers do?

Under the Equality Act 2010, all employers have a statutory duty to ensure that reasonable adjustments are made which ensure that recruitment practices and workplaces are accessible and inclusive for autistic employees. However, research suggests that employers can find it difficult to understand what works in implementing reasonable adjustments and making accommodations. This is often because reasonable adjustments can be subjective, with each individual requiring different support and requirements.

There are a range of reasonable adjustments and additional support that employers can provide autistic people which can lead to improvements in employment outcomes. These are:

1. Making reasonable adjustments to the recruitment process.
2. Making reasonable adjustments within the workplace.
3. Delivering autism awareness training for all employees.
4. Providing access to a job coach or access to support services aimed at autistic employees.

The rest of this section discusses each theme in more detail.



Making reasonable adjustments to the recruitment process

[The National Autistic Society](#) states that many minor adjustments employers can make to their recruitment processes have broader benefits to other candidates and can make recruitment more efficient overall. These adjustments include:

- **Adjustments to job adverts and descriptions:** Job adverts and descriptions should be concise and straightforward. For instance, job advertisements often include vague descriptions of soft skills such as ‘excellent communication skills’, which may impact an autistic person’s perception of their eligibility for the job, despite having strong skills relevant to the tasks involved. Ensuring that job adverts and descriptions are as objective as possible and focused on the competencies essential for the position will give a clearer indication of the experience and skills an applicant will need to demonstrate.
- **Adjustments to interviews or using work trials:** Some autistic people may face difficulties with social interaction and communication, making the traditional interview process difficult. Reasonable adjustments during an interview allow autistic candidates to portray their skills and competencies fully. This can include adjustments such as:
 - Providing the interview questions in advance.
 - Avoiding general questions (e.g. “Tell me about yourself”) and instead ensuring that questions are clear and specific.
 - Inviting a supporter to accompany the candidate.
 - Providing the option to send additional information in written format after the discussion.
 - Using alternative forms of assessment, such as work trials.



Making reasonable adjustments within the workplace

There are also a range of reasonable adjustments which can be made within the workplace. Assessments of individual needs should be carried out at the beginning of employment, ideally by someone with experience in understanding the needs and preferences of autistic people. Examples of adjustments which can be made following this assessment include:

- **Adjustment to the role and management processes:** such as establishing regular check-ins with managers to support the individual with expectations, organisation and

management of their workload, and to provide advance notice of changes in the workplace.

- **Adjustments to physical space:** Some autistic people may experience sensory sensitivities, and environmental adjustments can be helpful in these instances. Examples include providing noise-cancelling headphones or adjusting lighting in the workplace ([National Autistic Society 2024](#)). Making the necessary adjustments for individuals with restricted levels of physical mobility can ensure the workspace is accessible to everyone.
- **Adjustments to social/cultural practices within the organisation,** such as having a targeted structure to support the growth of skills and experience for an autistic employee. [The National Autistic Society's Top tips for reasonable adjustments](#) suggests that this could also include adjustments such as flexible work hours and deadlines, the minimisation of face-to-face interactions and meetings where possible, the use of explicit communication (for instance, using written communication rather than relying on verbal communication only) or using a buddy or mentor system, which can provide support by explaining nuances of the workplace, providing training, and offering advice and support.

All reasonable adjustments should also be periodically reviewed to ensure all the necessary support is provided. Communication is also important in this process, including a designated point of contact for the autistic employee can help them raise questions about adjustments and ensures accountability in implementing adjustments effectively. [The Discover Autism Research and Employment \(DARE\) Report on Adjustments \(2020\)](#) found that autistic employees often have to repeatedly advocate for themselves after their adjustments have been implemented, which can negatively impact welfare. Ensuring that adjustments are embedded within organisational practices and processes is key to avoid this.



Autism awareness training

Autism awareness training can help ensure that stigma around autism is reduced in the workplace and that adjustments are implemented in a sustainable way. This can include training on understanding autism, the strengths of autistic individuals, and strategies to help address any challenges which might arise.



Job coach support and support services

Employers can hire job coaching professionals to support co-workers and managers to feel confident in supporting autistic employees ([PA autism, 2024](#)). External training courses are also available which help employers understand the principles of supporting autistic employees and share strategies to communicate and manage performance.

In addition, employers can explore providing access to support services for autistic employees. These can include job coaching and tailored support which focus on navigating workplace dynamics and expectations, and understanding roles and responsibilities. These needs and support services can be identified as part of the process of identifying reasonable adjustments and additional support which may be beneficial.

5 Conclusion

This blog highlights a range of effective practice which employers can use to support autistic employees to obtain and retain employment. However, it also highlights a need for further research into what works for improving and creating an accessible and inclusive workplace environment for autistic people.

At Cordis Bright, we hope to use Neurodiversity Celebration Week – and our internal Neurodiversity Celebration Month – as a springboard for ongoing improvement and learning. As part of this, we are committed to ensuring that Cordis Bright is an accessible and inclusive place to work for autistic people. We will also continue to work with our clients to produce research and evaluation which contributes to a greater understanding of how organisations can embrace the strengths and skills associated with neurodiversity and ensure that all individuals have their needs met.

We would love to hear your thoughts and experiences in relation to this blog post. If you have any questions, please do get in touch with Emma Andersen at EmmaAndersen@cordisbright.co.uk.