



Supporting Autistic Colleagues

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Introduction

We believe the UK has an 'undiscovered workforce' of motivated and talented autistic people who may never have been employed. Being in meaningful employment can provide a person with self-worth, engagement and purpose. Being in the right role and receiving the right support allows people to demonstrate their skills and be appropriately appreciated.

Research shows that only 16% of autistic adults (including Asperger syndrome) are in full-time employment.

- 43% have left or lost a job because of their condition (National Autistic Society, 2012).
- Autistic adults should be offered individualised support if they are having difficulty maintaining employment (NICE, 2012).
- Only 16% of autistic people are in full-time employment compared to 48% of disabled people (Department of Health, 2009).

Many autistic people have a variety of sometimes exceptional skills that enable them to thrive in roles ranging from customer service to computer programmer, journalist to statistician, to name a few. However, some may be at a disadvantage because of other people's lack of understanding of autism.

As well as individual strengths and talents, autistic candidates often demonstrate above-average skills in some or all of the following areas:

- high levels of concentration
- reliability, conscientiousness and persistence
- accuracy, close attention to detail and the ability to identify errors
- technical ability, such as in IT
- detailed factual knowledge and an excellent memory.

By gaining an understanding of autism, you can open up new possibilities for your organisation, and for people with disabilities.

Meanwhile, employing an autistic person demonstrates your commitment to equality and diversity. Having a diverse workforce brings benefits to staff and business alike, and managers and colleagues often describe working with autistic colleagues as an enriching experience that encourages them to think more carefully about how they communicate, organise and prioritise their work.

"I disclose my autism at the point of [job] application to be fully transparent and challenge your preconceptions about autism. My CV speaks for itself and I am more than my autism diagnosis. Get to know me and how I will be the best employee for you, and you will learn more about what autistic people can bring to your organisation. Please don't think that I am disclosing in order to receive special treatment; a few reasonable adjustments can go a long way to help me succeed."

Autistic adult, Essential Autism Handbook



Preferred language to describe autism

The National Autistic Society operates on the principle of respect for diversity. It is important that people use the language and style of delivery that is comfortable for them; however, there are some terms and practices that are likely to cause offence. In addition, language needs to be current and up to date, avoiding outdated terms and references.

The language we use is important because it embodies, and can therefore help change, attitudes towards autism. Consider using the following terms:

- is autistic
- is on the autism spectrum
- autism is a condition
- autism is a difference.

What is autism?

Autism is a spectrum condition. All autistic people share differences and difficulties, but autism will impact them in different ways.

A diagnosis of autism is made through a process of observation and in-depth interviews, often in a variety of settings. To be diagnosed on the autism spectrum, a person must show difficulties in social interaction/communication and may have rigid or repetitive interests. They may also have sensory processing differences.



A diagnosis does not encompass what it is to be autistic and to experience the world as an autistic person. Autistic perspectives can lead to unique ways of seeing the world, as well as individual talents and abilities.

Below are some examples of difficulties autistic people may have:

Social interaction

Difficulties interacting, for example, not sharing with others, not showing typical emotional responses, seeming lack of interest in others.

Social communication

Difficulties initiating and sustaining conversations, literal interpretation of language.

Restricted interests

Adherence to routines, repetitive physical mannerisms, preoccupations with parts of objects, highly focused or intense range of interests.

Sensory differences

Appearing to experience over- or under-sensitivity to external and internal sensations eg sight, sound, taste, touch, smell, balance and body awareness. People on the autism spectrum experience sensory information differently.

Equality legislation

Equality legislation aims to protect disabled people and prevent disability discrimination. It provides legal rights in the following areas:

- employment
- education
- access to goods, services and facilities
- buying and renting land or property.

The classification of autism as a disability means that people on the autism spectrum are protected by the *Equality Act 2010*. The employment section of the *Equality Act* states that employers must make reasonable changes to applications, interviews and work so that disabled people are not disadvantaged compared to non-disabled people. These are known as **'reasonable adjustments'**.

Some examples of reasonable adjustments are:

- adjusting a person's working hours
- providing an adapted piece of equipment to help the person do the job
- providing written instructions for tasks
- arranging for the person to receive regular support in the workplace from a specialist mentor or job coach
- raising awareness and understanding amongst managers and colleagues who work closely with the person.

Recruiting and managing autistic employees



"People with autism have some very valuable skills which can be applied in the workplace. They might have very good attention to detail, or be really good at sticking to routines and timetables. Therefore, they are likely to be very punctual and reliable. Everyone has different skills but there will always be something."

Autistic jobseeker

Recruitment

Recruitment procedures often inadvertently create barriers. There are many minor adjustments that organisations can make to their processes that may help autistic candidates to apply for jobs, and enable them to demonstrate their skills as potential employees. Many of these adjustments may also benefit other candidates and enhance overall efficiency in recruitment.

By taking these simple steps, your organisation will be going a long way to meeting the *Equality Act (2010)* and *Northern Ireland Disability Discrimination Act* requirements for employers to make 'reasonable adjustments' for people with disabilities.

Job descriptions often include requirements that are not essential for the job to be carried out effectively. Qualities such as 'excellent communication skills' or 'good team player' are often included as default skills, even if they are not necessary - and many autistic people will not apply for jobs demanding these attributes. This can mean that suitable applicants may assume themselves to be ineligible for a job, even where they have strong skills that are directly relevant to the tasks involved.

It is not always obvious what information the applicant needs to provide on the application form. It is important to provide clear guidance on this, and to make sure that the form includes a space for applicants to highlight any support or adjustments they may need at an interview. Be aware that someone may not use 'buzz' words in their application and is likely to write using straightforward language without embellishment. If an electronic sorter is used to identify potentially suitable candidates, this person's application may not be selected. This means you may miss out on employing skilled, talented individuals.

Job adverts are not always concise or written in plain English. They should list essential skills, and avoid jargon or unnecessary information. The advert should be clearly presented, avoiding complex design. Try to be really objective about what abilities and experiences are genuinely essential for the job to be done well, and leave out any that are not.



Interviews rely heavily on social and communication skills, so some people may struggle to 'sell themselves' in an interview, even if they have all the right skills. In particular, difficulties may include:

- understanding body language and maintaining appropriate eye contact
- knowing how to start and maintain conversations
- judging how much information to give – especially if questions are open
- thinking in abstract ways, or considering 'what if?' scenarios
- varying tone of voice and finding the appropriate level of formality
- having higher anxiety than usual due to needing to communicate and interact with a new person.

Making reasonable adjustments during an interview is essential to allow candidates to portray skills and competencies fully, so that you can make an informed choice about who to recruit.

You could adapt the interview by:

- offering job trials or designing the interview to demonstrate practical skills
- providing clear information on what will be expected at the interview, how long the interview will take, what needs to be brought along and how to get to the interview
- describing any tasks that the recruit will have to do
- providing candidates with a list of interview questions in advance
- asking clear and specific questions such as, "Describe your work history for the last three years", rather than, "Tell me about yourself."
- asking questions based on past experience, relating specifically to skills needed for the job applied for, such as, "In your last job, did you do any table service or bar work?"
- avoiding hypothetical ('What if?') questions such as, "How do you think you'll cope with working if there are lots of interruptions?" A better question would be, "Think back to your last job. Can you tell us how you coped with your work when people interrupted you?"
- prompting and asking additional questions to get all the information needed
- being clear if an answer is too long. A polite but direct way of doing this would be to say, "Thank you, you've told us enough about that now and I'd like to ask you another question."
- being aware that the candidate may interpret language literally eg asking, "How did you find your last job?" may result in an answer of "I looked on the map" or "I looked in the paper, sent for the application form and completed it"
- building in structured breaks
- being aware that eye contact may be fleeting or prolonged, depending on the individual
- being aware of any sensory issues which may have been declared in their application and need to be taken into account for the interview eg lighting, colour, smells, noises
- respecting the person's individuality.

Supporting employees

Working with people on the autism spectrum can be an enriching experience for managers and colleagues alike. Here we explain how to avoid or overcome any difficulties, in order to ensure enjoyable and effective working relationships.

Communication differences may mean that people appear aloof or uninterested in talking to colleagues, or say something felt to be inappropriate. Be aware of the social expectations you may have and respect an individual's preferences. Offence is rarely intentional and more likely due to misunderstanding. If you become aware of any of these problems, try to deal with them swiftly and tactfully, and make colleagues aware of the potential for misunderstanding.

Be patient and explain boundaries of conversations with colleagues. Other staff may also need reminding that their attitudes may have a strong impact on the job performance of colleagues.

If an employee becomes anxious for any reason, try to find out what is causing the problem. One-to-one sessions are probably the best situation for doing this. You may need to think laterally. For example, the stress may not be caused by a difficulty in the job but by a colleague not being explicit in their instructions, by things not working efficiently (such as a computer crashing), or by difficulties in getting to work. Trying to think around the immediate issue may help, as well as supportively asking the employee specific (though not invasive) questions to try to get to the root of the problem. Be aware that sensory issues could also be the cause.

"Managing [David] has taught me that everyone is different, with their own individual strengths. Everyone in the team values David as a member of our working family."

Jacqui Copas,
Customer Reception Supervisor at First Great Western Railways

"When my [employer] asks how I am doing, I used to answer things like 'I have a headache' or 'I'm okay'... now I tell him three things I'm working on and wait if he has further questions. You see, I have so many things I could tell, but I don't know what he wants, so it all wants to come out at the same time, which results in silence."

Autistic adult, *Essential Autism Handbook*



Autistic staff may need some extra support to adapt their existing skills and knowledge to new tasks or environments.

Clarify expectations of the job

You may need to be more explicit about your expectations. As well as the job description, explain the etiquette and unwritten rules of the workplace. Make it clear that any adaptations are there to help people to do a job well.

Provide training and monitoring

Clear and structured training is invaluable. This can be provided informally on the job, by a manager, colleagues or a mentor, or by more formal training. Various organisations and schemes offer job coaches, and funding for this form of training may be available from Access to Work.

Make sure instructions are concise and specific

Try to give employees clear instructions right from the start about exactly how to carry out each task, from start to finish, as this will lay the foundations for good working practices. Don't assume the person will infer your meaning from informal instructions – for example, rather than saying "Give everybody a copy of the new menu", say "Make three photocopies of the menu, and give one each to Sam, Mary and Ahmed". You may also choose to provide written instructions. It can be helpful to ask the person to repeat back instructions so you are sure they have understood.

Ensure the work environment is well-structured

Some people need a structured work environment. You can help by working to prioritise activities, organising tasks into a timetable for daily, weekly and monthly activities, and breaking larger tasks into small steps. Some people will appreciate precise information about start and finish times, and assistance getting into a routine with breaks and lunches.

Regularly review performance

Line managers should provide regular one-to-one meetings to discuss and review performance and give overall comments and suggestions. Regular, brief reviews may be better than longer sessions at less frequent intervals.

Provide sensitive but direct feedback

Some people may find it difficult to pick up on social cues, so make sure your feedback is honest, constructive and consistent. If someone completes a task incorrectly, don't allude to, or imply, any problems – instead, explain tactfully but clearly why it is wrong, check what has been understood, and set out exactly what someone could do instead. Be aware that someone may have low self-esteem or have experience of being bullied, so ensure that any criticism is sensitive of this, and give positive feedback wherever appropriate.

Provide reassurance in stressful situations

Some people may be quite meticulous, and become anxious if their performance is not perfect. This can cause high stress levels in a situation such as an IT failure. You can help by giving concrete solutions – for example by explaining "If the card machine breaks at reception, use the one located in the bar." Similarly, provide reassurance that if someone occasionally arrives late due to transport problems or other unpreventable factors, this is not a problem. Employees may benefit from having a mentor or buddy in the workplace, such as an empathetic colleague who they can go to if they are feeling stressed, anxious or confused.

Support your staff member to prepare for changes

Give information about changes to the workplace or tasks well in advance.

Ask about sensory distractions

Some people may benefit from things like noise-cancelling headphones, information printed on coloured paper, or lower lighting levels.

Help other staff to be more aware

If someone consents to their condition being disclosed, then providing colleagues with information and guidance on autism can benefit everyone. Sometimes employees may find it helpful to write a document for other staff explaining what colleagues can do to support them. You could consider staff training, including face-to-face workshops or online modules.

Organisation skills

The ability to effectively organise and plan work involves a number of different skills and processes. These include:

- making decisions and judgements on the approach to take
- prioritising effectively
- following procedures accurately
- maintaining attention/focus
- multi-tasking
- finding the balance between accuracy and efficiency - knowing when a task is 'good enough' (particularly challenging for perfectionists).

Some people may need additional support around these matters.

Planning and setting objectives

Discuss and plan what someone's long-term objectives/goals are. A long-term plan enables tasks to be broken down and plotted out, to figure out what exactly needs to be done, in what order. People tend to neglect goal setting because it requires time and effort. However, a little time and effort at the start can save an enormous amount of time, effort and frustration in the future. Be mindful that for some people long-term planning may in itself raise anxiety levels and someone may need objectives broken down into smaller steps and short-term goals.

Prioritisation

Prioritising what needs to be done is especially important. Without it, an employee may work very hard, but won't be achieving the results they or you desire because what they are working on may not be of most value or strategic importance. Establish a list of tasks and timescales so that the most important tasks will be completed first.

"Being autistic is something I bring to a role. It's a different perspective. It's a different way of working. It's a commitment to working through any challenge."

Autistic adult, *Essential Autism Handbook*

Managing interruptions

It may be challenging for employees to minimise interruptions faced during a day at work. This could include phone calls, requests from colleagues and a range of other unexpected events. Some interruptions do need to be dealt with immediately, but there may be others which could be prevented/minimised.

Procrastination

"I'll get to it later" has led to the downfall of many a good employee. Procrastination is very tempting, but can have many negative consequences. To prevent this from happening, the first thing to do is to recognise and discuss the possibility, and why this may happen (eg fear of failure/fear of success/not knowing the approach to take/not enjoying the task).

Encourage employees to remind themselves regularly of the good work they have done to achieve different tasks and why it is important for tasks to be completed (explain the benefits for the individual, their team and the business).

Scheduling

A key aspect to organisation is the effective scheduling of time. Consider how a schedule of work may support employees to keep on track, and protect them from stress/exhaustion. This means understanding the factors that affect the time available for work, scheduling priority tasks, leaving room for interruptions, and time for unexpected/urgent tasks that would otherwise disrupt the schedule. This will support employees to control their time, progress in their work and keep their life in balance.

 Adapted from: www.mindtools.com

Teamwork

The hospitality industry relies on teamwork to ensure good customer relationships and smooth delivery of services. Positive relationships are essential in the workplace. People who are able to work as part of a team are always valued by employers and appreciated by colleagues.

Employees may need to be supported to be aware of the following key qualities of teamwork:

- being prepared to help colleagues with tasks when they are asked to do so
- if the task is something they are not trained to do, or would find difficult, then they need to know it is alright to say they won't be able to help, but it may be beneficial to explain why

- making allowances for colleagues having 'off days' as there will always be times when colleagues may make mistakes they wouldn't usually make or are short-tempered
- showing colleagues that they are listening by (where possible, when it will not cause distress or anxiety) making eye contact, nodding, or use verbal indicators such as "Yes" and "Mmmm"
- avoiding gossiping about colleagues. Other people in the workplace may do this, but this is something that can be upsetting or cause offence to others, so it is advisable to stay neutral
- offering to make tea, coffee or other drinks during break times
- building trust - if a manager or colleague says they will do something, it needs to be carried out.

Supporting sensory needs



Sensory differences are individual to every person. The different sensory systems are:

- sight (visual)
- sound (auditory)
- touch (tactile)
- taste (gustatory)
- smell (olfactory)
- balance (vestibular)
- body awareness (proprioception)
- inside body (interoception).

Processing sensory information can result in certain skills, such as:

- a good eye for detail
- spotting patterns where others might not
- accuracy and ability to focus intently
- scientific talent
- skills in engineering
- skills with written words, such as proofreading
- musical and artistic talent
- interest and attention.

When there is too much information we can all feel overwhelmed and find it hard to function. Autistic people may find it particularly difficult to process the sensory world. For some, the environment might not need to be particularly busy to feel overwhelmed. What may be thought of as a 'calm' or a 'quiet' environment might easily be overloading, especially if someone is hyper-sensitive to sensory stimuli.

Sensory processing differences can affect levels of interest and attention and can result in a hyper-focus toward pleasurable and interesting sensory experiences. In turn, this focus can lead to skills requiring an eye for detail, or in recognising complex patterns and arrangements. Interruptions to this focus may be interpreted as threatening and invasive to the person, sometimes leading to confusion and sensory fragmentation.

Ways in which you can provide support with sensory needs:

- low arousal - minimise sensory distractions within environments
- environmental audit - review work environments to identify potential challenges and either remove sensory problems or consider strategies to support
- remove stressors - either make changes to immediate environment eg lighting/sound or see if the person can move to a different space.

"Offer to turn one of the lights off, shut a door to make it quieter, that would be a huge help."

Autistic adult, Essential Autism Handbook



Supporting wellbeing

"I try to manage my stress levels to reduce anxiety. I have found that being overstimulated or on sensory overload will push me into a heightened state of anxiety. I therefore try to prevent this from happening by engaging in relaxing activities every day and creating/maintaining better habits to reduce overstimulation and sensory overload. Although I doubt I will ever completely eliminate my anxiety, I am much calmer now than I was in the past."

Amy - aspified.com quoted in *Essential Autism Handbook*

Some characteristics associated with autism can cause people to be particularly vulnerable to experiencing stress or anxiety. These include:

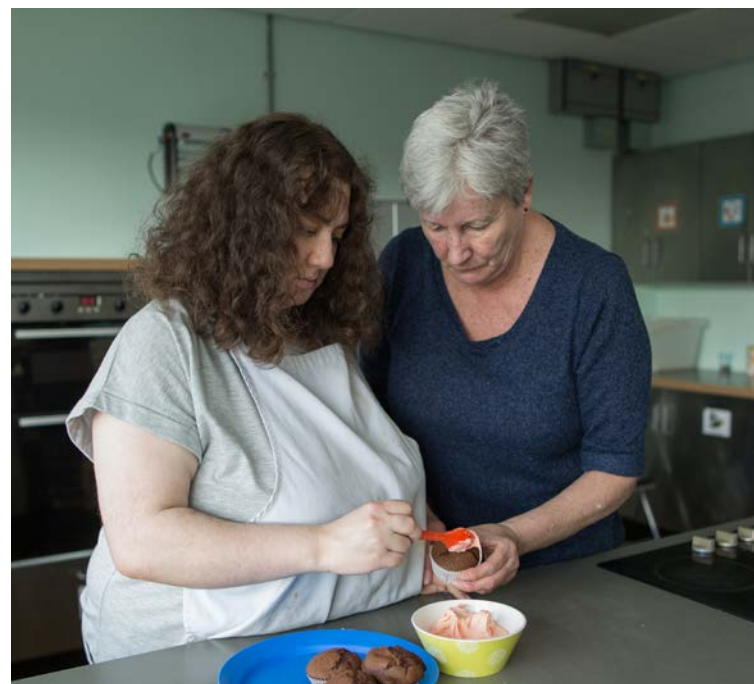
- difficulty communicating thoughts, feelings and intentions
- difficulty understanding the actions of others
- sensory sensitivities
- inflexible thinking style
- difficulty with change
- perfectionism.

Time stress is likely to be the most common form of stress experienced in the workplace. It includes worrying about being on time, worrying about not having enough time to get a particular job done and worrying about how to fit work tasks into a limited time frame. Time stress may cause feelings of frustration, being trapped, unhappiness, or even hopelessness. Common examples of time stress include worrying about deadlines or rushing to avoid being late for a meeting.

Anticipatory stress describes stress concerning the future. Sometimes the anxiety comes from not knowing what to expect, and sometimes it comes from the thought of a specific event or situation itself. Anticipatory stress can also be vague and undefined, such as an overall sense of dread about the future, or a worry that 'something will go wrong'.

Situational stress occurs in a situation someone has little control over. It may be a situation that causes uncomfortable feelings, or one that involves conflict or a loss of status in the eyes of a group. Being in an unfamiliar environment or making a major mistake in work are examples of events that can cause situational stress.

Encounter stress revolves around people. This could include worrying about interacting with a certain person or group of people and fears around being liked, or finding them unpredictable. This type of stress also occurs from 'contact overload' when feeling overwhelmed or drained from interacting with too many people.



Anxiety support

If you think that an employee may be struggling with anxiety or stress, raise any difficulties or concerns with them. Communicate in a calm environment and ensure there is enough time for someone to process what you are saying and that they feel safe to respond.

You may want to suggest some ways to support their anxiety.

Prevention

Consider if there are adjustments to the role or working practices to help minimise anxiety around situations. For example, making changes to working hours to avoid using public transport during the rush hour, or removing the requirement to complete certain duties/responsibilities and replacing them with others (eg less customer-facing work and more telephone and email administration).

Preparation

When certain tasks or situations cannot be avoided, prepare information in advance or provide opportunities to practise and learn about a situation as this may help to minimise anxiety. For example, produce an itinerary before a team meeting or provide written appraisal feedback in advance.

Relaxation

Discuss with your employee how they will manage their anxiety if it does escalate while at work. Possible strategies may include:

- taking time away from the situation – going for a walk/to a quiet room
- using breathing techniques and muscle relaxation
- sensory stimulation – such as calming smells, fabrics, coloured lights, gentle swaying, favourite familiar objects or activity.



Further sources of support and information

The National Autistic Society's website has information on a wide variety of autism-related topics for autistic individuals, their parents and carers, as well as for autism professionals and anyone encountering autistic people in their working life. You can visit the website at: www.autism.org.uk.

Adjustments in the workplace



Communication

- use preferred method
- visual reinforcement for verbal instructions
- clear and explicit language
- check understanding with specific questions
- clear, detailed, honest feedback
- don't rely on verbal communication.

Nature of the task

- produce checklists
- advance warning of changes where possible
- structure – timetables/processes etc
- consistency
- written instructions
- autism awareness training for staff
- workplace support
- mentoring
- regular catch-ups with manager.

Anxiety and personal situations

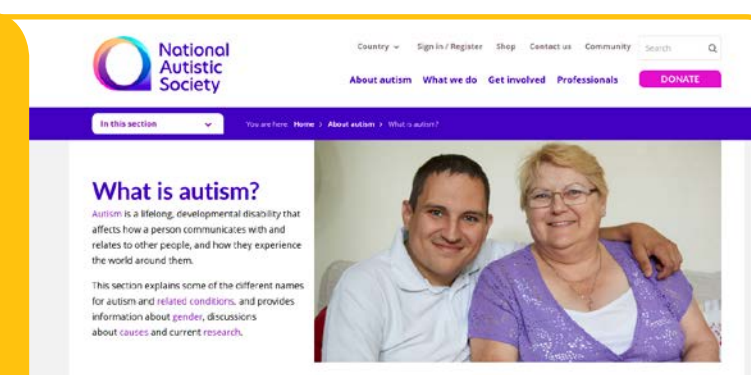
- amended working hours
- working from home for a certain number of days per week
- adapted role
- adjusted hours
- structured breaks.

Environmental factors and sensory sensitivities

- providing quiet places to work, for example, meeting rooms or a desk in a quiet location
- sensory adjustments such as noise-cancelling headphones, amended uniform or a personal fan.

You may find the following information pages particularly helpful:

- What is autism?
- Social skills for adolescents and adults
- What is Asperger syndrome?
- Anxiety in adults with an autism spectrum disorder.



Information for employers

You can find information for employers on what autism is, recruiting an autistic employee, and managing an autistic employee at:

 www.autism.org.uk/employers

You can also call our **Autism Helpline** on **0808 800 4104** and ask for the information sheets to be sent to you.

Online Community

The National Autistic Society's Online Community is a place for autistic people, carers, relatives and professionals to share their thoughts and experiences.

 Visit: <https://community.autism.org.uk/>

Employment training

We offer a variety of scheduled training events and courses run at your venue, tailored to your organisation's needs, a consultancy service that works with you to find creative solutions and a comprehensive range of online training modules.

Our **Employment Training Team** supports businesses to develop accessible employment opportunities for autistic applicants and retain the autistic talent they have in their organisation through raising awareness and implementing effective reasonable adjustments. All of our training and services are developed in close consultation with autistic people and 50% of our Employment Training Team have an autism diagnosis.

 Visit: www.autism.org.uk/professionals/training-consultancy/employment/meet-the-team

Brain in Hand

Brain in Hand gives personalised support when and where it's needed, via an app on your phone. A diary; notes and reminders to ensure you never forget what's important in your day; easy access to your best coping strategies to help reduce anxieties; and a traffic light system help you to monitor your anxiety or request additional help from the National Autistic Society if needed.

 Visit: www.autism.org.uk/braininhand

Network Autism

A UK-wide community of autism professionals with international reach:

- connect with professionals in similar situations
- share expertise and knowledge
- access useful resources
- develop and contribute professional skills.

 Visit: <http://network.autism.org.uk/welcome>

You can join the specific group 'Managing employees with autism - training participants' to access ongoing support and materials.

Support services

The National Autistic Society's Autism Helpline provides impartial and confidential information, advice and support to autistic people and their families.

The helpline can:

- answer general questions about autism, which includes Asperger syndrome
- talk through options available to autistic people
- talk through support options available to family members
- provide information on local services and other relevant organisations.

The contact details for the helpline are:
Phone: **0808 800 4104** (open 10am-4pm, Monday-Thursday, 9am-3pm Friday)
Email: autismhelpline@nas.org.uk

 Visit: www.autism.org.uk/helpline

The National Autistic Society is here to transform lives, change attitudes and create a society that works for autistic people.

We transform lives by providing support, information and practical advice for the 700,000 autistic adults and children in the UK, as well as their three million family members and carers. Since 1962, autistic people have turned to us at key moments or challenging times in their lives, be it getting a diagnosis, going to school or finding work.

We change attitudes by improving public understanding of autism and the difficulties many autistic people face. We also work closely with businesses, local authorities and government to help them provide more autism-friendly spaces, deliver better services and improve laws.

We have come a long way but it is not good enough. There is still so much to do to increase opportunities, reduce social isolation and build a brighter future for people on the spectrum. With your help, we can make it happen.

Find out more at:
www.autism.org.uk



**National
Autistic
Society**

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