

Employ Different Thinking

AUTISM & NEURODIVERSITY IN THE WORKPLACE

The autistic population is rich in individuals with tremendous skills, unique perspectives and a desire to engage in the workforce. Tapping into this currently under-engaged pool of neurodiverse talent and matching it with meaningful work is a great opportunity for employers, particularly in today's internationally competitive labour market. The following information is a starting point for employers interested in leveraging the talents and energy of individuals in this pool.

What is the Autism Spectrum?

The Autism Spectrum, or 'Autism' is understood to be a neurological variation and a lifelong condition that is classified as a developmental disability. It is called a 'spectrum' as it affects each individual differently and to varying degrees. In general, there are some characteristics related to social interaction, communication, behavioural traits and environmental sensitivity that can be common to many who identify with autism. However, just as is the case in the general population, each individual is unique with their own abilities, strengths and way of being.

'If you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism' – Dr. Stephen Shore

People on the autism spectrum are often underestimated or misunderstood as a result of misperception and stereotyping that has little basis in reality. It is important to understand that there are no behaviours specific to autism, rather a collection of traits that together result in a different way of experiencing and being in the world.

Autism in the workplace

An autistic employee may communicate, interact, learn and problem-solve in ways that do not always conform with what is considered the norm. Successful employers have learned that by embracing and accommodating these differences, leveraging good management practices and creating comfortable physical and social environments, workplaces benefit from all the strengths, intelligence and commitment a broader and more diverse workforce can offer.

When you think about it, workplaces have come a long way in integrating individuals of different genders, backgrounds, cultures and nationalities. This has resulted in constant development and improvement of communication and management practices amongst managers and employees. Workplaces that employ individuals on the autism spectrum have learned that success comes from continuing to develop these capabilities. And as a result, everyone benefits.

For example, clearer communications that work well for individuals who have a more literal way of thinking, generally work well for everyone, and allow teams to be more productive and operate more effectively. In the same way, adjusting environments and training procedures to accommodate diverse employee needs and learning styles can lead to increased efficiency, focus and experienced comfort for the team as a whole.

Individualized Approach

Businesses get the best from their employees by recognizing each employee's individuality. The same is true for autistic employees. Here are some examples:

The Comfort Zone

It is important to understand that individuals on the autism spectrum can often feel overwhelmed or even assaulted by the physical and social environment in which they live. Anyone's productivity will suffer if they are uncomfortable. Keep this in mind when considering how to better accommodate employees on the autism spectrum. Ask them what they believe they need to help them feel better in their working environment so that it can become one of their comfortable places and where they prefer to spend their time.

Focus on Strengths

It is often easy to focus on areas where individuals seem to have challenges or need improvement. But this can lead to a negative spiral. But focusing on an employee's strengths and leveraging them, they can experience success and build confidence. This will often provide a foundation for growth and development in new areas, and when work within a team can be shared in ways that focus on every member's strengths, then everyone can benefit.

Ask the Person

People know themselves well, so involve them directly in coming up with solutions to achieve the best outcomes. Make sure to have open and direct conversations about communication or learning styles, or about working environment and social relationships. They have spent a lifetime overcoming challenges and building strategies to deal with new or difficult situations. Together you can leverage that knowledge and experience.

Clarity in Communication

The best approach to communication is to say what you mean and to mean what you say. In a work environment, everyone benefits from clear instructions where nuance, sarcasm, colloquialisms, acronyms are reduced or eliminated. This is particularly important for those employees who think and communicate more literally. For some, communication is best in writing. For others a conversation works just fine. But for everyone, clarity will lead to fewer mistakes and higher productivity.

Job Coaching

A professional job coach, or employment support specialist will work directly with managers and employees to help them to understand or diagnose performance or communication challenges and to put in place tools and strategies to overcome them. This sort of third party support can be the key to success for all sorts of challenges within the workplace.

Physical Environment

Often small changes can dramatically improve work environments for individuals with autism. Perhaps there is a quieter work area away from conversations and high traffic or kitchen smells. Sometimes noise cancelling headphones allow people to better focus. Others may benefit from shades from direct light, or sunglasses.

Diversity Education

Knowledge and understanding are the best tools for taking on something new and for avoiding misunderstanding, bias and stereotyping. Hire a knowledgeable educator who can provide you and your employees with a better understanding of autism and neurodiversity, particularly in the workplace. A little knowledge will go a long way.

About Disclosure

In understanding and accommodating work cultures, disclosing to managers and coworkers that individuals are on the spectrum can go a long way to helping improve working environments. In supportive and inclusive workplaces, disclosure can lead to better communication and understanding. However, it is important to remember that the decision on whether or not to disclose belongs to the individual. Managers and coworkers must not openly discuss an employee's circumstances without permission, but should ensure an open environment in which discussions about disclosure and support are always welcome.

About Specialisterne

Specialisterne is an internationally recognized leader in harnessing talents of individuals on the autism spectrum, or who face similar employment barriers, providing businesses with talented employees and providing recruits with the opportunity to sustain meaningful employment. Through a proven method of recruitment, onboarding and management practices, Specialisterne helps businesses access this underemployed talent pool, a community rich in individuals with tremendous skills and unique perspectives. Founded in Denmark in 2004, Specialisterne – Danish for The Specialists – has operations in 14 countries worldwide and was established in Canada in 2013.