



ORGANIZATION FOR  
AUTISM RESEARCH

# UNDERSTANDING AUTISM: AN EMPLOYER'S GUIDE



*Keys to success  
for supervising  
and supporting  
employees  
with autism*



Produced in collaboration with the  
District of Columbia Public Schools

# INTRODUCTION

NOW THAT YOU'VE HIRED a person with autism, what do you need to know? People with autism are increasingly finding meaningful work and proving that with the right opportunities and proper support, they can be successful in a variety of positions. More and more employers find that individuals on the autism spectrum are productive employees who possess specialized skills, are detail oriented, and excel at managing schedules and deadlines. This brochure is intended to offer some tips for maximizing the potential of your employee with autism and fostering a supportive work environment.

## WHAT IS AUTISM?

AUTISM IS AN INCREASINGLY PREVALENT developmental disorder that affects the way a person perceives and communicates with the world, often resulting in challenges with social interactions and information processing. In the workplace, these challenges can manifest themselves in different ways. While there is no typical employee with autism, there are a range of behaviors employers might observe with regards to:

- Communication : (S)he may avoid eye contact when speaking or interpret phrases literally
- Social cues: (S)he may not understand that when a co-worker's phone rings, they may have to end their conversation early
- Senses: (S)he may not be able to concentrate when distracted by the sound of the printer or other office machinery
- Physical activity: (S)he may hold a stress ball or other object to manage anxiety

*These are only a few examples of individual characteristics you might expect to see, and it is by no means an exhaustive list. It is therefore especially important to get to know your employee with autism on an individual basis.*



## FIVE KEYS TO SUCCESS:

1. Get to know your employee
2. Orient your employee and train him/her on specific job duties
3. Foster a welcoming and supportive workplace
4. Maximize your company's existing support systems
5. Give clear directions and performance feedback

## KEY # 1:

### Get to know your employee

The process of establishing rapport with your employee with autism begins on the first day of work. During your initial discussions, addressing the topic of autism provides an opportunity to consider how it may affect your employee's job performance and adjustment to the culture of your business. In addition to questions you ask every new employee, you may want to ask your employee with autism:

- What are your greatest strengths?
- What tends to make you stressed or nervous?

You should also approach the topic of disclosure, whether co-workers should know that your employee has autism. Disclosure can allow for greater understanding and normalization of autism in the workplace. Try to reach a mutual agreement with your employee regarding the details of disclosure (how much information is appropriate, etc.), but remember that the decision ultimately rests with your employee. All the information you learn through this process can be used to assign tasks and schedules that best suit the employee's strengths.

## KEY #2:

### Orient your employee and train him or her on specific job duties

When training an employee with autism, be specific in your instructions and explain every procedure in as stepwise a process as possible. A useful strategy for teaching your employee a new task is called modeling, in which the trainer:

- Demonstrates each step of the task while the employee observes
- Has the employee perform the task immediately following the demonstration
- Corrects any mistakes and requires the employee to repeat the task successfully until it has been mastered

As you train your employee in his or her specific job responsibilities, it is also important to explain appropriate workplace behavior and other rules, which may seem obvious but may not be to your employee with autism. Consider addressing everyday procedures, such as:

- Morning arrival and clock-in
- How best to socialize with co-workers
- Taking lunch and other breaks
- Emergency considerations
- Arriving late or taking days off

*“Be specific in your instructions and explain every procedure...”*



## KEY #3:

### Foster a welcoming and supportive workplace

The workforce is incredibly diverse, with employees representing many different backgrounds often working closely together in pursuit of common goals. Whether your employee publicly shares that (s)he has autism or not, it is important to promote a workplace culture in which every staff member is valued for his or her contributions. Supervising an employee with autism is not unlike supervising any other employee; those who do not have autism still present their own idiosyncrasies. As a supervisor, you may also want to consider slight changes to the physical workspace that can help your employee with autism thrive. For example, a quiet interior office may help him or her maintain focus.

## KEY #4:

### Maximize your company's existing support systems

Employees with autism can benefit from many of the same programs that supervisors already implement to help their employees succeed. Some examples include:

- Mirror existing incentive systems (e.g. vacation days based on time worked) and ensure you're your employee understands explicit connection between particular behaviors and rewards
- Assign a co-worker to help mentor your employee as (s)he navigates their new work environment

Many employers have had success using outside job coaches to help their employees with autism during the training process. Job coaches, who possess specialized knowledge about developmental disabilities, can help employees (especially those transitioning to new roles) master skills and remain on task. Adding a third person to the employee-supervisor dynamic can sometimes be difficult, but supervisors should always remember to address employees directly and use job coaches as secondary resources.



JOB COACHES shadow employees and empower them to improve performance and communication skills, while ensuring they don't interact or perform the employee's tasks for them. Ideally, as the employee becomes more independent, the job coach progressively decreases his or her involvement.

## KEY #5:

### Give clear directions and performance feedback

It is important to be both candid and constructive when evaluating the performance of your employee with autism. Note praiseworthy accomplishments, identify specific mistakes, and explicitly suggest alternatives that can help him or her be more successful. Here are some helpful recommendations:

- Be specific; identify the exact behaviors you want your employee to continue or modify
- Teach the “big picture”; explain the purpose of each individual task and how these collectively help accomplish the broader goals of your company
- If your employee is struggling, encourage gradual change; break down large responsibilities into smaller, more manageable parts that (s)he can work on



*“Break down large responsibilities into smaller, more manageable parts...”*

# TO HELP YOUR EMPLOYEE...

## ▶ **Follow instructions:**

- Provide very specific directions
- Explain everything step-by-step
- Supply verbal praise and specify the source of mistakes
- Create written or pictorial guides

## ▶ **Deal with change:**

- Inform of changes ahead of time
- Gradually incorporate small schedule modifications to prepare for larger shifts

## ▶ **Understand workplace culture:**

- Use literal language
- Don't require him or her to "read between the lines"
- Clearly explain point of view and intention

## ▶ **Generalize business standards and protocols:**

- Orient him or her to the culture of your company and how it applies
- Connect one situation to another (e.g. "you can take a lunch break every day, not just on days when I happen to say you should")

## ▶ **Deal with potential distractions:**

- Provide distraction-free work spaces
- Understand that occasional breaks may be necessary
- Be aware of sensitivities to light, sounds, smells, etc.

# WASHINGTON, DC RESOURCES

IN THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA, the Department on Disability Services (DDS) is the adult services agency that provides comprehensive employment support to qualifying individuals through the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA). The RSA can also be a helpful resource for employers. They can:

- Help you better understand the requirements set forth in the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and determine how to make reasonable workplace accommodations (job coaching, assistive technology, additional training, etc.) if necessary
- Provide technical assistance and on-the-job support for you and your new employee during the transition period
- Expand your access to qualified candidates for future positions



1125 15th St. NW  
Washington, DC 20005  
(202)730-1700  
[www.dds.dc.gov](http://www.dds.dc.gov) • [dds@dc.gov](mailto:dds@dc.gov)  
Open Monday-Friday, 8:15 a.m.-4:45 p.m.

## CONCLUSION

READING THIS GUIDE is just the first step in establishing a work environment that maximizes the potential of your employee with autism to help your business. Employees with autism may behave differently in some instances, but they should be held to the same high standards as other staff members. With a basic understanding of autism and how it may affect your employee, you are prepared to provide the support and professional guidance (s)he needs to make valuable contributions to your company.



2000 N. 14th Street, Suite 710  
Arlington, VA 22201  
(703)243-9710  
[www.researchautism.org](http://www.researchautism.org)  
[oar@researchautism.org](mailto:oar@researchautism.org)



Office of Special Education  
1200 First Street NE, 9th Floor  
Washington, DC 20002  
[www.dcps.dc.gov](http://www.dcps.dc.gov)  
(202)442-4800