



STUDENTS WITH ASD IN THE WORKPLACE



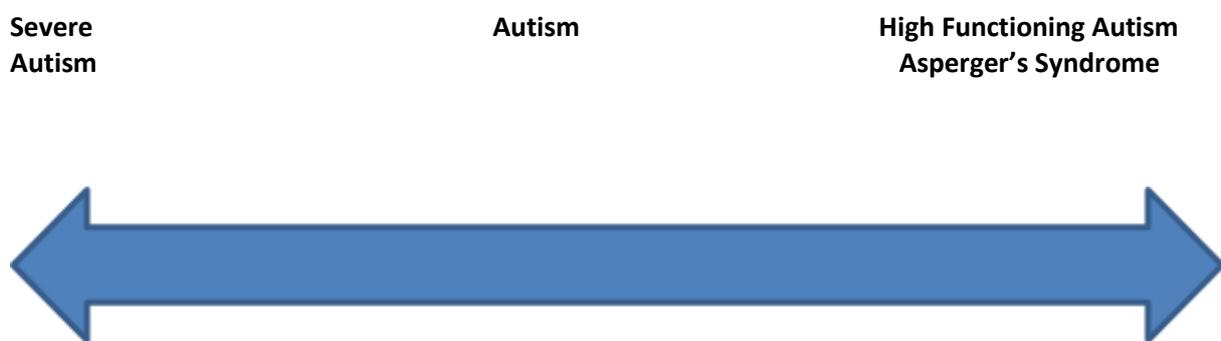
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What is Autism / ASD?

Autism is a spectrum condition combining Autism, Asperger's Syndrome, and other related disorders which were combined into one diagnosis and is now referred to as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The American Psychiatric Association (2013) describe ASD as a pervasive neurodevelopmental disorder, characterized by impairments in social communication and restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests or activities.

Figure 1 Autism Spectrum Disorder



Asperger's Syndrome (AS) can be loosely defined as mild autism spectrum disorder which is recognised as being at the high functioning end of the autistic spectrum. People with Asperger syndrome will often be of average, or above average, intelligence and have a high aptitude for acquiring knowledge. Generally, they will not have a learning disability and usually have fewer problems with language development while experiencing difficulties with social communication (HSE 2011).

People with ASD can display a wide range of work strengths showing unusual aptitude or having particular strengths. Depending on the characteristics of each person and where they fall on the spectrum, these can include:

- High attention to detail, accuracy and quality of work.
- Long-term memory capacity, with ability to recall detailed facts and figures.
- Strong adherence to routines, rules and regulations and appreciation of repetitious tasks.
- Expert, in-depth knowledge of one or more chosen subject areas.
- Enhanced ability for pattern recognition.
- Being hard working and intensely focused.

Difficulties that may be experienced by individuals with ASD.

Autistic people tend to see, hear and feel the world differently. They may feel significant anxiety as the world can feel overwhelming for them. In particular, they experience difficulties in understanding and relating to other people. Taking part in everyday family, school, work and social life, can be challenging.

ASD is primarily characterised by a triad of impairments or difficulties, these include:

1. Communication difficulties,
2. Social/interpersonal barriers, and
3. Repetitive and restrictive behaviours and interests.

Communication Difficulties

- challenges interpreting both verbal and non-verbal language.
- may not understand; facial expressions, tone of voice or jokes/sarcasm.
- lack casual conversation skills.
- take a literal understanding of language.
- struggle with vagueness or abstract concepts.

Social / Interpersonal Barriers

- may have difficulty recognising or understanding others' feelings, intentions and social cues.
- challenge in expressing their own emotions or seeking comfort from others.
- find it hard to form friendships.
- seek out time alone when overloaded by other people.
- appear to behave 'strangely' or in a way thought to be socially inappropriate.

Repetitive and Restrictive Behaviours and Interests

- often prefer to have a daily routine.
- The use of rules can be important.
- can have intense and highly-focused interests, often from a fairly young age.
- can experience over- or under-sensitivity to sounds, touch, tastes, smells, light, colours, temperatures or pain.
- may engage in repetitive body movements, such as rocking back and forth or flapping their hands.

Impact on workplace learning.

Communication Difficulties

- Student may have difficulty understanding metaphors, sarcasm, unclear directions or ambiguous content. This can impact auditory and reading comprehension.
- May not ask for help as may find it challenging to initiate communication.
- Student may be unable to complete tasks or assignments because of comprehension difficulties or poor organisational skills.
- Organising material, planning, managing their time and deadlines can present a significant challenge.
- Student may have difficulty completing daily tasks.
- May appear aloof, bored or lacking engagement.

Social / Interpersonal Barriers

- Student may be demanding of a manager's time or attention. May not be able to understand that colleagues may become frustrated with this behavior.
- Other behaviour deemed inappropriate such as interruptions and difficulty with turn-taking can occur.
- Student may have difficulty developing peer relationships.
- May not understand social cues and so personal space may be an issue.
- May be quite conscious of their performance in social situations, which can be a source of anxiety.
- Student may find group work situations challenging or stressful.

Repetitive Behaviours

- Student may display repetitive body movements, such as rocking back and forth, flapping their hands or less prominent movements e.g. cracking knuckles, chewing on pencils or pens, perseveration on thoughts or topics, which can be distracting in class.
- Students may find adapting to new routines or changing circumstances challenging. The non-routine nature of work life can often be difficult.
- Orientation to new locations and systems, can be challenging, particularly during early stages of transition.

Restrictive Behaviours and Interests

- Student can be sensitive to sensory aspects within the work environment. Sensitivities such as a noisy work area, humming of a computer or the [sound of] turning of a page, the glow of fluorescent lighting or the smell of dry-erase markers, can cause some students to lose focus.
- Fitting all the pieces of information / learning together into a whole picture may prove a challenge.
- A singular focus on one area can make transitioning between topics difficult.
- Perfectionism can be a restrictive issue for students with ASD. For example fear of failure or a desire for the perfect piece of work can cause procrastination and affect their ability to complete work.

* Additionally, some students with ASD may experience difficulties with gross or fine motor skills, and have difficulty with handwriting or note-taking.

Strategies for supporting students with ASD.

The transition to the workplace can be particularly challenging for students with ASD. Support and understanding during this period will be valuable.

Students with ASD respond well to consistency and predictability:

Students with ASD tend to adopt consistent routines in their everyday life. There are a number of ways in which this can be achieved in the workplace;

- Provide well-structured, predictable rooms and schedules.
- A clear timeline of events, assignments, and deadlines will support the student in recognising when things are due and allow them to manage their time and plan ahead.
- Prioritising activities, organising tasks into a timetable for daily, weekly and monthly activities, and breaking larger tasks into small steps will help support the student.
- Give the student notice of any changes in routines, as well as an opportunity to practice new routines. A student with ASD will appreciate specific information about start and finish times, breaks and lunches.
- If possible try not to reschedule or double-book time if meeting a student with ASD as this can cause them significant stress.
- Be cognisant that a student with ASD may not want to sit close to others in or may have a seat / area that they consider “theirs”. As such asking them to change their routine can cause upset.
- Allow the student flexibility to organise their own workspace and develop their own way of completing a task where possible.

Students with ASD tend to be literal learners:

Generally, students with ASD take a literal understanding of language. As such it is important to ensure that meaning is clear and that no ambiguous language is used. Thus, it is suggested that;

- Language used should be simple and clear and free from metaphors.

- It may be useful to match a student with ASD to a colleague who can act as a mentor to help explain / translate workplace culture, instructions and comments.
- Managers should take time to clearly explain policies and / or expectations about staff conduct and workplace behaviour.
- Explicitly state expectations, instructions and feedback. Aim to provide lists of written instruction rather than long, hard to interpret or rushed verbal instruction. However, it is beneficial to provide these in both written and verbal form.
- It may be worthwhile when giving instructions / feedback to students with ASD to check they have understood what has been said. A student with ASD may be able to repeat what has been said without understanding its meaning. Asking open-ended questions can ensure that understanding is reached.
- Feedback provided should be constructive as perfectionism can be an issue for students with ASD. As these students may set very high expectations for themselves critical feedback may be perceived in a negative way.
- The use of a personal calendar, or appointment book and / or the use of technology like smart phones with scheduling software may be beneficial.

Students with ASD may need additional support strategies:

- Ensure work location / tasks do not have unnecessary stimulation such as distracting sounds, smells, or sights. For example avoid fluorescent lights (humming or flickering) which can be distracting for those with ASD.
- People with ASD may benefit from having a screen around their desk, the use of noise-cancelling headphones, or their desk being in the corner, to overcome the effect that the workplace could have on their senses.
- If possible make meeting notes available in advance in written format. Students with ASD may find it difficult to concentrate in meetings, as well as having fine motor skills, attention, and organisation and note taking difficulties, and having written transcripts can assist this.
- Students with ASD may need additional guidance in the way they communicate and present information.

- Students with ASD may have difficulty taking part in group work. Be aware of this when organising groups as it may cause a student with ASD to feel excluded or have difficulty adapting if they do not know the other group members.
- Encourage students to make a list of questions and raise them individually with their manager if they are interrupting or asking a lot of questions on a daily basis.
- It may be beneficial at the end of each day, particularly during the transition phase, to provide an opportunity for the student to ask questions on the nature of their role and assigned duties. This may help enhance the student's auditory and processing comprehension.

Further Information.

For further information regarding people with ASD in the workplace please see: **“National Disability Authority (2018) “Assisting People with Autism: Guidance for Line Managers and HR Professionals.”**

The following links provide additional information about ASD:

- [Irish Society for Autism](#)
- [Aspire Ireland](#)
- [Shine Ireland](#)
- [National Autistic Society UK](#)
- [AsIAm.ie](#)

“What would happen if the autism gene was eliminated from the gene pool? You would have a bunch of people standing around in a cave, chatting and socializing and not getting anything done.”
— Temple Grandin