



Unit 2: Removing barriers at the workplace

The importance of making adjustments at the workplace

It is a fact that people with autism face a few obstacles in the work environment. In order to minimise those barriers, facilitate transitions and enhance their performance, a variety of adjustments can be made before and during employment.

In order to be able to identify the most suitable adjustments, an employer first needs to understand the possible support needs of their employees. A person with autism or other neurodevelopmental disabilities might have some of the following needs:

Social: People on the spectrum face many difficulties in social situations. These can include: avoiding eye contact, not using gestures or body language appropriately, not being able to effectively communicate their ideas.

Physical: They may have gross-motor problems, such as a clumsy, uncoordinated gait; and difficulties with fine-motor control, such as manipulating objects and writing. Adjustments should make the workspace and work tasks more accessible.

Cognitive: They may have some executive function deficiencies — a set of mental skills that underlie planning, self-control, short-term memory and decision-making. Adjustments should aim at supporting employees with processing times, memory and organisation skills.

Sensory: Autistic people can experience both hypersensitivity (over-responsiveness) and hyposensitivity (under-responsiveness) to a wide range of stimuli. Most people have a combination of both. Many autistic people experience hypersensitivity to bright lights or certain light wavelengths (e.g., fluorescent lights). Certain sounds, smells, textures and tastes can also be overwhelming. This can result in sensory avoidance – trying to get away from stimuli that most people can easily tune out. Sensory avoidance can look like pulling away from physical touch, covering the ears to avoid loud or unpredictable sounds, or avoiding certain kinds of clothing.



Therefore, adjustments should support the unique way in which neurodivergent people may perceive and experience different sensory stimuli in the workplace including sound, vision, touch, taste and smell.

Mental health: Individuals with autism can suffer from mental health problems such as anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and depression. Therefore, adjustments at the workplace should facilitate the mental health and wellbeing needs of the employees.

Skills and experience: Always take into account the extent to which neurodivergent people may have been previously disadvantaged by the education system/prior work experiences. Such adjustments involve establishing a targeted structure for supporting the growth of skills and experience.

According to these needs and based on the DARE Report on Adjustments (see it here: <https://dareuk.org/dare-adjustments-toolkit>) we can divide adjustments into 3 main categories:

- *Adjustments to job role and management processes (including communication)*
- *Adjustments to physical space and equipment*
- *Adjustments to social/cultural practices within the organisation*

According to DARE Report on Adjustments (January 2020), some possible physical adjustments are:

- Ability to adjust temperature where possible (e.g., through air conditioning, desk fan)
- Allocated desk (i.e., in otherwise hot-desking environment)
- Allocated parking space
- Avoid fluorescent strip lighting if possible
- Avoid open plan office if possible
- Blue screen filter for computer screen to see colours more easily
- Clear signage throughout building and designated quiet areas
- Communication devices (e.g., a slider on desk to indicate when working from home).



- Designated quiet space
- Ear defenders/ Noise-cancelling headphones/ Ear plugs
- Ergonomic chair
- Ergonomic wrist-rest and keyboard
- Fast response to malfunctioning equipment (e.g., a flickering light above desk)
- Laptop stand (neck and back support)
- Maximise personal space where possible (e.g., spaced out seating in meetings)
- Online accessible resources about getting up to speed in a new role
- Option to work away from doors (which slam shut) and busy pathways
- Repositioning of desk (e.g., in corner to avoid being startled)
- Secondary glazing (to provide sound protection) where possible
- Site blocker software to avoid internet distractions
- Small desk lamp (if main light too bright or not bright enough)
- Software to improve accessibility (e.g., screen reader)
- Tinted glasses (to minimise overpowering lights)
- Visual partitions of workspace (i.e., to minimise distraction and sound)

According to DARE Report on Adjustments (January 2020), some possible job role and management adjustments are:

- Accurate job descriptions (e.g., not emphasising social presentation skills when not necessary, clarifying likelihood of taking on additional responsibilities)
- Advanced notice of changes
- Avoid role-play on training courses
- A culture of asking one question at a time
- Explicit communication (e.g., written instructions rather than verbal)
- Evolving job role based on strengths
- Extra breaks to prevent becoming overwhelmed
- Extra time meeting with managers
- Flexible deadlines
- Flexible work hours to avoid commuting in rush hour
- Frequent feedback
- Longer time to familiarise with new routines when there are changes



- Maintain consistent job roles, patterns and working partners where possible
- Minimise unnecessary away days
- Minimise unnecessary face-to face meetings
- Minimise face-to-face interaction where possible
- More time for tasks
- Online access to further information about sources of support for job role, mental health and wellbeing
- Option to work remotely where possible
- Process for having concerns recorded and taken seriously
- Realistic manager expectations
- Specifying clear action points in emails so that recipients understand what is being asked of them
- Trialling workspace before starting
- Using a mentor (external) to help manage challenges
- Using an internal advocate who can communicate on behalf of the employee
- Weekly plan with manager
- Widespread training on neurodiversity available to all employees
- Written communication preference over verbal communication
- Written questions for job interviews and circulated ahead of time

According to DARE Report on Adjustments (January 2020), some possible adjustments to social/cultural practices are:

- A team culture that is aware of sensory impacts (e.g., eating lunch away from desks due to potential sensory discomfort from smell)
- A team culture that encourages quieter lunchtime conversations
- Ability to explore other job roles within the organisation
- Access to senior mentoring
- A team culture that educates about negative language in the workplace (e.g., describing autism as a tragedy)



- A team culture that avoids unnecessary metaphorical and idiomatic language (which can be hard to interpret for autistic people)
- A team culture that respects preferences concerning physical contact (e.g., no handshakes)
- Being asked about one's preference for social events (e.g., whether to receive birthday cards, location for social dinner)
- Colleagues conscious about wearing strong perfumes
- Ensuring all team members understand and respect adjustments in absence of manager
- Flexibility regarding clothing choice if possible
- Handouts in advance of training/presentations (to follow what is being discussed verbally)
- A culture that respects keeping promises if they are made
- More patience and flexibility from colleagues regarding misunderstandings
- Offering the option to refuse taking on more work (since some employees find it very difficult to say no)
- Reduced overnight stays where possible
- Relaxed obligations to social commitments
- Specified hours for responding to emails
- Training staff on neurodiversity and specific needs
- Working near familiar and understanding colleagues

Resources

- Time (from management and HR to identify and implement an adjustment)
- Effort (from management and HR to identify and implement an adjustment)
- Financial cost (e.g., if adjustment involves new equipment, or funds to invest in neurodiversity training)
- Space constraints (e.g., setting up a quiet room may not always be possible)
- Finally, embedding adjustments within everyday practice can sometimes take time to become honed to individual needs and organisational practice. Moreover, many adjustments will need to be iteratively developed over time as people's needs change.



- Establishing interaction protocols where both employee and employer can discuss and evaluate adjustments will help to ensure sustainability.
- It is important to remember that each person with autism is different and has different needs. Therefore, adjustments should be tailored.
- This highlights the importance of good communication and organisational protocol for monitoring and following up on adjustments. Ideally, employees would benefit from being supported by adjustments as they start work, which necessitates a pre-employment discussion about what adjustment needs there may be.
- Follow-up discussions can be scheduled, or even integrated to probationary meetings, to periodically assess the effectiveness of adjustments and identify new adjustments as the employee becomes familiar with their day-to-day roles and responsibilities.

References:

Heasman, B., Livesey, A., Walker, A., Pellicano, E., & Remington, A. (2020). *DARE report on adjustments*. Centre for Research in Autism and Education, Institute of Education, UCL, London, UK. <https://dareuk.org/dare-adjustments-toolkit>