



Unit 3: Policies at the workplace

There are a wide variety of ways that businesses can support their employees with autism. For starters, employers must have a comprehensive understanding of what autism is and what it looks like in the workplace. Companies also have to learn how to manage and reasonably accommodate employees with autism. They also need to ensure other employees know how to work with someone with autism.

When interviewing someone with autism, employers should focus on whether the individual is capable of doing the job. Managers should pay attention to the person's abilities, rather than any perceived limitations due to their autism.

Provide Clear Directions

It's important to provide employees with autism with clear, succinct directions and guidelines for performing their job. Employers should thoroughly explain what's expected of them and also explain the unwritten rules of the office. It can be helpful to provide written instructions for employees with autism so they have something to reference later if necessary.

The job coach / mentor

Once an individual accepts a job, a plan for supports should be developed that will meet both the needs of the individual and the employer. Because supports are individualized, they can be customized to meet the unique social, communication and behavioral issues often faced by individuals with autism spectrum disorders.

Whenever possible, the job coach or employment professional should work with the employer to use naturally existing supports in the work place. These supports may be supplemented by paid support from a job coach. In addition, the employment specialist may serve as a consultant to the employer, helping the employer to work directly with the individual.

It does not necessarily have to be someone on previous team. It should be someone the worker trusts, he feels comfortable speaking, company can consult the employer before appointing the right person.



The company's reasonable adjustments policy towards people with ASD

Reasonable Accommodations are changes or adaptations an employer makes to the workplace, such as adjustments to the workplace environment or to a specific work routine or practice, which supports autistic people and people with other disabilities to carry out their work and access the same training and development opportunities on an equal footing as their non-disabled colleagues. These include making changes to the workplace environment, making adjustments to workplace practices and providing technology equipment which can support an autistic employee at work. It also entails offering flexible working hours, substituting workplace tasks and providing access to training and workplace supports.

Denying Reasonable Accommodation to employees constitutes as discrimination under the Act, unless applying the accommodation would pose a 'disproportionate burden' on the employer. In this instance, a 'disproportionate burden' relates to the financial costs of the proposed accommodations, the impact on staff time and productivity, whilst also considering whether an European employer can access public funding like the Reasonable Accommodation Fund that can help put the support in place.

While the employer is obliged to provide reasonable accommodations, and these accommodations are primarily there to support an autistic person in their work, providing accommodations also provide many wider benefits for employers. Employers reported that applying reasonable accommodations were highly effective and the costs of applying accommodations were offset by reduced costs in other areas. They also note that accommodations also helped employers retain or promote employees, increased the organisation's morale and productivity, increased employee safety, and increased employee attendance.

The Voluntary Protection Programs Participants' Association, Inc. VPPPA published in June 2020 an article explaining the Key HR Policies For Creating A Safer Workplace For Employees with ASD :

- Implement A Regular Workplace Environment Sensory Review Policy

Employees with ASD often encounter either hypersensitivities or hypo sensitivities to stimuli like sights, sounds, or touch. To provide adequate accommodation for such



employees, start with identifying their sensitivities during the onboarding process. Employers can also review the workplace atmosphere for any triggers and implement safeguards such as providing visual supports to aid information processing, opting for dimmed lights in the office, or providing dedicated soundproofed areas for loud noises. Alternatively, Human Resources can also implement an ask before touching policy to promote personal space in the workplace.

- **Enforce A Strict Anti- Bullying Policy in The Office**

Even without being affected by ASD, 49% of Americans have been affected by bullying in the workplace according to the Waitt Institute for Violence Prevention's statistics. In addition to being harmful to the mental health of employees and the morale within the workplace, bullying can also instill a culture of fear and stress for employees. Workplace bullying can take a different form than the traditional in-school bullying. Colleagues may exclude employees with ASD from meetings or projects, cite their disability as a reason for persistent exclusions for contributions, or overlook them for promotions.

HR can update the company's employee handbook to include company-wide anti-bullying reporting policies, such as a confidential reporting corporate hotline and other support mechanisms extending to the employee's immediate family. For instance, providing go-to resources and an information hub to help employees cope with their child's prognosis. As much as 63% of children with autism are bullied, which can affect their parent's performance at work and even be the cause of workplace bullying for the employee themselves. Fostering a culture of inclusivity and communicating with your staff the strong repercussions and low tolerance level of such behavior in the workplace can also help in getting the message across.

- **Offer A Specialized Employee Recruitment and Support Process**

One of the challenges faced by employees with autism is difficulty identifying danger. As a result, some employees can pose a safety risk to themselves or their colleagues in the workplace. By providing autism awareness training for all employees, employers can improve their knowledge and present solutions in any potentially harmful situations. Autism awareness training in the workplace seeks to disseminate useful information on interacting with colleagues in a mode of communication everyone can understand.



Another bonus of providing such training to your employees is that it also trains other employees on what to look out for such as signs of an anxiety attack, sensory issue, or a potentially harmful safety issue. By being trained in this, managers and colleagues are more likely to seek help and implement measures when needed to keep the workplace — and the workers — safe.

While those on the autism spectrum may face unique challenges in and out of the workplace, they can also end up being invaluable assets with the right support in place. By implementing HR policies such as these, employers can take the first steps to overcoming the continuing bias that employees with autism face.

- **Offer Autism Awareness Training**

Candidates with autism can present great employability characteristics during the recruitment process including detailed technological knowledge or high levels of accuracy. However, to unlock these benefits, employers must first be able to identify the right support these employees require. When recruiting an employee on the ASD spectrum, HR should offer an alternative recruitment policy. During the interview process, offer alternatives to the traditional interview process for those that may have social anxieties or trouble with communication such as the option to have an accompanying supporter or offering a phased introduction into the workplace.

In the employee on boarding process, have your HR department include a standard section on employee distraction or triggers to better understand the employee. This helps the organization implement the appropriate safeguards if not already in place. For instance, an individual employee ID indicating their exceptional needs or sensitivities.

References:

Best Practices for Training and Developing Employees with Autism:
<https://hrdailyadvisor.blr.com/2019/02/11/best-practices-for-training-and-developing-employees-wit>



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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>

Ireland's National Autism Charity: <https://asiam.ie/about-us/>

Key HR policies for creating a safer workplace for employees with ASD (USA)

<https://vpppa.a2hosted.com/advancement/the-leader-magazine/blog-entry/key-hr-policies-for-creating-a-safer-workplace-for-employees-with-asdh-autism/>

UDS Foundation: Autism in the Workplace: <https://udservices.org/blog/employees-with-autism/>

1. Reasonable Adjustments Policy Template

You can use this template to create your company's Adjustment Policies Document.

2. Reasonable Adjustments Checklist:

These checklists provide the basis for a conversation which should happen between the autistic person, and their line manager or supervisor. They should also be encouraged to bring a trusted friend or mentor to the meeting.

The list can also be used as an aid for discussion and evaluation of the current working environment

(Adapted from: <http://dart.ed.ac.uk/supporting-autistic-people-in-he/>)



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the world is only one creature



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The sensory environment

Is everyone feeling comfortable in their place of work? What can be done to create a more comfortable work environment? What about the sensory stimulations (sounds, smells, visuals)? Are they tolerable? Someone might be wearing a really strong perfume, or the lights might be too bright, the room too cluttered or noisy. What is the layout of the room? Is it possible to have ear defenders, computer screen filters, or room dividers available for those who need them?

The timely environment

When assigning tasks, have you considered if the time allowed is appropriate? What happens if a task finishes earlier or later than the deadline? Allowing time to reflect upon tasks can maximise success.

The explicit environment

When assigning tasks, are instructions clear and explicit? Is it made clear what tasks should be prioritised over others? Is there a procedure for asking for clarifications?

The predictable environment

How predictable is the environment? Regular meetings can be set up. Material and resources needed can be sent in advance. Is there a procedure for when there is a cancellation?

The social environment





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Are there social occasions/ group activities? Does everyone participate? How can you make reluctant people participate? (clear invitation, specific time for the duration of the event etc).

Is there a system in place to show stress levels? (see traffic light system).

3. Reasonable Adjustments Questionnaire

Use this questionnaire to find out how committed your organisation is to different areas of inclusion in the workplace



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Reasonable adjustment policy template

Introduction

The introduction should state the purpose and principles of the policy as well as the legislative and organisational policy framework.



Definitions

This section is to define relevant terminology and concepts; and could include definitions of disability, disclosure, discrimination, inherent requirements, merit principle, reasonable adjustment and unjustifiable hardship.



Entitlement/coverage

This section should clarify who qualifies for consideration of reasonable adjustments



Confidentiality

This section should summarise the organisation's policy with regard to the disclosure of disability and the handling of private disability-related information



Communication and responsibilities

This section should outline how the availability of reasonable adjustments will be publicised in the organisation and summarise which staff have responsibilities in the reasonable adjustment approval and implementation process.



Reasonable adjustment procedure

This section should describe the internal procedures regarding how reasonable adjustments are requested, assessed and approved/ rejected, financed, implemented and evaluated. It should also detail an appeals process for individuals who wish to challenge any rejection decisions. Naturally the information in this section will vary from organisation to organisation, depending on size and structure. It would need also to more fully outline which staff members are responsible for managing the various parts of the process, and the timelines involved. Some organisations may prefer to have this actual procedure separated out from the policy as a guidelines document for operational staff with a final sentence in the opening principles section to the effect: this policy is supplemented by the 'reasonable adjustment guidelines' that provides detailed information and a guide to assist relevant staff administer this policy



Reasonable Adjustments Checklist

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The list can also be used as an aid for discussion and evaluation of the current working environment

(Adapted from: <http://dart.ed.ac.uk/supporting-autistic-people-in-he/>)

ADAPTING THE ENVIRONMENT	Current arrangements	What (other) arrangements can be made?	Is official diagnosis required for adaptations?
The sensory environment			
The timely environment			
The explicit environment			
The predictable environment			



The social environment			
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1. The sensory environment

Is everyone feeling comfortable in their place of work? What can be done to create a more comfortable work environment? What about the sensory stimulations (sounds, smells, visuals)? Are they tolerable? Someone might be wearing a really strong perfume, or the lights might be too bright, the room too cluttered or noisy. What is the layout of the room? Is it possible to have ear defenders, computer screen filters, or room dividers available for those who need them?

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4. The predictable environment

How predictable is the environment? Regular meetings can be set up. Material and resources needed can be sent in advance. Is there a procedure for when there is a cancellation?

5. The social environment

Are there social occasions/ group activities? Does everyone participate? How can you make reluctant people participate? (clear invitation, specific time for the duration of the event etc).

Is there a system in place to show stress levels? (see traffic light system).



Reasonable Adjustments Questionnaire

Please indicate how committed your organisation is to the following five areas of inclusion in the workplace

0	1	2	3
No commitments in this area	Committed to making improvements in this area	to Confident in our inclusive policies and practices in this area	Leading in this area, promoting inclusion in other organisations

Q1:

How committed is your organization to an inclusive and accessible recruitment (e.g. making job adverts accessible, accepting applications in alternative formats)

1

2

3

4

Q2:

How committed is your organization to communicating vacancies (e.g. advertising vacancies through a range of channels targeted at the disabled community, getting advice and support from Jobcentre Plus, and/or relevant advocate organisations, such as local charities)

1

2

3

4



Q3:

How committed is your organization to offering an interview to disabled people or people with a condition (e.g. encourage applications by offering an interview to an applicant who declares they have a condition or disability and meets the essential criteria listed on person specification)

1

2

3

4

Q4:

How committed is your organization to providing workplace adjustments (e.g. changes to working patterns, adaptations to premises or equipment and provision of support packages).

1

2

3

4

Q5:

How committed is your organization to Supporting existing employees (e.g. Supporting employees to declare a diagnosis, retaining an employee who declares a condition or disability)

1

2

3

4