

# The Integrated Employment Success Tool (IEST)

An evidence-based guide for employers of autistic adults



## **The Integrated Employment Success Tool (IEST): An evidence-based guide for employers of autistic adults**

**Dr Melissa Scott** Autism CRC | Curtin University

**Dr Marita Falkmer** Autism CRC | Curtin University

**Prof Sonya Girdler** Autism CRC | Curtin University

**Prof Torbjörn Falkmer** Autism CRC | Curtin University

**Prof Sylvia Rodger** Autism CRC

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### **Disclaimer**

- » Across Australia, the IEST will be used by a variety of employers in different types of workplaces. Due to the many types of workplaces, the overall design of the IEST is generalised to meet the needs of all the employers. Therefore, the IEST is not designed specifically for any one industry.
  - » The IEST does not provide medical or legal advice or services. This workplace tool provides information to employers describing how to effectively modify and adjust the work environment for autistic employees. If any such medical or legal work-related situations arise or further services are required, you need to contact the appropriate and necessary resources and services as required.
  - » The current edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) lists the characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). A diagnosis of ASD now includes several conditions that used to be diagnosed separately: autistic disorder, pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS), and Asperger syndrome. These conditions are now all called Autism Spectrum Disorder.
  - » Within the community it is recognised that there is no one perfect term or phrase for a person diagnosed with autism, and people have different preferences varying from 'autistic' to 'on the spectrum'. For the purpose of this workplace tool and according to Autism CRC style guidelines, we will use the term 'autistic' or 'on the autism spectrum' when referring to a person diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder.
  - » It is recommended if a potential or current autistic individual chooses to disclose their autism that you as their employer ask if they have a preference of the language by which they choose to identify. This may be Person-First Language, in which the person comes before the diagnosis, for example 'I'm a person with autism', or whether they use Identity-First Language, for example, 'I'm an autistic person'. Both options are widely used by the autistic community.
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# Foreword

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Autism CRC is the world's first national cooperative research effort focused on autistic individuals across the lifespan. As both an employer of autistic adults and Chair of Autism CRC, I am delighted to introduce *The Integrated Employment Success Tool (IEST): An evidence-based guide for employers of autistic adults*.

Autistic adults are often subject to unemployment, under-employment and social disadvantage. Skilled employment can be difficult to find and hard to retain, despite individuals being capable and motivated. Traditional recruitment practices can cause distress, and workplace understanding and support for adults on the autism spectrum is often poor.

The IEST is an evidence-based resource designed specifically for employers of autistic adults. Its effectiveness has been tested in a randomised, controlled trial with employers Australia-wide. Employers who used the IEST in their workplace had an increased understanding and knowledge of autism and were found to be more confident in supporting their autistic employees. The results showed that the more employers knew about autism, the more confident they felt about approaching their employee to discuss their needs.

The IEST was developed from identified gaps that exist between employers and autistic employees on the journey toward successful employment. To bridge these gaps, the purpose of the IEST is to:

- 1 Create an awareness of autism and highlight the strengths of autistic employees
- 2 Assist employers and co-workers to identify potential environmental workplace challenges for autistic employees
- 3 Recommend the actions or modifications required to resolve environmental workplace challenges
- 4 Create a mutually beneficial relationship between employers and autistic employees by building understanding of each other's strengths and workplace requirements, and
- 5 Improve employee productivity, job retention and overall workplace success.

I have first-hand experience of the benefit of neurodiversity employment programs, with the SunPork Group, of which I am CEO and Managing Director, having implemented a program for two of its Australian farm operations in 2016. More than four years on and 12 autistic individuals recruited through that initiative continue to be valued employees at SunPork or have been able to find employment elsewhere.

The initiative has not only enabled autistic individuals to achieve a career path but also the satisfaction of meaningful work and financial independence. Further, they have gained confidence and friendships. For the organisation, the initiative has improved workplace culture, business pride and we see it as a pathway to drive innovation in recruitment, employment and general operational procedures and processes. There have certainly been challenges and valuable learnings, and we would have benefited from more resources and the experience of others had they been available when SunPork started on this journey.

The potential for the IEST to improve your workplace can be greatly increased if there is a collaborative approach to modifications and adjustments to the company environment. Including autistic individuals in a hands-on manner (being physically present when making adjustments and asking for their input) is much more efficient.

We hope that use of the IEST contributes to autistic people being empowered to use their diverse strengths and interests and gaining and sustaining meaningful employment.



**Robert van Barneveld**

Chair

Autism CRC Ltd



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# Introduction



## Purpose of the IEST

Autistic employees have diverse skills, strengths and interests that enable them to be successful in a variety of roles. Based on a review of factors for successful employment, the IEST is designed to help employers determine and implement effective workplace modifications best suited to the needs of autistic employees. More than 100 employers were involved in the research and development of the IEST, with the overall aim to improve employee productivity, job retention, employer confidence, and overall workplace success.

This workplace tool provides information about:

- » Autism and the strengths of autistic employees
- » The benefits of employing autistic individuals
- » The employment process and important factors for successful employment
- » Strategies to implement workplace modifications
- » A range of resources, including editable checklists and proforma

Often, unless a person discloses that they are autistic, it can seem difficult to provide accommodations or modifications.

Research suggests that the strategies presented in the IEST will benefit more than just the people who disclose their autism, as there are people who may not wish to disclose, or who may not have a formal diagnosis, for whom these strategies will also work. These approaches can help promote team building, personal growth and opportunities to learn about human and developmental diversity. And in establishing customised guidelines, all individuals may have the support to thrive in the workplace.

Advertising your organisation as being supportive of diverse employees in your job advertisements will encourage people to feel comfortable about disclosure so that they can be supported for success in the workplace.

The IEST empowers employers with the skills and confidence to make changes in the workplace to make it inclusive, bringing benefits to all employees.

## How to use the IEST

This tool is presented according to the phases of employment. The IEST initially describes the factors for successful employment, followed by the phases:



**Advertising  
the job**



**Interviewing**



**Job  
commencement**



**Workplace  
modification**



**How to maintain  
ongoing support**

Each phase includes information on specific workplace requirements, tips and advice, questions to consider, and checklists. Additional resources are available in the IEST if required. Throughout the document you will also find quotes from real employers, based on feedback and research conducted as part of the development of this tool.

You may notice that parts of the IEST are repeated in different sections. This is because this information is relevant to all of those sections. It means that if you only read a particular section that is relevant to your needs, you will

not miss out on important information. It is recommended to establish whether your organisation or company has knowingly employed an autistic person before, and if not, it is advisable to allocate time to assess which recommendations and guidelines would apply to your specific workplace and how these could be implemented to ensure a harmonious and efficient work environment.

**The IEST can be used at any phase in the employment process. To begin using the IEST:**

- 1** Familiarise yourself with the *Understanding autism* section on pages 3-8
- 2** Identify the stage in the employment process your business or organisation is in using the *Decision tree* on page 11). For example, Phase 2: The interview or Phase 4: Workplace modification
- 3** Evaluate and identify any potential or current workplace challenges the autistic employee may experience in the workplace
- 4** Begin to modify the workplace or practices using the strategies specifically designed for each phase of the employment process. You may find yourself moving between phases depending on your employee(s) and their needs or your workplace
- 5** If the initial workplace modification was not successful, attempt another strategy provided, as each employee will be different and require different types of modifications and support

Strategies and some checklists for each phase have been specifically designed to assist in developing, modifying and/or maintaining your workplace. These strategies are generic and provide an overall and general approach for assisting autistic employees to be successful, no matter which environment they work in. Because all workplaces are not the same, you will need to decide what is appropriate for use in your workplace.



*“One of the things that made it work for us was that we created a working group prior to recruiting employees on the autism spectrum. We started with asking for volunteers within the company. We were surprised how many of our employees had experience of autism, someone’s got a brother, a sister, a kid, a nephew, that has autism, and they know what it’s like, and they offered their support.*”

*... IEST provided good overall information but we also realised that it cannot be designed for a specific industry, so we need to consider which of the recommendations/guidelines in the IEST that suited us. ... The fact is, after doing this, we improved our recruitment and interview process for all employees.”*

IEST Trial–Employer feedback



# Understanding autism

## What is autism?

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or 'autism' is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition that affects the way in which people relate to their environment and interact with other people.

The term 'spectrum' in the name indicates that whilst autistic individuals may share certain core characteristics, the degree and type of support they require will vary. It is overly simplistic to view autism as a condition which ranges from mild to severe. In addition to differences in presentation between individuals, how autism affects an individual (and the supports they require) may vary in relation to different contexts and circumstances such as the physical environment, the degree of social expectation and their emotional state. Some individuals may live and work with little support needs, while others may have accompanying anxiety, learning disabilities or other co-occurring conditions that require greater support.

The two core areas of challenges for autistic individuals are:

- » Social interaction and communication (e.g., difficulty initiating conversations, understanding expected social 'norms', maintaining eye contact during conversations)
- » Repetitive or restricted behaviours and/or interests, and/or sensory sensitivities

Autistic individuals may also have a range of additional challenges, including:

- » Intellectual disability
- » Specific learning difficulties (e.g. dyslexia)
- » Anxiety
- » Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

\* For more information about [Understanding autism](#), see the External online resources section



**"If you have met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism."**

Dr Stephen Shore, Autistic author and academic

## Strengths of autistic individuals

The idea behind the IEST is to take a **STRENGTHS-BASED** approach.

Autistic individuals may share certain core characteristics and challenges, which can affect their ability to apply for, and maintain, a job. The IEST acknowledges that autistic employees may require additional support in the workplace, but that they also have many strengths. In order to create a workplace that is productive with satisfied and engaged employees, the skills for harnessing employees' strengths are essential. Employees whose interests and natural talents are developed into strengths become motivated and loyal employees.

## Harnessing strengths

Employees achieve more if you take the time to ask about their skills and interests and consider these in relation to the role you want to fill. This allows you to build on their strengths.

### Strengths of autistic individuals can include, but are not limited to:

- » Strong attention to detail (may notice errors or information others may miss)
- » Accuracy (this is often linked to feelings of personal integrity and a sense of duty to others)
- » Rote memory and exceptional long-term recall
- » High levels of concentration and focus
- » Reliability and loyalty, with a strong sense of fairness
- » Often able to remain calm in situations some non-autistic individuals may find distressing
- » Great empathy and compassion for others, regardless of ability to personally relate
- » Ability to think and process information 'outside the box', often quite industrious
- » May have a natural aptitude for learning languages
- » May have a natural aptitude for computing or software applications
- » Quite varied and often unexpected interests, certainly not always restrictive in genre

\* For more information about [Strengths of autistic individuals](#) see the External online resources section

## Helpful tips



### Developing employee strengths

- ▶ **Identify** employee's skills and interests
- ▶ **Match** job tasks to employee's skills and interests
- ▶ **Reward** good work with recognition

## Benefits of employing autistic individuals

Autistic individuals have skills that enable them to be successful in a variety of roles in the workplace. As a result, employers are beginning to explore this untapped pool of talent. Employing autistic individuals can bring benefits to the workplace such as:

### 1 Increased work productivity through:

- » High levels of concentration, focus and attention to detail allowing employees to work persistently without being distracted (often less likely to prioritise social engagement over productivity)
- » Excellent memory for facts and numbers
- » Specialised work-related knowledge (including usually quite strict adherence to Occupational Health and Safety standards)
- » Accuracy performed in work tasks

### 2 Low absenteeism rates through:

- » Loyalty to their employer
- » Once settled into a familiar, supported routine, less likely to leave a job

### 3 Reliable work ethic through:

- » Integrity in their work
- » Conscientious work manner

### 4 Persistence through:

- » Being efficient at completing repetitive tasks such as filing or categorising information



**“It is important to talk about autism in a positive way, not to deny the difficulties, but to open a way forward so those difficulties can become less so. A positive outlook enthuses, creates, restores and breeds hope.”**

Dr Wenn Lawson, Autistic author and researcher

## Understanding potential workplace challenges

- » **YES** — this workplace tool is strengths-based
- » **YES** — this workplace tool focuses on developing a successful work environment for autistic employees
- » **BUT** — in order for employers to feel confident and equipped in knowing how to effectively modify the work environment for autistic employees, an understanding of employee needs and the potential challenges that may occur in the workplace is essential.

## Autistic employees may need support in the following areas:



### Social interaction

Autistic individuals can find interacting with others in different social contexts challenging (e.g., at home, at work, in the community). Some autistic individuals may appear quite confident in social situations. However, this is often a result of years of masking (mimicking expected behaviour). This can be quite mentally exhausting to maintain for long periods of time, and people may benefit from more support.

Some comments may inadvertently come across as awkward or rude. Some autistic individuals may not always understand unwritten social rules of the workplace that other employees usually pick up on. **For example**, they may prefer to remain at their work station when the rest of the staff are having lunch in the staff room. They may not realise that choosing to not engage socially during lunch breaks can often make it more difficult to build workplace relationships. In conversation, they may have difficulty understanding implications, the context and recognising non-verbal cues or body language.

Differences in social interaction that you may notice:

- » Listening and engaging in social workplace banter (potential lack of interest in current cultural trends)
- » Making eye contact when communicating (harder to absorb information whilst doing so)
- » Social sensitivity – not recognising the potential impact on someone else’s feelings or any offense unwittingly implied (matter-of-fact language)
- » Difficulty expressing personal feelings
- » Wanting to interact with colleagues but being unsure of how to do so

### Communication

Many autistic individuals have a very literal understanding of language. They may appear direct in conversation, which can be misinterpreted as blunt, antagonistic or arrogant. Some autistic individuals may not talk very much and others may talk at length about topics of interest to them, but may not appear interested in others’ topics, such as the latest football match.

Miscommunication and misunderstanding can happen between any group of people. This is more likely to occur if there are differing communication needs and strengths that are not well understood. It’s possible for this to lead people to:

- » Misunderstand metaphors, similes, idioms, irony and sarcasm in conversation
- » Interrupt others when talking (difficulty identifying gaps in conversation)
- » Misinterpret facial expression, tone of voice and body language
- » Misread verbal and non-verbal cues
- » Respond in an unexpected way due to misunderstandings
- » Bring up inappropriate conversation topics without realising

## Executive functioning

Executive functioning is a broad term used to describe the brain's management of all our thinking processes that help us to regulate and control our thoughts and actions and to plan, organise and complete tasks.

Some autistic individuals may benefit from support with aspects of executive functioning, such as:

- » Organising, planning and initiating work tasks
- » Multi-tasking and prioritising
- » Meeting deadlines in a timely manner
- » Getting back on track after interruptions
- » Recognising and problem solving workplace difficulties
- » Transferring skills across different work settings

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## Creating an inclusive work environment

### What is an inclusive work environment?

An inclusive work environment is a place where everyone is treated with respect, dignity and equality, where each employee's skills and talents are valued and their contribution is acknowledged. Employees of an inclusive workplace are generally happier and more motivated to work as a team, and as a result productivity increases and improves. In larger organisations these workplace values are often reflected in the mission and vision statements.

### What does an inclusive work environment look like?

An inclusive workplace is one that promotes respect, dignity, equality and autonomy on a daily basis so that this behaviour is considered the norm. In an inclusive workplace:

- » Inclusive policies are in place to underpin equality and fairness
- » All staff are aware of the business's inclusive values and are involved in the policy development
- » Any barriers or tensions in the workplace are identified and addressed
- » Inclusive strategies are supported and promoted by the senior staff

### What are the benefits of an inclusive work environment?

More and more employers are thinking of ways to **create and promote** an inclusive workplace so that they attract new talent to their business, increase productivity and increase employee commitment. Ultimately, this will assist in retaining skilled employees. An inclusive work environment can:



#### **Attract new talent from a wider pool:**

this increases the broad spectrum of creative ideas and solutions brought into the workplace



#### **Retain committed and productive staff:**

if employees are valued and appreciated, they are more likely to work hard and train and share skills with new employees



#### **Access untapped markets:**

a more diverse workplace can promote the business to a wider population



#### **Create a workplace culture that spreads:**

a positive and inclusive workplace spreads across communities and encourages business growth

Consistently challenging all employees to think differently and work cohesively in team environments will help them adapt and thrive in all areas.

\* For more information about [Inclusion and neurodiversity](#), see the External online resources section

## Helpful tips



### Workplace inclusion

- ▶ Inclusion is not specific to autism
- ▶ Work environments should encourage inclusion and diversity





# Factors for successful employment

Autism CRC research to explore the key factors for successful employment from both the viewpoints of autistic adults and employers found that there are three main factors for successful employment<sup>1,2</sup>. Both groups agreed on each factor; however, each group had a different perspective. It is hoped that the IEST will assist in closing the gap between these perspectives to ensure successful employment.

The three factors for successful employment are:



## Factor 1

### Workplace support

Both groups felt that support in the workplace was important for successful employment, but each group needed different types of support.

#### **Autistic employees:**

This group felt supported through inclusion in the workplace by employers and co-workers. Being made to feel “*part of the team*” and valued for their contribution to the workplace supported their successful participation at work.

#### **Employers:**

This group felt supported when outside services assisted them with implementing any necessary workplace modifications or job adjustments. Support from outside services assisted employers with creating a successful workplace.



## Factor 2

### Job expectations

Job expectations are described as the “*things employees want or expect*” from a job and the “*things that employers expect from someone doing the job*”. Successful work environments depend on clear job descriptions, a shared understanding of the task completion time, workplace training, the right resources, and a supportive workplace atmosphere.

#### **Autistic employees:**

This group’s job expectations include: work responsibility, career advancement, fair pay, and job tasks to match their skills and abilities.

#### **Employers:**

This group expected hard work, loyalty, minimum length of stay, and productivity.

<sup>1</sup> Scott, M., Falkmer, M., Falkmer, T., Girdler, S. (2018). Evaluating the Effectiveness of an Autism-Specific Workplace Tool for Employers: A Randomised Controlled Trial. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 48(10), 3377-3392.

<sup>2</sup> Scott M, Milbourn B, Falkmer M, Black M, Bólte S, Halladay A, Lerner M, Taylor JL, Girdler S. (2018). Factors impacting employment for people with autism spectrum disorder: A scoping review. *Autism*, 1362361318787789.



## Factor 3

# Productivity requirements

Both groups agreed on the business transaction idea of, *“I’ll provide you with a job, in return I expect you to be productive”*, but each group differed in their approach to maintaining a job.

### Autistic employees:

This group required a supportive, structured and task-adapted workplace to assist with successful job performance and productivity, and ultimately, retention of their jobs.

### Employers:

This group felt that once they had given a job opportunity to an autistic employee, it was the employee’s responsibility to *“fit”* into the workplace and the associated work and productivity requirements.

## Helpful tips



### Communication in the workplace is key

▶ Communication between employees and employers is KEY to ensuring these factors continue to create and maintain successful employment.

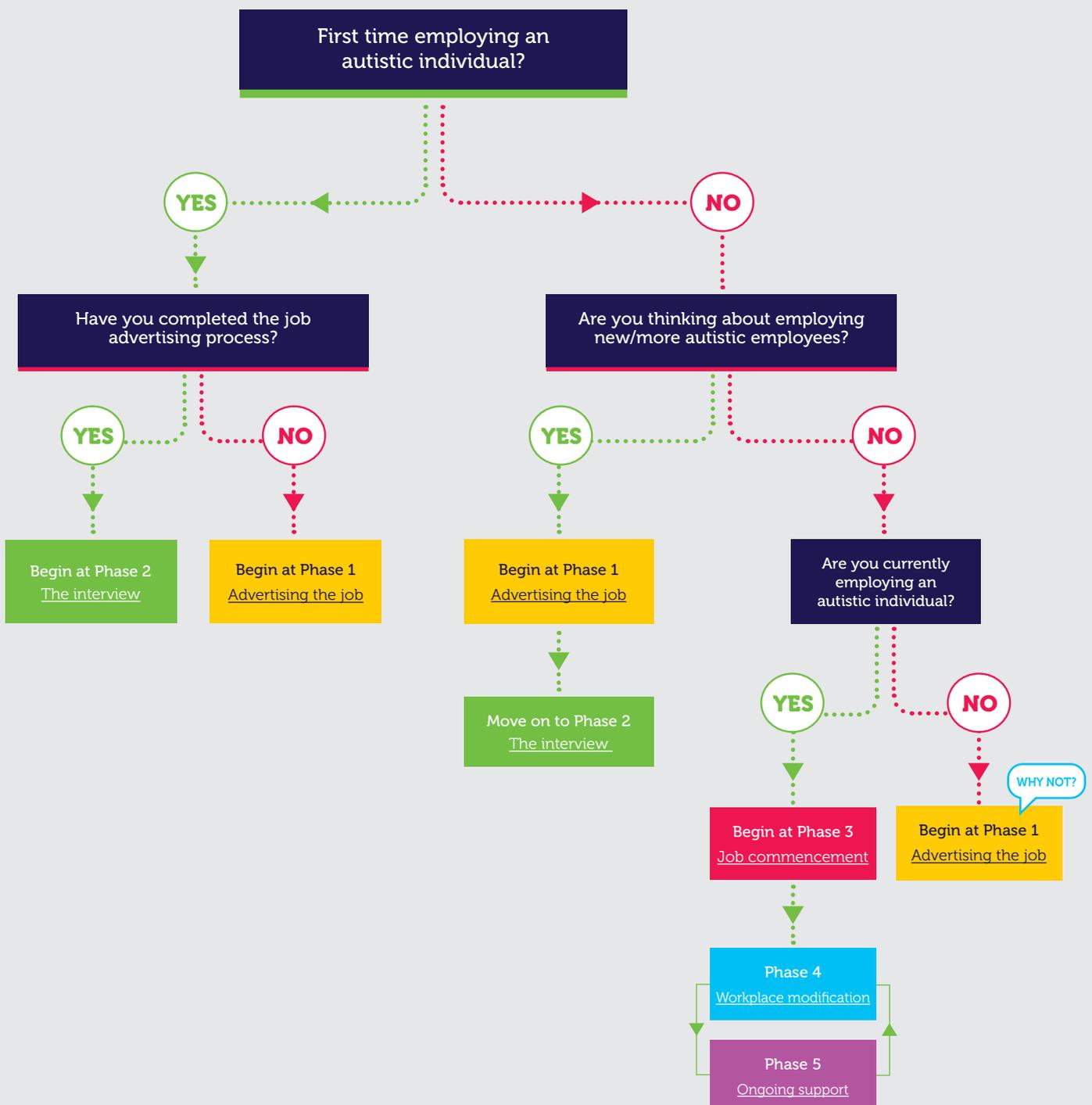


# Decision tree

## Identify your stage in the employment process

Use the decision tree below to help you decide where you are in the employment process. This decision making tree will then direct you to the most appropriate chapter for your stage in the employment process journey.

### Employment process for employing autistic individuals





# Implementing strategies for successful employment

This is the practical section of the IEST. It contains various strategies and some checklists for each phase of the employment process. Each section and its strategies have been tested and refined with employers and autistic employees.

## Remember these steps to using the IEST:

- 1 Use the decision tree to identify your stage in the employment process
- 2 Begin at your chosen phase in the employment process, e.g., *Phase 2: The Interview*
- 3 You may find yourself moving between phases depending on your employee(s) and their needs or your workplace
- 4 Strategies and some checklists for each phase have been specifically designed to assist in developing, modifying and/or maintaining your workplace
- 5 These strategies are generic and provide an overall and general approach for assisting autistic employees to be successful, no matter which environment they work in
- 6 Because all workplaces are not the same, you will need to decide what is appropriate for use in your workplace
- 7 If one strategy has not been useful or successful, change to another one, as each employee will be different and require different types of modifications and support





## PHASE 1

### Phase 1: Advertising the job

As previously discussed, autistic individuals have many skills to offer employers, as well as bringing many benefits to the workplace. However, for many autistic individuals getting a job in the first place can be difficult. As employers, making a few simple adjustments to the job-advertising phase can make the process of applying for a job easier, clearer and more accessible.

#### ► Factors to consider when advertising a job

##### Have you thought about...

- » Broadening your advertising strategy approach?
- » Adjusting the job description to make it inclusive and attract diverse applicants?
- » The potential modifications that might need to occur during the advertisement process?
- » Working alongside Disability Employment Service providers?
- » Your current knowledge of autism?
- » The skills required to support an autistic employee in your workplace?
- » Talking to others who have employed autistic adults?

### Helpful tips



#### What are Disability Employment Service (DES) providers?

- DES providers assist people with a disability, injury or health condition in searching for, finding and/or keeping a job
- They provide a range of services including: job search support, initial on-the-job training, support and training for employers and co-workers, and access to work modification assistance and funding assistance

#### ► Awareness of potential difficulties when advertising a job

##### Have you thought about...

- » Using multiple and alternative sources for advertising a job?
- » The learning preferences of autistic applicants?
  - › Visual, aural, verbal (reading/writing), kinaesthetic, logical, social, solitary
- » The possibility of receiving résumés or CVs in different formats and/or with breaks or gaps in their employment history?
- » Autistic applicants who also have an intellectual disability, and skills required to support that employee?



If the majority of your responses have been 'Yes', continue using the IEST and its strategies for your workplace.

If the majority of your responses have been 'No', contact a Disability Employment Service provider for more support in conjunction with the use of the IEST: Go to [jobaccess.gov.au](http://jobaccess.gov.au)

## ► Strategies for advertising a job

Please consider the following strategies when advertising a job, which may be suitable for autistic individuals. You may find yourself using only one, or a combination of strategies during this process:

### Job application description

- » Use clear, concise, and factual wording when describing the job position
- » Avoid using jargon, metaphors, similes or catch phrases when wording the job description
- » Carefully consider the skills required for the job. **For example**, if skills such as, 'great interpersonal skills' or 'excellent communication skills' are not necessarily important for completing the job and would just be an added extra, avoid including this as a requirement. If this is listed as a requirement, it may prevent autistic individuals from even applying
- » You may also want to include information about the line of support in work teams. **For example**, to whom they report to and the number of supervisors involved. One main supervisor to report to or work with is recommended. Any travel requirements and number of total work hours expected to be worked per week should be included
- » Notify applicants that if invited to an interview, a support person such as a family member or employment co-ordinator from a Disability Employment Service provider may accompany them
- » Be aware that when an autistic applicant applies for the job their résumé, curriculum vitae (CV) or portfolio may have large gaps or breaks in their employment history. This may be due to:
  - > Poor job matching
  - > Anxiety
  - > Difficulty hurdling the interview stage of jobs applied for

### Reasonable adjustments during the job advertising process

Make it clear that accommodations or adjustments can be made during the application process or if invited to an interview. This is important to assist in overcoming any barriers to applying for employment and will encourage autistic people to apply, knowing that you are likely to also be accommodating of their needs if they get the job. **For example**, an applicant may be asked to submit a portfolio of work skills and experiences instead of a CV or résumé.

- » Include an optional section on the application form for applicants to fill in any requests for reasonable adjustments or accommodations that they may require during the recruitment process, or once employed
- » Types of adjustments or accommodations that might be requested include:
  - > Requesting to bring a person of support if invited to an interview
  - > Alternative interview to the formal interview process
  - > Having access to the interview questions ahead of time
  - > Applying using a different format than the one requested, such as a résumé, work experience or portfolio versus a CV
  - > Requesting a time extension on the job application
  - > Supporting applicants during this application process if required. **For example**, having a helpline available
- » Consider offering these modifications to all applicants – not everyone may feel comfortable disclosing their autism, and some autistic individuals will not be diagnosed. Offering accommodations at this stage will encourage a more diverse selection of applicants

## Broadening your advertising strategy approach

- » Look for talent in different or unlikely places by advertising:
  - > Online
  - > Through autism associations or organisations
  - > Through university campuses, TAFE, Vocational Education and Training centres
- » Applicants may be applying through Disability Employment Service providers. Advertise through these disability employment service providers to reach a broader, untapped pool of talent
- » Use multiple methods of media for recruitment:
  - > Broaden your job vacancy promotion strategy beyond traditional search engines like Seek, JobSeeker, JobSearch, CareerOne
  - > Use creative methods such as Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn
  - > Many autistic applicants are visual and concrete learners, so use media that are visually appealing (pictures, colour, video clips, but avoid visual clutter or too much colour as this can be distracting for anyone)
- » Highlight diversity inclusion as part of the brand of your organisation on the company website

## Financial assistance

Financial options are available to assist employers with employing autistic individuals, such as:

- » Employment Assistance Fund
- » Wage Subsidy Scheme
- » Supported Wage System

These are further discussed in *Phase 3: Job commencement*. This is just to create an awareness of the options available.

## Education on autism in the workplace

Prior to the recruitment process, employers and co-workers need a basic understanding of autism, the potential workplace challenges, and an awareness that not all autistic employees will want to disclose this information to everyone in the workplace (refer to previous chapters)

✦ For more information about [Recruitment](#), see the External online resources section



# Summary checklist for advertising a job



To-do	Strategies required	Person responsible	Task complete
Job description			<input type="checkbox"/>
Reasonable adjustments			<input type="checkbox"/>
Advertisement strategy approach			<input type="checkbox"/>
Contact Disability Employment Service provider			<input type="checkbox"/>
Increase education and awareness on autism in the workplace			<input type="checkbox"/>
Additional tasks			<input type="checkbox"/>



## Phase 2: The interview

Interviews are a conversation between two or more people where a series of questions are asked to find out if the applicant is the most suitable person for the job. Interviews mainly depend on communication skills, social interaction and the applicant's ability to promote themselves and their skills and abilities. For many autistic individuals, interviews can be stressful because of challenges in their communication and social skills.

Similarly, employers who are interviewing autistic individuals for the first time may feel unprepared, a little nervous, unsure of what to expect or how to phrase questions in an easy and understandable manner, and perhaps even a little bit hesitant.

To assist in making this process smoother and easier for autistic applicants and the employer, a few simple considerations can be made to the interview process. These considerations include asking two important questions:

### 1 What do you expect to get out of the interview?

For most employers the interview process is twofold in that, it gives you an insight into the personality and abilities of the applicant, as well as giving you a chance to assess their skills and qualifications and whether or not they fit into your company's goals and vision. Basically, you are wanting to meet the applicant and decide whether this is a good job match. Based on this idea of interviewing and knowing that autistic applicants may have difficulty with their communication and social skills, you need to ask yourself the next question.

### 2 Is a formal interview necessary or required to assess the applicant's suitability for the role?

For many roles the answer to this question will be 'No'. As an employer it is important to then consider alternate means for assessing the applicant's skills and abilities and their alignment to your company's values and vision. There are a number of alternate means to formal interviewing, such as:

- » Phone, email or video conferencing discussions
- » Work experience to assess for a good job match
- » Work trial to demonstrate their skills
- » Assessing a work portfolio
- » Informal interview

## ► Factors to think about when interviewing

### Have you thought about...

- » Restructuring your interviewing style?
  - › Traditional interviews versus practical demonstrations
- » Preparing for different stages of the interview?
  - › Prior to the interview
  - › During the interview
  - › Follow-up after the interview
- » Rephrasing the types of questions you might ask?
  - › Literal, concrete and closed-ended questions versus open-ended and abstract questions
- » The potential modifications that might need to occur during the interview process?
- » The applicant's choice regarding disclosure of autism?

## ► Awareness of potential difficulties during interviewing

### Have you thought about...

- » The effect difficulties in social interaction and communication might have on the interview process?
- » The applicant's interpretation of non-verbal language?
  - › Difficulty interpreting the interviewer's facial expressions, gestures and tone of voice
  - › Applicants may be unaware of their own non-verbal body language such as slouching and head lowered
- » The applicant's eye contact made during an interview?
  - › Applicants may make infrequent eye contact and eyes may be downcast when answering questions. This is not out of a lack of respect, interest or engagement
- » The applicant's potential anxiety and the effect this will have on their performance?
  - › Difficulty initiating and maintaining conversation during the interview
  - › Making small talk during the interview
  - › Knowing whether the answer given to a question has been adequate
- » The challenge of self-promotion?
  - › Applicants may have a good understanding of their strengths and skill set but may have difficulty communicating this in an interview as the ability to promote themselves may not come naturally



If the majority of your responses have been '**Yes**', continue using the IEST and its strategies for your workplace.

If the majority of your responses have been '**No**', contact a Disability Employment Service provider for more support in conjunction with the use of the IEST: Go to [jobaccess.gov.au](http://jobaccess.gov.au)

## ► Strategies for interviewing

To simplify your understanding of the interview process, information is divided into three stages. These stages include:

1

Prior to the interview

2

During the interview

3

Follow-up after the interview

**Please consider the following strategies when interviewing, which may be suitable for autistic individuals. You may find yourself using only one, or a combination of strategies during this process:**

### **Prior to the interview**

- ⋮ *“We realised that when we communicated with job-seekers/employees on the autism spectrum, we needed to add a lot more details in our information than we would typically have done. For example, we provided not only the address where to meet, but we also added a map, photos of the people they would meet and what we would do during the meeting. That worked, the employees on the autism spectrum told us that it helped them to relax.”*
- ⋮ IEST Trial–Employer feedback

### **Interview preparation**

The more information you can give an applicant before the interview, the more relaxed they will feel. Many autistic applicants have a preference for predictability and rely on knowing what comes next to be able to react in a socially appropriate manner. This also helps to reduce the stress related to the unpredictable nature of an interview. If you are already employing an autistic individual/s, consider if you can involve them in the interview process.

### **Information provided to the applicant**

Prior to the interview provide the applicant with:

- » Number, names and titles of people on the interview panel
- » Date and location of interview (include a photo of the building if possible)
- » Instructions on how to get there
- » Interview times including start and end time (approximately how long the interview will take)
- » Specific information on what to bring to the interview
- » A copy of the interview questions or a list of the areas that will be discussed. This helps with the predictability of the interview for the applicant and will help reduce their anxiety and stress

Avoid deviating from the interview time outlined to the applicant because schedule changes will impact on the predictability the applicant has been expecting.

### **Structure of the interview**

Interviews can include:

- » Traditional individual interview, which is a discussion of a series of set questions
- » Practical demonstration of skills in a set amount of time on the day
- » Group interview alongside other applicants (this may involve team work)

If the interview is more than just one meeting with the applicant, notify the applicant that this interview process consists of ‘x’ number of stages (this is a common interviewing style in engineering and the business sectors). Whatever process you choose, you can make it inclusive by using it for all shortlisted applicants.

A work trial demonstrating skills and abilities in the workplace can be beneficial for both the organisation and the applicant to determine if they are suited to each other. Information about work trial laws can be found on the [\*\*Australian Government Fair Work website\*\*](#).

- ⋮ *“One thing that I liked about the informal interview, one of the people that was interviewing us also had autism, and had been through the same process before us. It was a good touch to have someone that was also on the spectrum doing the interviewing. I liked that there was someone who had been through the program before and has been successful. And apparently, it was on his feedback that they changed the format of the interview.”*
- ⋮ IEST Trial–Employer feedback

### Preparing interview questions

- » Autistic applicants may think and respond literally to the types of questions asked. **For example**, you may ask, ‘How long did you work in your last position?’ Applicants may respond with an exact number of months and days. Instead, ask specific questions such as, ‘What did you enjoy about it? What did you find challenging?’
- » If you are following a pre-designed standard set of interview questions generally used for all applicants you may need to revise any abstract and ambiguous questions for autistic applicants
- » Keep questions literal and concrete
- » Ask closed questions that require either: a YES/NO response or require a specific, short answer. **For example**, ask: ‘What were the three main tasks did you do in your last job?’ (this is specific and will give applicants a chance to list past skills and responsibilities). Avoid asking: ‘Tell me a bit about yourself’ (this is vague and has endless possible answers and may be stressful for the applicant to answer)
- » Have a few topics for small talk to bring into the interview as some autistic individuals have difficulty initiating small talk when nervous or stressed
- » Small talk topics may also require a few directive prompts for the applicants

..... *“We got the information about one candidate being really, really good at maths. When we asked him, “Are you really good at maths?” He said, “Not really.” And it was because of the way we worded the question. We should have asked “What’s your favourite part about doing this or that.” I think it’s also good if you can find out a bit more about their interests and how they like to do things. I think that’s something that can be captured in the interview.”*

..... IEST Trial–Employer feedback

### Potential accommodations to be made in the interview process

- » Call the applicant to inform them about their interview and confirm the interview details discussed
- » Follow up by sending an email with all the above information discussed in the phone call. This is important because many autistic applicants are visual learners and will respond more effectively if they have both seen and heard the information. Consider including a map of where to meet and possibly a photo of the interviewer with the email
- » When you contact the applicant, ask them what is their preferred way of communicating, as this will help suggest the interview style most appropriate for this applicant
  - » If they are confident at speaking, then the traditional interview structure of standard questions may be suitable
  - » If they are less confident at speaking and more confident in their written or practical skills and abilities, then a written or computer based test, or a practical demonstration or work trial is more likely to be better suited to this applicant



- » They may require/request a support person to attend the interview. This may be an employment co-ordinator/ family member/friend/or advocate. A support person may assist during the interview with:
  - › Reducing the applicant’s anxiety and stress
  - › Providing prompts when/if needed
  - › Rephrasing interview questions if they have been misunderstood or if there is a lack of clarity
- » Group interviews are possible, but success will depend on the individual applicant and the style of the group interview
- » Be flexible in your interviewing style when possible. Most autistic individuals will be more comfortable with a more casual style of interview

“We tweaked our interview process to make it less anxiety provoking. We decided to make it less formal and to skip the standard panel of people asking questions. Instead we had a workshop where we showed the programs we use and asked them to have a go and “play” with them. That way we could ask the technical questions while actually having the potential employee trying out our tools. After that we took a tour around the workplace for a less formal chat, asking more value-based questions while walking around. This was a less formal way of getting information and the feedback from the applicants was very positive.”

IEST Trial–Employer feedback

### Interview environment accommodations

It can be helpful to ask applicants about their preferred interview environment relating to their sensory needs. Consider how you may be able to accommodate an interview room preference using the following table as a guide:

Sensory request	Accommodation
<b>Lighting</b> Such as soft, warm or bright light	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Hold interview in a room that satisfies the lighting request</li> </ul>
<b>Noise level</b> Reduced noise, almost complete silence is preferable or white noise (soft background noise like a fan or clock) to assist with concentration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» For reduced noise find a location away from staff workplace noise. This may include meeting at a quiet coffee shop or hiring a room at the community library</li> <li>» For white noise, you can reduce the noise in the surrounding office space by closing doors and windows, moving slightly further away from main office noise, turning on a fan</li> </ul>
<b>Space requirement</b> Open plan and spacious room	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Reduce clutter and external distractions (such as other people walking past or about during the interview, interruptions during interview)</li> </ul>
<b>Odour level</b> Strong odours can be overpowering and overwhelming for some autistic applicants. This includes strong perfumes or colognes, fumes (working in a factory, food industry, mechanical fumes) or air fresheners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» On the day of the interview if you regularly wear perfume or cologne, refrain from doing so. Remove air fresheners from the interview room and if you do work in an industry with strong fumes in the workplace, provide warning to the applicant so they can expect this at the interview</li> </ul>

## During the interview

### Disclosure of autism (see ‘Helpful Tips’ at the end of the chapter)

Applicants have no legal obligation to disclose their disability during an interview or when employed. They may choose to disclose their disability if the question is asked on the job application form, but still have no legal obligation to disclose their disability during the interview. They may fill the application form in as ‘Not applicable’ for disability.

Disclosure is necessary if the disability:

- » Directly impacts on the employee’s ability to do the inherent requirements of the job
- » May impact on their ability to work safely and ensure the safety of co-workers, but the employer must consider actual versus perceived risks
- » Requires reasonable accommodation or workplace modifications to support the employee in the workplace

Disclosure may occur during the interview, after an employment offer or as a result of performance issues. Respond to disclosure by:

- » Discussing the job requirements and expected performance with the applicant
- » Discussing the necessary workplace accommodations or modifications required for job performance
- » Maintaining privacy of disclosure in the workplace

As an employer you cannot disclose the disability to other co-workers or human resources without written consent from the employee with a disability.

### When asking questions

- » Avoid open-ended and hypothetical questions. **For example**, ‘Tell me about your strengths’, is vague and ambiguous and may be interpreted literally such as, ‘I can lift 40 kg’. Instead, ask specific closed-ended questions such as, ‘Tell me at your last job, what three tasks were you particularly good at doing?’
- » Be direct in questioning. Provide prompts to the applicant if too much, or too little information has been given
- » Allow for an extended response time. Some applicants need extra time to process, interpret and respond to the question (this is often where a support person would be most helpful)
- » If a support person does attend the interview with the applicant, ensure that you continue to address the applicant. The support person is there to assist and guide both you and the applicant through the interview
- » Be mindful that reduced, moderated or minimal eye contact or unusual body language does not mean the person is not paying attention. Often during a conversation it can be difficult to engage more than one sense at a time – specifically, both listening to, and looking at, the person talking can make it difficult to absorb all the information necessary to participate in a meaningful conversation. It can also be quite intimidating for an autistic person to look someone else in the eyes, so if they take notes during the interview or look away, this is usually because they are processing what you’re saying and taking the time to formulate a response
- » It is often helpful to put things in writing and/or reiterate any important information you feel they may have missed. You may also provide a handout or brochure about your company if necessary



## Helpful tips



### Additional information on disclosure of disability in a workplace

- ▶ Article: [Disclosure in the workplace – Australian Human Rights Commission \(humanrights.gov.au\)](https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/anti-discrimination-law/employment/employment-discrimination)
- ▶ Legislation: [Disability Discrimination Act 1992 – Australian Government \(legislation.gov.au\)](https://www.legislation.gov.au/idx/idx.cfm?doc=1311111)
- ▶ Legislation: [Commonwealth Privacy Act 1988 – Australian Government \(legislation.gov.au\)](https://www.legislation.gov.au/idx/idx.cfm?doc=1311111)

### Follow up after the interview

#### If the applicant is successful in the interview:

- » Call them to inform them of your decision and the next steps involved in commencing their employment
- » Follow up the phone call with an email detailing: start date, start time, employment contract, and dress attire

#### If a job offer has not yet been made, but the option of work experience exists:

- » Inform the applicant that work experience is an extension of the interview (this may also be called a job trial)
- » Specify the duration of the work experience
- » Be clear about the work experience expectations and outcomes

#### If the applicant is unsuccessful in the interview:

- » Notify them directly of the interview result
- » If possible, provide constructive, sensitive, direct and literal feedback to assist them for future interviews

# Summary checklist for interviewing



To-do	Strategies required	Person responsible	Task complete
Prepare and provide interview information to applicants			<input type="checkbox"/>
Structure the style of the interview			<input type="checkbox"/>
Prepare an interview guide with modified questions			<input type="checkbox"/>
Accommodations/ modifications to be made in the interview process			<input type="checkbox"/>
Follow-up phone call after the interview to inform applicant of your decision			<input type="checkbox"/>
Make the job offer			<input type="checkbox"/>



# Phase 3: Job commencement

## You have just hired an autistic employee. What's the next step?

Autistic employees tend to prosper in workplaces that are organised and well structured. These work environments allow employees to demonstrate their strengths, which can benefit and enhance your workplace and business. In order to maximise an employee's strengths it is important to make sure your employees have a thorough understanding of their **job expectations and productivity requirements** in this position.

Job expectations and productivity requirements for autistic employees need to be clear and concise and agreed upon by both the employer and employee. This next phase of the employment process is job commencement.

The strategies provided can be used with **any new employees** beginning at your workplace. Although these strategies have been tailored to autistic employees, many of the strategies will benefit all new employees. The strategies in Phase 3 can be generalised to most workplaces.

### ► Factors to think about during job commencement

#### Have you thought about...

- » Orientation and workplace training required?
- » Assigning a current employee as a supervisor or mentor to the new autistic employee?
- » Discussing and outlining the job expectations and productivity requirements?
- » Developing a support plan to assist the new employee?
- » Accessing external support from Disability Employment Service providers?
- » The financial assistance available to support you and the employee in the workplace?
- » Increasing education and training on autism for staff members?

### ► Awareness of potential job commencement difficulties

#### Have you thought about...

- » The unpredictable nature of beginning a new job and its effect on the autistic employee?
- » The anxiety associated with beginning a new job in a different and unfamiliar environment?
- » The social anxiety associated with meeting and working with new co-workers?
- » The challenges an employee might experience trying to understand the workplace culture and social expectations?



If the majority of your responses have been '**Yes**', continue using the IEST and its strategies for your workplace.

If the majority of your responses have been '**No**', contact a Disability Employment Service provider for more support in conjunction with the use of the IEST: Go to [jobaccess.gov.au](http://jobaccess.gov.au)

## ► Strategies for job commencement

Please consider the following strategies during the job commencement stage of the employment process, which may be suitable for autistic individuals. You may find yourself using only one, or a combination of strategies during this process.

### Prior to commencing the job

#### Finalise the job contract

- » Provide an invitation to meet before the job starts
- » Provide salary/payment details – fair payment that is comparable to co-workers (as an employer you may have financial assistance or support to do so)
- » Outline annual leave, sick leave, other leave entitlements, superannuation, worker's compensation
- » Give the employee the chance to ask any questions for clarification
- » Clarify any necessary and reasonable adjustments or modifications that may be needed in order to assist with effective productivity requirements
- » If all is well and the terms and agreements have been met, sign the contract

#### Send a welcome pack

This pack could include:

- » Information on the job start date, time, location and person to report to
- » An induction pack to read through before beginning the job

#### Organise a time to meet with the employee

It is not reasonable for employers to expect incoming employees to spend a significant amount of unpaid time preparing for a new role or attending meetings. However, you may like to offer the employee an opportunity to meet a few days before the job starts to address any questions they might have and to explain and clarify what to expect in the job. It may also assist with reducing their anxiety when beginning a new job in an unfamiliar environment. Any topics not covered prior to commencing the job may need to be addressed in the first week of employment.

#### In this meeting you could provide:

- » An opportunity to meet their supervisor
- » An opportunity to meet their co-workers with whom they will most frequently be working. A short introduction may reduce the employee's anxiety about beginning a new job and will give them a few familiar faces to recognise on their first day
- » Specific information about dress attire. Rather than simply stating 'formal', 'semi-formal' or 'casual' give specific examples, such as: Men should wear a business shirt, but no tie, long pants, but not jeans. Shoes should be enclosed, but please don't wear joggers
- » Uniform, if required. Ensure the person understands whether this will be supplied by the organisation or if they will need to provide it themselves (include cost, how many to buy, where they should purchase from and who will pay for it)
- » If Personal Protective Equipment (e.g., safety vest, steel capped boots, hard hat etc.) is required explain if the organisation will supply these, or if they will need to provide/purchase their own
- » Information on grooming standards – explain the business policy on clean shaven versus beard, hair tied back, jewellery and tattoos

⋮ *"I think it's important to be clear that this is a professional environment, there are certain expectations, and to explain these. Maybe think about what things the employee should know before coming into the workplace and provide this information early."*

⋮ IEST Trial–Employer feedback

✳ For more information about [Strategies for job commencement](#), see the External online resources section

## Helpful tips



### Choosing and appointing a supervisor and/or mentor

Appoint one main supervisor to the autistic employee. You may like to select a mentor/workplace buddy to appoint in addition to the supervisor. Alternatively, the supervisor can fill both these roles. If possible, allow staff to volunteer to be a supervisor/mentor for an autistic employee. If appointing a supervisor and a mentor it is important to clearly define the roles, responsibilities and time constraints of each person, and to ensure the employee understands these boundaries.

- » The supervisor may be the employee's direct line of support for:
  - > Work-related queries
  - > Task instruction and breakdown
  - > Daily reporting
- » A mentor/workplace buddy may be the employee's direct line of support for:
  - > Advocacy support
  - > Social and communication skills
  - > Any difficulties that arise in the workplace. **For example**, attending social work events, anxiety, stressful situations, kitchen etiquette, hygiene and self-care
- » Ensure that the supervisor/mentor and autistic employee are well-matched. If the original match is not effective or suitable, consider changing the supervisor/mentor after a one month review of their progress
- » Appoint a secondary supervisor/mentor for the autistic employee to work with, to cover for circumstances when the primary supervisor/mentor is unavailable such as sick days, annual leave, promotion to another role or department or resignation
- » The supervisor/mentor should establish regular supervision sessions with the autistic employee. This may be on a daily basis at first, then as the employee begins to feel more confident in the workplace supervision can be reduced to once a week, then once a fortnight and then monthly. Supervision can be adjusted according to the employee's support needs

*"I think it's a wonderful thing to be able to give back and to help because I understand what it's like to work for a big company. I meet up with him [autistic employee] twice a week and give him certain tasks to do. I'll teach him about some tool sets that he'll need to use, give him some background of the company, and the project that he's going to be working on soon. I try to have a follow-up with him every couple weeks for a ten minute catch up outside of the office, maybe in a quiet room. Maybe down outside so it's a bit comfortable – just to find out how the arrangement is working."*

IEST Trial–Employer feedback

- » Supervisors/mentors should attend training and education on autism and learn the skills in how to interact and best support autistic employees. Training may also include other co-workers who work with or alongside the autistic employee. Education is the key to successful interaction and inclusion in the workplace
- » If you are working with a DES provider, the employment/job co-ordinator for the autistic employee will initially assist with job commencement, task instructions and management until both you and the employee feel confident to manage independently
- » Supervisors/mentors need to take the time to get to know the employee, learn their strengths and how to identify situations/tasks that make them nervous, stressed or anxious, and then how to manage it

## During the first week of employment

### Use external support

- » If your workplace has an Employee Assistance Program familiarise and encourage autistic employees to use its services
- » Many autistic employees will be connected to a DES provider. This DES provider will most likely have assisted them to find and interview for this job. This DES provider will continue to support this employee as they begin in the workplace until they are independent or no longer require regular workplace support
- » DES providers also assist employers to increase their confidence and skills to manage and work with autistic employees
- » If you are an employer whose employee is not associated with a DES provider, your workplace support can be accessed via **JobAccess** (see **Helpful Tips** box, p 29)
- » DES providers assign an employment/job co-ordinator to each autistic employee. The role of an employment/job-co-ordinator is to:
  - › Ensure the right job match for autistic employees
  - › Develop a support plan
  - › Task instructions and demonstration
  - › Workplace modifications and adaptations
  - › Provide training and education to supervisors/mentors and co-workers who work directly with the autistic employee
  - › Educate employers about financial assistance options available

### Develop a support plan

A support plan is used to assist both the employer and employee as they begin this new journey into employment, and provides all the important information necessary to achieve success in the workplace. A **'Support Plan Agreement' template** is available in the Resource section.

#### A support plan should include the opinions and decisions of:

- » The autistic employee
- » The employer
- » The supervisor/mentor
- » The DES employment co-ordinator

#### A support plan should discuss and include the following:

- » Roles and responsibilities of the employer and the employee
- » If support is required and what type (formal, informal, one-on-one, social)
- » Frequency and duration of support/supervision (daily, weekly, fortnightly, monthly)
- » Review periods and adjustments to be made accordingly
- » Training requirements
- » Workplace modifications – the employee may not be immediately aware of a requirement for these, but may recognise a need after they have been working in their position for a period of time. **For example**, equipment needed, adjustments to be made or training involved
- » An explanation of the procedure for requesting and implementing workplace modifications, so that it is clearly understood that it may take time for it to be implemented once the request has been made
- » A timeline to reduce DES support

Once agreed upon by all involved, the support plan should be signed by the employer, employee, supervisor/mentor and DES provider employment co-ordinator (if you are working alongside one).

## Helpful tips



### Important resources for workplace assistance and training

- ▶ Resource: [Training and education for your co-workers – JobAccess \(jobaccess.gov.au\)](https://www.jobaccess.gov.au/training-education)
- ▶ Resource: [Access for Employers – JobAccess \(jobaccess.gov.au\)](https://www.jobaccess.gov.au/access-employers)  
Support for Employers not associated with a DES provider
- ▶ Resource: [Disability Employment Services – JobAccess \(jobaccess.gov.au\)](https://www.jobaccess.gov.au/disability-employment-services)
- ▶ Resource: [Employers Guide to Partnering with Disability Employment Services – Disability Employment Australia \(disabilityemployment.org.au\)](https://www.disabilityemployment.org.au/employers-guide)
- ▶ Resource: [Find a DES service provider – JobAccess \(jobaccess.gov.au\)](https://www.jobaccess.gov.au/find-a-des-service-provider)

### Begin workplace orientation and training

If the roles of supervisor and mentor are held by separate people, remember to clearly define the responsibilities of each person in orientating and training the employee.

- » Supervisor/mentor to orientate the employee to:
  - › The workplace environment (lunch room, staff room, bathrooms, office space, parking)
  - › Workplace rules and regulations
  - › Health and safety procedures
  - › Emergency procedures (who to call, what to do, evacuation meeting point)

A visual chart of workplace roles can be helpful. This can include information on who they can speak to regarding personal issues, who they directly report to and what form of communication is appropriate for which situation. **For example**, whether a phone call or an email is required.

#### Discuss job expectations (employer's and employee's expectations)

- » Type of work involved in this particular job position
- » Role and specific responsibilities of the employee
- » Individual versus group or team work
- » Supervision – how regularly will this occur, will it increase or decrease as required depending on circumstances
- » Work conditions – safety and physical conditions

#### Discuss productivity requirements:

- » Number of hours worked (per day/per week/per month)
- » Quality of employee's work delivered or completed
- » Employee's thorough understanding of the skills required to complete the job in order to be productive according to the needs of your business

- » Necessary reasonable adjustments or modifications that may need to be made in order to assist with effective productivity requirements
- » Deadlines for completed work tasks
- » Task training will be different for every employee depending on their needs, level of support and detail required for the task. General requirements for task training (see [Phase 4: Workplace modifications](#) for multiple specific strategies):
  - › Be clear and concise
  - › Give explicit instructions, verbally and visually (written down or via email or text)
  - › Demonstrate what the final product should look like (if applicable)
- » If the person is employed through a DES, during the first week, depending on the individual, it is possible that you will have the employment co-ordinator alongside you to assist with breaking down the task as required for the employee and providing task instructions, or that they will be able to be contacted for assistance, if required
- » Assist with the initial organisation of their work space
- » Allocate time for the completion of tasks
- » Set due dates for task completion
- » Allow time for questions
- » Ensure instructions have been understood
- » Provide direct and sensitive feedback on performance, to assist with reassurance and to enhance performance and productivity

#### **Discuss expectations, such as:**

- » Attending work social events (optional versus compulsory attendance)
- » Attending staff meetings on a regular basis
- » Greeting co-workers and making basic small talk

⋮ *“I said, ‘Look, for the first couple weeks, if you want to try different hours, completely happy until we find something that really works well for you.’”*  
 ⋮ IEST Trial–Employer feedback

#### **Apply for financial assistance (if applicable)**

There are financial assistance programs available to employers who employ people with a disability. These programs have been set up to assist employers with some of the costs that may be associated with employing people with a disability, such as wages, equipment, training and workplace modifications. However, many modifications or accommodations will be inexpensive or no cost.

At the time of writing, the Australian Government has several different programs designed to help meet the financial cost of supporting a new employee with a disability:

- » **Employment Assistance Fund**  
Provides financial assistance to purchase work modifications, and/or services for employees with a disability. This may include:
  - › Cost of work modifications to the physical environment
  - › Adaptive equipment
  - › Disability awareness training
- » **Disabled Australian Apprentice Wage Support**  
Provides funding for employers to assist with successful participation of apprentices in on-the- job training
- » **Wage Subsidy**  
This is paid to the employer to assist with covering the cost of paying the wages for the first few months of employment of a person with a disability. There are different programs available:
  - › **Wage Subsidy Scheme:** Job seekers who are registered with a DES provide
  - › **Supported Wage System:** Assists employers to pay productivity-based wages for an employee whose work productivity is significantly reduced due to their disability

\* For more information about [Job commencement](#), see the External online resources section

## Helpful tips



### Financial assistance

- ▶ Resource: [Employment Assistance Fund – JobAccess \(jobaccess.gov.au\)](http://jobaccess.gov.au)
- ▶ Resource: [Disabled Australian Apprentice Wage Support – Australian Apprenticeships \(servicesaustralia.gov.au\)](http://servicesaustralia.gov.au)
- ▶ Resource: [Employer Incentives and Financial Assistance – Disability Employment Australia \(guide.disabilityemployment.org.au\)](http://guide.disabilityemployment.org.au)
- ▶ Resource: [Supported Wage System – JobAccess \(jobaccess.gov.au\)](http://jobaccess.gov.au)

## Summary checklist for job commencement



To-do	Strategies required	Person responsible	Task complete
Provide employee with necessary information prior to beginning their new job			<input type="checkbox"/>
Discuss job expectations and productivity requirements			<input type="checkbox"/>
Finalise and sign job contract			<input type="checkbox"/>
Choose a supervisor/mentor for the new employee			<input type="checkbox"/>
Assign supervisor/mentor to the new employee			<input type="checkbox"/>
Provide workplace orientation and training			<input type="checkbox"/>
Develop a support plan			<input type="checkbox"/>
Access external support from a Disability Employment Service provider <i>(if required)</i>			<input type="checkbox"/>
Apply for financial assistance <i>(if required)</i>			<input type="checkbox"/>



### Phase 4: Workplace modification

An autistic employee may face challenges in the workplace due to the nature of their disability, the type of work involved and/or the physical environment. It is important to be aware of these potential challenges, as well as knowing how to establish a workplace that **promotes effective participation and equal opportunity**.

*“I think it is a good thing to provide details about how the workplace usually works, and then ask if there are any aspects that we can adapt. For example, we told the autistic employees that we have a flexible work place where you might be at a different desk every day. That means that you share key-boards with others, there might be people talking, moving around. Then we explained that they could choose to bring their own key-board and headphones/headsets. We also provided them with access to a quiet place if they needed to. Because we offered adaptations from the start, they did not have to come ask for it.”*

IEST Trial–Employer feedback

Workplace modifications or reasonable adjustments are the processes by which adaptations or modifications are made in and to the work environment. These modifications assist an employee to carry out their work effectively. Employers are required by law to provide workplace modifications when necessary for their employees.

Workplace modifications may include:

- » Provision of equipment
- » Education, training and re-training
- » Job analysis and re-design
- » Flexible work arrangements
- » Adaptations to the employee’s work area

*“He didn’t need much of any alterations or changes. On his first day, I did give him options of places to sit and desks to be able to use, and I said, “Look, this desk is good, it’s off to the side. However, there are a couple of meetings a day just off the side of that desk. You might find it a bit noisy. There’s this desk here, but, you know, there’s other things that go on in this area, so ... I think just accommodating him and letting him pick his desk was the biggest adaptation we made.”*

IEST Trial–Employer feedback

It is often difficult during the job commencement and placement phase to know if any or which work modifications may be required for an autistic employee. It is usually during the initial weeks in a role that barriers begin to arise in the workplace. It is during this phase of the employment process that employers are most likely to request and apply for the **Employment Assistance Fund**.

#### ► Factors to consider during workplace modification

##### Have you thought about...

- » The different aspects of the work environment that might need modifying?
  - > Sensory
  - > Social
  - > Communication
  - > Task specific
  - > Physical

- » Individualising workplace modifications to meet the employee's specific needs?
- » The nature of the workplace modifications?
- » Temporary versus ongoing modifications?
- » Working alongside and discussing the necessary workplace modifications with the employee involved?
- » Asking the employee directly about their specific work-related needs?

## ► Awareness of potential challenges in the workplace

### Have you thought about...

- » The social anxiety that may be associated with initiating conversations and social interactions in the workplace?
- » The sounds, physical space, tactile nature and visual distractions of the work environment and their potential impact on an employee with sensory sensitivities?
- » The support an employee with executive functioning challenges may require to maximise decision-making, concentration, time management and organisational skills?
- » The challenges an employee may experience if there is a change in routine, the environment or the predictability of the day?
- » How stress and anxiety may impact on the ability to work effectively and productively?



If the majority of your responses have been **'Yes'**, continue using the IEST and its strategies for your workplace.

If the majority of your responses have been **'No'**, contact a Disability Employment Service provider for more support in conjunction with the use of the IEST: Go to [jobaccess.gov.au](http://jobaccess.gov.au)



## Important points to remember for work modification strategies



In Phase 4: Work modification, there are five main areas that may require modification. Many of the modifications in these areas will overlap with one another. These five areas include: sensory environment, social environment, communication, activity and task, and physical environment



Due to the complex nature of autism, social and other functioning can vary between environments, settings, and the emotional state of the person. The recommended modifications have been developed based on the most common traits and challenges encountered in the workplace



Remember that every employee on the autism spectrum is an individual and unique. Many will only need a small number of accommodations or modifications, and some may not need any at all. You should consult with the individual and ask about their personal requirements before making any changes



If you find that the modification strategies recommended are not suitable for your employee, further consultation with the employee or your DES provider is advised

# Steps in the workplace modification process

1



## Identify the need for modification

- ▶ Employee requests workplace modifications or the employer recognises the need for modifications

2



## Assess the need for modification

- ▶ Include the autistic employee in this process; they are the expert in their individual experience
- ▶ The assessment can be completed internally or externally
- ▶ This may include functional capacity assessments for employees or workplace re-design
- ▶ Financial assistance is available for workplace modifications, see [JobAccess Employment Assistance Fund](#)

3



## Develop and negotiate the modification plan

- ▶ Establish the details of the modifications in the support plan
- ▶ Discuss the potential modifications with employee, their supervisor/mentor and employment co-ordinator from their DES provider
- ▶ Modification plan to be agreed upon by all involved

4



## Implement the workplace modifications

- ▶ Implement the required modifications according to your available workplace resources
- ▶ DES providers can assist with implementing workplace modifications

5



## Monitor and review the workplace modification

- ▶ Monitor the employee regularly to ensure that their workplace needs are met through these modifications
- ▶ Set regular review dates to re-assess the workplace modification support plan (weekly, monthly, quarterly)
- ▶ Provide the employee with a diary/notebook they can keep at their work station to record any concerns or ideas they have between review dates. This allows for instant relief of stress and a proactive approach to self-regulation
- ▶ If the modification support plan is not successful or suitable, begin the workplace modification process again using different modification strategies

Adjust if the modification plan is no longer appropriate or effective

# Strategies for workplace modification

Becoming an autism-friendly workplace will benefit other workers too, including those who choose not to disclose that they are autistic, or those without a formal diagnosis. You may discover that many of these strategies work well to make the workplace more inclusive for everybody.

When planning to implement modifications in the workplace, you should take a collaborative approach. Work with the autistic employee(s) to determine what their particular needs are, which modifications they can implement themselves, and which they may require assistance with.

We suggest you use this section with the employee as a guide to the sorts of things that might affect them, giving suggestions as to how the issue can be reduced or eliminated. It may be that you use only one, or you may use a combination of strategies during this process. Discuss with the person about whether the reasons for the modification might need to be explained to co-workers, and who might do that.

Be mindful that sometimes people may only become aware of some sensitivities after they have been exposed to them for a period of time. Encourage them to let you know if any new issues arise or if the accommodation or modification does not work for them.

## 1 Sensory

### Strategies to modify the auditory workplace

Identifying sensory sensitivity	Understanding sensory sensitivity
<p><b>Sounds and pitches</b></p> <p>Common sounds and pitches include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Chairs scraping on the floor</li> <li>» Co-workers’ voices and conversations</li> <li>» Fire alarms</li> <li>» Continuous loud white noise</li> <li>» Ticking clock</li> <li>» Workplace radio</li> <li>» Machinery and equipment</li> <li>» Heavy traffic</li> <li>» Vacuum cleaner</li> <li>» Lift (elevator)</li> </ul>	<p><b>Impact of sounds and pitches on autistic employees may result in:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Difficulty hearing, understanding and responding in conversation. This may apply to social situations and an employee’s ability to respond in conversation when distracted by sounds, including tone and pitch of voice</li> <li>» Decreased mood due to frustration and lack of control over sounds and pitches</li> <li>» Lowered concentration, especially when attempting more complex tasks, multi-tasking or with social interaction</li> <li>» Decreased productivity</li> <li>» Increased stress</li> </ul>

**One or a combination of strategies can be used for success.**

- » Ear plugs
- » Headphones (active noise cancelling technology or music can be played)
- » Place anti-scratch felt/leather pads on the bottom of chair legs to prevent scratching, scraping and dragging on the floor
- » Work in a quieter environment:
  - › Work in a shared office (maximum two people) versus large open plan office with cubicles. However, it may be best to avoid placing in an individual office, if possible, to avoid isolation.

- › If working in an open plan office, restrict the number of other employees in the office space (maximum of four to six)
- » Avoid seating the employee in high traffic work areas such as near the reception desk, switchboard, staff toilet, kitchen and lunch rooms, meeting rooms, printing and equipment rooms
- » Place noisy equipment such as printers and machines in an isolated or specific room
- » Run particularly noisy equipment early in the morning or late in the afternoon when less employees are likely to be in the workplace
- » Schedule cleaning times early in the morning, at the end of the day or after hours when less employees are likely to be in the workplace
- » Encourage the employee to write down messages as they hear them. Be aware that they may prefer to use a computer or other electronic device to write or record messages or reminders
- » Use written communication in place of, or in addition to, verbal instructions (autistic employees are often visual learners)
- » If the environment is too quiet, allow for 'white noise' such as a radio, fan, clock in the workplace
- » Prepare the employee for unexpected sounds that might occur such as a fire alarms or construction site works to assist with predictability

### Strategies to modify the visual workplace

Identifying sensory sensitivity	Understanding sensory sensitivity
<p><b>Visual</b></p> <p>Common visual sensitivities include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Lighting</li> <li>» Movement</li> <li>» Colours and contrasts</li> </ul>	<p><b>Impact of visual sensitivities on autistic employees include:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Bright fluorescent lighting or flickering can be distracting</li> <li>» Working in or near a high traffic environment such as staff toilet, kitchen, reception area or meeting rooms can distract from work tasks</li> <li>» Difficulty processing visual information quickly depending on the visual structure of the work environment, such as colours, contrasts and clarity</li> </ul>

#### One or a combination of strategies can be used for success.

- » Depending on the work environment:
  - › Change fluorescent lights to an LED or halogen light
  - › Position the work area close to natural light where possible, such as a window
  - › The employee may need to wear tinted glasses/sunglasses in the workplace if the lighting cannot be adjusted
- » Position the work area away from high traffic areas to minimise visual distractions. Be mindful not to isolate the employee
- » Work areas can be organised to face a wall or structured within a cubicle instead of facing high traffic areas
- » Visually structure the work area to assist with more effective processing of visual information by incorporating visual cues such as :
  - › **Visual instructions for tasks:** step-by-step instructions can be written, symbols or pictures
  - › **Visual clarity:** colour code important and essential information using coloured dots, files, labels
  - › **Visual organisation:** setting up the environment to reduce clutter, use boxes to organise tasks, use colours to represent different ideas and use a visual schedule or calendar

## Strategies to modify the tactile workplace

Identifying sensory sensitivity	Understanding sensory sensitivity
<p><b>Tactile (touch) and space</b></p> <p>Common tactile and space sensitivities include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Work uniform fabrics and labels</li> <li>» Texture of products being produced (food, industrial products, materials and fabrics)</li> <li>» Crowded office (too many employees)</li> <li>» Work space area</li> </ul>	<p><b>Impact of tactile and space sensitivities on autistic employees:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Clothing that scratches or irritates the skin can distract, frustrate and leave the employee feeling flustered</li> <li>» If the employee is required to handle and work with textures that irritate their skin or overwhelm their sensory system, they may avoid completing the work task</li> <li>» If an employee feels claustrophobic and crowded within their work space it might leave them feeling overwhelmed and stressed</li> </ul>

### One or a combination of strategies can be used for success.

- » Question whether a uniform is essential for the job and if the employee needs to wear the uniform. If yes, can it be made in a softer or different fabric
- » Employee can remove labels from clothing
- » Where possible, and in accordance with Occupational Health and Safety (OH&S) rules and regulations, allow employees to wear gloves or accessories that will assist in reducing their tactile sensitivities
- » Avoid employees sharing a workspace or hot desk. If it is possible assign the employee their own desk
- » Inform the employee of 'personal space' breaks when feeling stressed or overwhelmed in the work environment such as, going for a short walk, taking a short 10 minute break in a designated quiet space to calm down and reduce their stress. Many other employees will take natural breaks (visit the toilet, get a coffee) when they require some personal space time, but autistic individuals may need to feel they have permission to leave their workspace when it is not an official break time. They may need a little more time than these natural breaks allow. To ensure the workplace is inclusive for all people, allow other employees to use the quiet space as required.

## Strategies to modify workplace odours

Identifying sensory sensitivity	Understanding sensory sensitivity
<p><b>Odour (smell)</b></p> <p>Common odour sensitivities include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Strong perfumes or colognes</li> <li>» Toilet odours</li> <li>» Air fresheners</li> <li>» Cigarette smoke</li> <li>» Job-related odours, such as industrial fumes, food, factory odours</li> </ul>	<p><b>Impact of odour sensitivities on autistic employees:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Strong perfumes or odours can cause strong reactions including nausea and dizziness</li> <li>» Employees may avoid co-workers who wear strong perfume or smoke and this may lead to workplace conflict</li> <li>» Depending on an employee's response to the job-related odours, it may be worth re-considering if this particular task is a good and appropriate job match</li> </ul>

**One or a combination of strategies can be used for success.**

- » Depending on the employee's degree of sensitivity, avoid using air fresheners in the workplace
  - » If there is a need for air freshener, choose fragrances that are agreeable to the employee
  - » On days when an employee is required to work within a team or attend a meeting, make a request to avoid wearing strong perfumes and colognes on these specific days.
- 

### Sensory overload

Occasionally, an autistic individual may have what is commonly referred to as a meltdown or a shutdown. This is when the body or brain becomes so overwhelmed that it goes into 'fight, flight or freeze' mode, usually caused by a reaction to a sensory or information overload. This overload is often due to external factors, but can also be due to internal or emotional factors.

**Shutdown** (freeze) is usually a way for a person to avoid further sensory stimulation, with the aim of averting a meltdown, which would be embarrassing and distressing for the person. Recognising a shutdown:

- » They may be exhibiting signs of anxiety (pacing, repetitive movements or questions, rocking)
- » They may retreat to a quiet area, cover their ears and/or eyes in an effort to avoid further stimulation
- » The person may not respond when spoken to, or may respond in an inappropriate manner
- » They may have an angry look or stance (clenched fists, stiff body)

**Meltdown** (fight or flight) is a temporary loss of behavioural control, and is not to be confused with a tantrum. The person may shout, scream, cry, lash out in a physical way (fight) or run to a place they feel safe (flight)

In the case of a shutdown or meltdown you should:

- » Stay calm
- » Remove or adjust anything that may be adding to their sensory overload – loud music, bright lights, unnecessary people
- » Have one person who is familiar to the person **sit quietly** (this is non-threatening to the person) nearby, or just outside the room, to keep others away – this will help the person feel safe
- » Avoid looking at them or staring
- » Avoid talking to them more than necessary – the person may be unable to hear or process verbal language at this time
- » Avoid asking questions – they may be unable to talk
- » Avoid touching them – they may not want to be touched (and may react defensively if you do)
- » Avoid judging them – this is something they can't control

In the case of meltdown:

- » Give the person some space and time – they will need time to recover after the meltdown is over
- » Be aware that they may be embarrassed after the meltdown and their adrenaline will take many hours to dissipate. They may be unable to talk about it for a while without getting overwhelmed again. Wait until the next day to ask how you can support them more effectively if it happens again, or how to avoid the same trigger in the future

\* For more information about [Workplace modification and strategies](#), see the External online resources section

# Summary checklist for the sensory environment



To-do	Strategies required	Person responsible	Task complete
Modify auditory environment			<input type="checkbox"/>
Modify visual environment			<input type="checkbox"/>
Modify tactile and space environment			<input type="checkbox"/>
Modify odorous environment			<input type="checkbox"/>

Recognising the social profile of autistic employees	Understanding social interaction for autistic employees
<p><b>Social workplace</b></p> <p>Common areas where difficulties may occur:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Eye contact when communicating</li> <li>» Awareness of unwritten social rules and workplace culture</li> <li>» Recognition and appropriate response to facial expressions and body language in social situations</li> <li>» Appropriate hygiene and grooming</li> <li>» Initiating and participating in small talk</li> <li>» Being able to express, respond and regulate emotions</li> </ul>	<p><b>Eye contact</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» A lack of eye contact may be a result of a sensory overload for the employee. <b>For example</b>, listening to what a co-worker or supervisor is saying, processing the information and responding might make it challenging to maintain eye contact. This could be due to an auditory (sound) and visual sensory overload</li> <li>» A lack of eye contact may also make responding to facial expressions and body language challenging</li> <li>» It is important to remember that a lack of eye contact is not likely an intentional rude gesture, nor is the employee avoiding listening or engaging</li> </ul> <p><b>Social behaviour</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Understanding the unwritten social rules and workplace culture can be challenging as many of these behaviours are unspoken and implied. Clear and concise explanations, otherwise the expected social behaviour may not occur</li> <li>» Often autistic individuals may not recognise facial expressions and their associated meanings and as a result do not respond emotionally or appropriately. Again, this is not intentional, nor are employees being rude</li> <li>» In response to emotions, employees may also find recognising and expressing their own emotions challenging. Autistic employees may <b>want to be included in social interactions</b>, but often do not know how to initiate a social conversation. They may not engage at all because they do not know how to. They may also bring inappropriate social topics to the conversation or miss cues that indicate whether someone is happy to start or continue a conversation.</li> </ul> <p><b>Hygiene</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Personal hygiene and grooming can be challenging in the workplace for some autistic employees</li> <li>» Unwritten societal rules for hygiene exist with the expectations of: showering daily, wearing clean clothes, managing body odour and brushing your teeth. For some this is an unknown expectation and may not always be well managed</li> <li>» Sensory sensitivities may result in avoidant behaviour. <b>For example</b>, brushing teeth can be sensitive and uncomfortable</li> </ul>



**It is important for co-workers to know how to socially interact with autistic employees. Education and training about autism and the social challenges and anxieties that an employee may be experiencing in the workplace can improve understanding and dispel any myths or misconceptions such as: everyone is like 'Rain Man' or 'Sheldon' from The Big Bang Theory, or that autistic individuals are rude, abrupt, anti-social or lacking in empathy. Increasing co-workers' knowledge and understanding of autism will encourage engagement and inclusion in the workplace.**

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**Co-workers can help workplace social interactions by:**

- » Choosing some topics of interest to the autistic employee that you know will engage and spark their interest in conversation, particularly a hobby or sport that you know they enjoy
- » Providing social invitations. This can go at least one of three ways:
  - 1** Some autistic employees would like to attend and will come to the event but will need some assistance with social interaction and engagement. This support could be provided by their supervisor/mentor.
  - 2** Some employees may be too stressed or anxious to accept the social invitation and will decline, or may just need some graded exposure to social situations.
  - 3** Some employees will genuinely not be interested in attending and will therefore not attend any social events.

*The point to this is to invite the employees anyway, even if they do not attend you have still included them in the workplace and the team.*

As it is not compulsory for someone to disclose that they are autistic, co-workers should be educated about diversity and how to ensure they are inclusive of everyone they work with.

**Addressing workplace hygiene and grooming (this will not apply to all autistic employees)**

Hygiene and grooming for some autistic employees tends to fall into the 'unwritten social rules' category of unknown expectations. It is important that this topic is addressed by someone who these employees trust and respect, such as their supervisor/mentor.

**Supervisors/mentors need to be:**

- » Direct and sensitive in this feedback
- » Explain what hygiene is and why it is important. **For example**, hygiene means washing your hands after going to the bathroom, showering daily, brushing your teeth, wearing deodorant daily, throwing away your used tissues. Co-workers will find extreme body odours and bad breath offensive
- » Explain what grooming is and why it is important. **For example**, grooming means washing your clothes regularly, wearing clean underwear, and a fresh pair of socks daily

This may be a topic that a DES provider employment co-ordinator can assist with for the autistic employee.

A daily hygiene and grooming checklist can be printed off – see **'Hygiene checklist'** in the Resource section

- » A copy is given to the autistic employee to keep to follow on a daily basis
- » This checklist can be placed around the office in places like the kitchen, staff room and work bathrooms, because hygiene and grooming can be applied to all staff members

# Summary checklist for the social environment



To-do	Strategies required	Person responsible	Task complete
Assign supervisor/mentor to the autistic employee			<input type="checkbox"/>
Modify the social workplace			<input type="checkbox"/>
Provide education and training to co-workers about autism in the workplace			<input type="checkbox"/>
Address workplace hygiene			<input type="checkbox"/>

Recognising the communication profile of autistic employees	Understanding communication for autistic employees
<p><b>Workplace communication</b></p> <p>Common areas where difficulties may occur:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Eye contact when communicating</li> <li>» Recognition and appropriate response to facial expressions and body language in social situations</li> <li>» Verbal responses can be blunt, honest and direct and this can be seen as arrogant or rude</li> <li>» Abstract language can be misinterpreted</li> <li>» Verbal communication, such as: following verbal instructions or conversations, and responding to verbal feedback</li> </ul>	<p><b>Eye contact</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» A lack of eye contact may be a result of a sensory overload for the employee. <b>For example</b>, listening to what a co-worker or supervisor is saying, processing the information and responding can make it challenging to maintain eye contact. This may be due to an auditory (sound) and visual sensory overload</li> <li>» A lack of eye contact may also make responding to facial expressions and body language challenging</li> <li>» It is important to remember that a lack of eye contact is not an intentional rude gesture, nor does it indicate that the employee is not listening or engaging</li> </ul> <p><b>Communication</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Often employees may not recognise facial expressions and their associated meanings and as a result do not respond emotionally or appropriately. Again, this is not intentional, nor are employees being rude. In response to emotions, employees may also find recognising and expressing their own emotions challenging</li> <li>» Many employees <b>want to be included in social interactions</b>, but may not know how to initiate a social conversation. As a result they may not engage at all because they do not know how to, or they may bring inappropriate social topics to the conversation</li> <li>» Employees may also lean toward the other extreme and talk too much on a particular topic that is only of interest to them such as: a particular sport, pet, hobby, or personal life event</li> <li>» Autistic individuals may communicate in an honest, direct and blunt manner. Their intent is not to be arrogant, rude, or matter-of-fact. Communication might be difficult for some employees and they may not understand or see the need for small talk. As a result communication becomes direct, to the point and honest</li> <li>» Abstract language and metaphors should be avoided in conversation where possible. This is because many autistic employees are very literal. Some employees may simply not understand what you mean, and others may recognise this is an abstract concept and will ask questions until they understand</li> <li>» Autistic individuals are often visual learners, and are more likely to respond better if instructions and feedback are given both visually and verbally, rather than just verbally</li> </ul>

## Strategies to modify workplace communication

Communication in the workplace is essential for maintaining work relationships, interacting within a team, and being able to communicate work-related information that is important for productivity. One or a combination of strategies can be used for success.

**It is important for both supervisors/mentors and co-workers who work directly with autistic employees to have a good understanding of how to effectively communicate. This includes:**

- » Education and training about autism and understanding the communication challenges and anxieties that an employee may be experiencing in the workplace. **For example**, the lack of eye contact, difficulties interpreting body language and facial expressions, interrupting conversations
- » Education to dispel any myths or misconceptions about autism in the workplace, such as: everyone is like 'Rain Man' or 'Sheldon' from The Big Bang Theory, or that autistic individuals are rude, abrupt, anti-social or lacking in empathy
- » Education and training to increase co-workers' knowledge and encourage engagement and inclusion in the workplace
- » Being direct and literal in your conversations, instructions and feedback. Autistic employees tend to take everything literally and may have difficulty understanding generalisations or implied meanings
- » Being direct with your communication, including explaining how you are feeling and what you are thinking, instead of relying on them trying to interpret your body language and facial expressions
- » Avoiding abstract language in conversation, particularly when giving instructions. **For example**, saying things like 'The ball is in your court' or 'Don't cry over spilt milk'. Often the meaning of idioms or abstract language can be lost and will leave your employee feeling confused trying to follow what it is that you are saying, and they may begin asking multiple questions to clarify what it is that you mean. Instead say things like:
  - > 'It is your decision whether you want to file this report or not. The deadline is 5pm, so please make your decision by then.'
  - > 'Do not worry about what has happened, there is always a way to fix it and if not, we will make a new plan.'
- » Being clear and concise when giving instructions, directions and feedback. **For example**, when organising a small team meeting with your staff try to avoid saying to your employee, 'Can you please send everyone an email about the team meeting today?' Instead say, 'John, can you please send an email to Joan, Kevin, Paul and Mandy to remind them about the team meeting we are going to have today at 3pm in room 205?'
- » Informing the employee of the specific workplace language you use in your business, both formal and informal, so that they are aware of the jargon used and can begin to understand the context and its use
- » Considering putting verbal instructions, directions, feedback, and reminders in a concrete visual format for your employee. This can be in the format of:
  - > Email/text message
  - > Notes
  - > Visual charts
  - > Calendars or planners (colour coded)
- » Encouraging and allowing other forms of communication in your workplace other than face-to-face communication such as:
  - > Email
  - > Instant messaging
  - > Text messaging
  - > Phone call (optional)
- » Providing a warning in advance for meetings that an autistic employee is required to attend, particularly if the employee is required to verbally participate and/or provide a verbal update on their work progress
- » Providing alternative options for employees if verbally presenting their information is too stressful; such as allowing them to present their information in the format of a PowerPoint presentation, or paper/electronic document
- » Consider allowing an employee to bring a support person or their supervisor/mentor to meetings that may cause stress or anxiety, such as performance reviews

# Summary checklist for communication



To-do	Strategies required	Person responsible	Task complete
Provide education and training to staff about autism and communication skills in the workplace			<input type="checkbox"/>
Visual instructions			<input type="checkbox"/>
Alternative devices for communication (email, phone, instant message)			<input type="checkbox"/>

Recognising the need for activity and task adjustment in the workplace	Understanding communication for autistic employees
<p><b>Workplace tasks and activities</b></p> <p>Common challenges that may occur in work activities and tasks:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Organisation and prioritisation of tasks</li> <li>» Time management</li> <li>» Memory</li> <li>» Maintaining concentration</li> <li>» Multi-tasking</li> <li>» Problem solving</li> <li>» Transitioning between tasks (new and current)</li> <li>» Routine and predictability</li> <li>» Stress management</li> </ul>	<p><b>Many autistic employees may have difficulty with executive functioning. Executive functioning is an umbrella term for the management of the brain and its decisions. This means that employees may require support with:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Organising their work space</li> <li>» Prioritising work tasks according to timelines, deadlines and importance</li> </ul> <p><b>Time management</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Keeping track of time</li> <li>» Task completion: missing deadlines or completing the task at a slower pace</li> <li>» Managing time when needing to prepare or begin a new task</li> <li>» Punctuality with arriving to work, meetings and functions on time</li> </ul> <p><b>Memory</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Poor short term memory may result in difficulty remembering job duties, recalling information, instructions, and daily actions</li> <li>» Autistic people tend to have better long term memory than short term memory</li> </ul> <p><b>Concentration</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Maintaining concentration for long periods of time</li> <li>» Distractions in the work environment such as visual and auditory distractions in the workplace (phone ringing, office printer, co-workers' conversations)</li> <li>» Workplace distractions can decrease concentration</li> </ul> <p><b>Multi-tasking</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Performing many tasks at one time</li> <li>» Difficulties may occur regardless of the complexity of the tasks, similarity of the tasks or even the number of times the tasks is performed</li> <li>» Multi-tasking may increase stress for the autistic employee</li> </ul>

Cont. >

**Recognising the need for activity and task adjustment in the workplace**

**Understanding communication for autistic employees**

**Problem solving**

- » Planning work tasks and setting goals
- » Breaking tasks down step-by-step, and being able to see parts of the task as a whole (looking at the bigger picture or end product)
- » Generating alternative options/solutions when a problem presents itself
- » Problem solving scenarios may increase stress for the employee

**Transitioning between tasks**

- » Change in the workplace; increased stress and anxiety when changing tasks
- » Flexibility in tasks makes moving from one task to another or initiating a new task challenging. As a result, transferring skills learned in the initial or previous task may be lost when beginning or transitioning to a new task

**Routine and predictability**

- » Predictability is mainly about having information about what to expect
- » Predictability in a job is important for some autistic employees to help them understand the expectations associated with the job (particularly the social expectations)
- » Some employees perform better when their jobs are clearly structured and consistent in nature
- » For some employees, having the knowledge of what will most likely occur in the workplace on a daily basis helps to reduce stress and anxiety from the unknown
- » However, for some autistic employees, having a job that is predictably unpredictable is perfectly okay

**Stress**

- » Any of the above situations may cause stress and anxiety to an autistic employee
- » Responses to stressful scenarios will vary from employee to employee
- » Common scenarios that might create stress include increased workloads, unrealistic timeframes, sudden changes in the original plan and instructions, workplace changes (supervisor is sick or on annual leave) and conflict between co-workers
- » Stress reduces an employee's ability to be productive and feel confident in their job

## Strategies to modify workplace tasks and activities

Strategies to be implemented by autistic employees or their supervisors/mentors. When strategies are implemented it is important that the employee is consulted along the way and given constructive feedback on their performance. Supervisors or mentors can assist with one, or a combination of strategies.

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### ► Organisation and prioritisation of tasks

- » Structuring and organising employee's personal workplace
  - » Use coloured weekly charts/calendars/computer programmes to identify and continuously remind the employee of their daily work tasks, responsibilities and activities
  - » This may change on a daily basis depending on the workplace, but have a set routine to begin with
  - » Setting daily and weekly goals with employee – see '[Goal Planner' template](#) in the Resource section
  - » Prioritising daily and weekly tasks with the employee according to importance and deadlines
  - » Assigning a new task or project only when the last one is complete
  - » Developing a colour-code system for files, projects, activities and tasks, meetings and deadlines
  - » Providing an information sheet for quick and easy access to prioritised tasks, meetings and people – see '[Priority Planner' template](#) in the Resource section
- 

### ► Time management

- » Breaking down tasks step-by-step, i.e., breaking down a large task into smaller tasks
  - » Setting reasonable and achievable timeframes for an employee to complete the tasks, such as mini-deadlines within the overall deadline
  - » Providing a checklist for each task to assist with prioritisation and completion
  - » Making use of calendars and organisers and colour coding for task completion; paper and electronic calendars
  - » Giving ample warning about upcoming meetings where attendance is required to assist with punctuality
  - » Setting an alarm for required meetings on a phone or computer
  - » Do not let the employee get stuck on a certain point in a task. **For example**, give clear instructions that say 'If you cannot complete this section or you are having difficulty, attempt the task three times and then move on to the next task'. At the end of the day or during feedback this will be addressed and help will be given
  - » Buffer time between tasks – allow and encourage down time (approximately 5-10 minutes) between tasks, such as a coffee break or short walk. This helps to reset concentration and focus for the next task
- 

### ► Memory

- » Verbal and written instructions (via email, written notes)
- » Instructions must be clear, concise and literal
- » Instructions may also be written using pictures; sometimes this helps with providing the employee with the appropriate cue or reminder of the task
- » Encouraging the employee to ask questions about the current task. This can be done via email, instant message or through writing the question down to remember to ask it in the next supervision session
- » Using a flow chart to break down large or complex tasks. This chart can also be colour coded and used for tasks such as logging into a computer, turning off equipment or operating equipment
- » Use calendars, pin-up boards, post-it notes and organisers to remind the employee of important dates, meetings, deadlines and work functions
- » Making use of phone alarms or computer alarms for daily reminders of tasks, meetings and deadlines
- » Providing the employee with a contact list of their co-workers or team, with their associated photos, names and office numbers to assist with remembering names and faces
- » Providing the employee with a list of essential passwords for the workplace. This **must** be securely stored
- » Encouraging the employee to use a voice/audio recorder to record instructions

## ► Maintaining concentration

- » Planning the work day by breaking it down into smaller achievable tasks
  - » Prioritising work tasks
  - » Setting a timer to achieve each task
  - » At the end of the task, or when the timer goes off, taking a short break for relaxation
  - » Limiting visual and auditory distractions such as organising the work space, de-cluttering the work environment, using noise-cancelling headphones, moving employee's workplace away from lunch room, busy corridors, bathroom and kitchen. If possible, set-up workplace in an office space with less co-workers and fewer distractions
- 

## ► Multi-tasking

- » Clustering similar tasks together for consistency and ease of transitioning from one task to the next
  - » Providing clear instructions when beginning or adding a new and/or more complex task
  - » For large tasks, breaking it down into a series of smaller tasks that can be completed one at a time
  - » Providing individualised training for the employee to learn the skills of multi-tasking in tasks, such as answering the phone and typing on the computer, taking notes whilst attending and listening in a meeting
  - » Providing prompts or cues to the employee when the task requires multi-tasking
  - » Setting up the workplace environment with all the necessary equipment to assist with multi-tasking, such as a note pad next to the phone, a head set for video conferencing clients, lining up tools to be used in the task
  - » Removing visual and auditory distractions to assist with maintaining concentration
- 

## ► Problem solving

- » Providing a flow chart of the process to follow when having difficulty in a task. This will prompt the employee to identify the problem, attempt to resolve it or move onto the next task. **For example**, attempt the tasks three times, if you still cannot do it, move onto the next task
  - » Providing the employee with an Emergency Plan for tasks that create anxiety and stress, to the point that the employee is overwhelmed. **For example**, contact the supervisor, take a short break, use relaxation techniques
  - » Providing the employee with written instructions for work tasks. The employee can then refer to these instructions when unsure of, or if they require reminding of the steps involved
  - » Encouraging employees to ask questions (this can be via email or instant messaging while completing the tasks)
  - » Setting daily or weekly goals to be achieved by the employee
  - » Planning each work day or work week using a calendar, chart or organiser
  - » Colour coding important information, events, meetings, and deadlines
- 

## ► Transitioning between tasks

- » Informing the employee as soon as practical when there is a change in the workplace, job tasks, or supervisors
- » Preparing the employee in advance for new tasks that they will soon begin; whether the tasks are similar or different to what they have currently been doing
- » Providing individual training if upskilling is required for the next task
- » Providing written instructions for the new task, including an example of the finished product
- » Encouraging employees to ask questions (this can be via email or instant messaging while completing the task)
- » Breaking the new task down into step-by-step stages until the employee is comfortable with what is required of them
- » Being mindful of signs of stress during this transition period (repetitive questions, rocking body back and forth, excessive sweating, decreased appetite)
- » Managing stress accordingly – see *the Stress Management section on the next page*
- » Setting up a regular time for supervision or feedback during the task transition stage

## ► Routine and predictability

- » Planning and setting daily or weekly goals with the employee
- » Providing the employee with visual job schedules and routine charts on a regular basis to better structure their workplace
- » Using these schedules to communicate with the employee when workplace changes are going to occur
- » Informing the employee of these changes at least a day prior to them occurring to better prepare them and to reduce any associated anxiety and stress. By predicting and communicating any planned changes the autistic employee may be better prepared for the upcoming change and thrive in the changing environment

## ► Stress management

- » Setting realistic and achievable task timeframes
- » Planning and setting realistic work goals
- » Keeping to the discussed and set routine
- » Providing positive feedback and encouragement for tasks completed well
- » Encouraging the employee to be aware of what scenarios increase their stress and anxiety. During a supervision session ask the employee to share this with you so you can better modify their workplace
- » Incorporating regular short breaks into their visual calendars to help manage stress (time for a short walk, deep breathing, using a heat pack to relax muscles)

\* For more information about [Workplace modification and strategies](#), see the External online resources section



## Summary checklist for activity and task adjustment



To-do	Strategies required	Person responsible	Task complete
Assist with organising and prioritising tasks			<input type="checkbox"/>
Assist with time management			<input type="checkbox"/>
Assist with memory-based tasks			<input type="checkbox"/>
Modify the work environment to manage concentration			<input type="checkbox"/>
Adjust the demands of tasks			<input type="checkbox"/>
Assist with problem-solving skills			<input type="checkbox"/>
Assist with task transition			<input type="checkbox"/>
Assist with routine and predictability of tasks			<input type="checkbox"/>
Manage stress-induced work environments			<input type="checkbox"/>

Identifying the needs in the physical environment	Understanding the physical work environment
<p><b>Physical workplace</b></p> <p>Common needs in the physical work environment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Workspace location</li> <li>» Workplace supports and relationships</li> <li>» Workplace attitudes</li> <li>» Products, technology and equipment</li> </ul>	<p><b>Impact of the physical work environment on the autistic employee</b></p> <p><b>Workspace location</b> may impact on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Sensory sensitivities</li> <li>» Social and communication interaction</li> <li>» Carrying out tasks and activities by creating distractions and decreasing concentration, reducing the ability for multi-tasking and time management</li> </ul> <p><b>Workplace supports and relationships</b> are essential for success. This includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» An allocated supervisor/mentor to the autistic employee</li> <li>» Supervisor/mentor to assist with workplace modification strategy implementation</li> <li>» Supervisor/mentor is included in the development of a support plan with the employee</li> <li>» Continuous and regular supervision for the employee is essential for monitoring progress and maintaining success</li> </ul> <p><b>Workplace attitudes</b> impact on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Co-workers' understanding of autism and the workplace</li> <li>» Co-workers' social interaction and communication with autistic employees</li> </ul> <p><b>Products, technology and equipment</b> in the workplace assist with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Increasing work performance</li> <li>» Increasing concentration, memory and time management</li> <li>» Increasing productivity</li> <li>» Decreasing stress and anxiety associated with work tasks and activities</li> </ul>

## Strategies to modify the physical environment

Many of the physical workplace modifications are easy and inexpensive to implement. One or a combination of strategies can be used for success.

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### ► **Workspace location**

- » Create a quieter work environment by:
    - › Working in a shared office (maximum 2 people) versus large open-plan office with cubicles. However, it may be best to avoid placing in an individual office if possible, to prevent isolation
    - › Restricting the number of other employees in an open-plan office (maximum between 4 to 6)
    - › Organising the work area to face a wall or structuring a cubicle workspace to avoid hallway traffic areas
  - » Avoid placing the employee in high traffic work areas such as near the staff toilet, kitchen and lunch rooms, meeting rooms, printing and equipment rooms
  - » Place noisy equipment such as printers and machines in an isolated room
  - » Run particularly noisy equipment early in the morning or late in the afternoon when less employees are likely to be in the workplace
  - » Schedule cleaning times early in the morning, at the end of the day, or after hours when less employees are likely to be in the workplace
- 

### ► **Workplace supports and relationships**

- » The allocated supervisor/mentor and the autistic employee must be well-matched to one another for compatibility
  - » The supervisor/mentor is responsible for the work modification implementation in the areas of:
  - » Work-related queries
    - › Task instruction and breakdown
    - › Daily reporting
    - › Advocacy support
    - › Social and communication skill development
    - › Addressing any difficulties that arise in the workplace
  - » A support plan needs to be developed with the supervisor/mentor and the employee to be agreed upon regarding job expectations, roles and responsibilities. The Disability Employment Support worker may also assist with this
  - » Support plans need to be reviewed regularly (approximately every three months) to assess for progress and to adjust any current modifications or to implement new strategies
  - » Continuous and regular supervision needs to occur between the supervisor/mentor and the employee to monitor and assist with day-to-day work tasks
  - » Supervision can be daily, weekly, fortnightly or monthly and adjusted according to the needs of the employee
- 

### ► **Workplace attitudes**

Education and training for co-workers is essential to better understand autism and how best to socially interact and communicate with their new co-worker

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### ► **Workplace products, technology and equipment**

This may include:

- » Allowing an employee to use noise cancelling headphones, a headset or ear plugs
- » Anti-scratch felt/leather pads on bottom of chair legs to prevent scratching, scraping and dragging on the floor
- » Allowing an employee to use an alarm clock, smart phone or tablet (for alarms, schedules, visual calendars)

- » Voice/audio recorder (for recording verbal instructions and meetings)
- » Software to assist with organisation, scheduling, job tasks checklists, deadlines and colour coding important information (most of this is standard in a workplace)
- » Stationery to colour code, label and organise an employee's workspace effectively and efficiently
- » Making minor lighting modifications (such as changing fluorescent light to LED or halogen bulbs)
- » Positioning work area close to natural light, such as a window, where possible
- » Allowing an employee to wear tinted glasses in the workplace if the lighting cannot be adjusted

\* For more information about [Workplace modification and strategies](#), see the External online resources section

## Summary checklist for the physical environment



To-do	Strategies required	Person responsible	Task complete
<b>Modify the workplace location</b>			<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Modify and monitor workplace supports</b>			<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Education and training for staff on autism in the workplace</b>			<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Modify workplace products, technology and equipment</b>			<input type="checkbox"/>



### Phase 5: Ongoing support

There is no end date to supporting autistic employees in the workplace. This is an ongoing and important process, especially when aiming to retain employees long-term. The ongoing support provided will vary for each employee as they progress along their employment journey. There will be times when more support is required and there will be times when the level of support can be reduced as the employee becomes more confident in their job performance.

Ongoing support can be mutually beneficial to both the autistic employee and the employer. When the employer provides continuous support to the employee through workplace modification, mentorship and compliance with support plans, the employee will feel valued, supported and encouraged. In return for this support, the employee is more likely to be committed and loyal to their job, increase their productivity, and remain in their job position.

#### ► Factors to think about during ongoing support in the workplace

##### Have you thought about...

- » Providing regular feedback and supervision sessions for the employee?
- » Regularly reviewing the employee's support plan?
- » Reviewing the effectiveness of past and current workplace supports?
- » The level of ongoing support required?
  - > Mild or flexible
  - > Moderate
  - > High support
- » Ongoing implementation of workplace modifications? Particularly when:
  - > Job tasks/hours/locations change
  - > Supervisors/mentors change through re-location, annual leave, sick leave or resignation
  - > Organisations or teams are restructured

#### ► Awareness of potential difficulties during ongoing support in the workplace

##### Have you thought about...

- » The stressful nature and the effect of transitioning between new tasks, work environments or supervisors for the employee?
- » The potential lack of well-trained and available supervisors in your workplace?
- » The effect of reducing the level of workplace support on the employee?
- » The effect of minimal long-term strategies on the employee and the workplace?



If the majority of your responses have been **'Yes'**, continue using the IEST and its strategies for your workplace.

If the majority of your responses have been **'No'**, contact a Disability Employment Service provider for more support in conjunction with the use of the IEST: Go to [jobaccess.gov.au](http://jobaccess.gov.au)

## ► Strategies for ongoing support

### ► Supervision and feedback sessions

The supervisor/mentor is responsible for organising regular and ongoing supervision sessions with the employee.

- » The frequency of the supervision sessions will vary between employees and between workplace changes, and need to occur according to the level of support required by the employee. This may be:
  - › Flexible or mild support (fortnightly to monthly sessions)
  - › Moderate support (daily to weekly sessions)
  - › High support (task-by-task to daily sessions)
- » Supervision sessions need to be:
  - › Structured and direct
  - › Sensitive and tactful
  - › Purpose-driven
- » Supervision sessions are essential in maintaining employment for the employee and need to address the following:
  - › Work performance
  - › Job tasks – too easy versus too difficult. Too much versus too complex
  - › Current workplace strategies – Are they effective?
  - › Implementation of new workplace strategies such as new job tasks, new job location or modifications to strategies that have not been effective
  - › Workplace stress and anxiety
- » The supervisor/mentor is responsible for setting work-related goals with the employee to achieve the job tasks required
- » Workplace goals should be set daily to weekly for employees

\* For more information about [Ongoing support](#), see the External online resources section

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### ► Long-term support

Long-term support is important and essential in retaining employees.

- » Long-term support can be maintained through:
  - › Support plans
  - › Regular supervision and feedback sessions
  - › Regular contact and collaboration with your DES provider
- » Support plans need to be in place and agreed upon by the employee, the employer, DES provider and the supervisor/mentor from the commencement of the employment contract
- » Support plans need to be reviewed and updated as a team on a regular basis as required. When updated, they should include:
  - › Revision of job tasks
  - › Revision of job-related goals
  - › An increase in roles and responsibilities in the workplace (potential career development)
  - › A decrease in roles and responsibilities if there is an increase in stress and anxiety for the employee
  - › New workplace strategies to be implemented to continue to improve work performance, job satisfaction, and productivity of employees
- » Regular re-training of supervisors/mentors on autism, workplace inclusion and new strategies for workplace modification is advised



## Stress-management strategies in the workplace for autistic employees

- 1 Be aware of signs of stress from sensory overload in the workplace such as feeling anxious, loss of concentration, feeling distracted from work tasks, loss of appetite, and muscle tension (particularly neck muscles)
- 2 After recognising these feelings begin deep breathing for 5-10 minutes
- 3 Go for a short walk
- 4 Discuss these feelings and the reason(s) why you feel overwhelmed with your supervisor/mentor. They can help you problem solve the situation
- 5 Relax your neck muscles using a heat pack that can be warmed in the microwave. The heat and the deep pressure will help you to relax

## Supporting the mental health of autistic employees

It is normal for anyone to have a day or two where they feel a bit down or off, especially if there has been an event or change in their life that might need adjusting to. However, if this change lasts for more than two weeks, there may be cause for concern. Autistic individuals are no different, and may be affected more easily than others.

It is important to note that autistic individuals may not always feel that they're able to ask for help. This is especially true of employees who have had past negative consequences resulting from disclosing any difficulties they were having. Gentle encouragement is an excellent way to build trust and communication.

Autistic employees will want to work to the best of their ability all of the time, and usually work hard to fit into their work and social environments. This, and their need to do things accurately, can sometimes exhaust them and take a toll on their mental health, often making them more susceptible to anxiety.

**The list below has been adapted to autistic individuals. If you notice two or more of the following changes, the person may need additional support:**

- » Changes in mood
  - > Seem more irritable than usual
  - > Seem more anxious or worried about everything (struggling to see the positive side of anything)
  - > React more emotionally than usual (crying or angry outbursts)
  - > Seem overwhelmed by tasks that were previously manageable
- » Changes in behaviour
  - > Taking more sick days than usual. Be aware that autistic individuals usually take less sick days than other people, and are not known to take a day off unnecessarily
  - > Seem more withdrawn than usual
  - > Difficulty concentrating or seem distracted
  - > Not performing to their usual standard
  - > Working longer hours

- » Changes in their physical appearance
  - › Seeming more fidgety and nervous than usual (blinking, pacing or hand movements)
  - › Complaining of more headaches, migraines or stomach aches than usual
  - › Looking more tired than usual
  - › Eating more or less than usual
- » Changes in how thoughts are expressed
  - › Saying things that sound confused or irrational
  - › Complaining about not sleeping well or having trouble switching off
  - › Experiencing difficulties with spoken language (stuttering, taking longer than usual to respond, or not responding at all)

**If you do have concerns about the mental health of an autistic employee, and you need to ask them if they are okay, take the following things into consideration:**

- » They may need specific information about why you are asking. **For example** 'I've noticed that you've had a lot of headaches and you seem more irritable, I just want to check if you are okay?'
- » They may need additional time to communicate their problems to you. Even if they usually speak well, when they are more anxious than usual, spoken language may become difficult. They may find it easier to communicate in an alternative way, so offer choices of communication method:
  - › In person
  - › Via email, Skype or other electronic means
- » Offer choices about where and how this conversation can happen:
  - › In a quiet room
  - › Somewhere outside the building
  - › Chat while walking
- » Ask if they would like a support person to attend with them
- » Let them know if they want to talk later, you are there
- » Ask if they would prefer to talk to someone else, or get that person to ask
- » Give them the name and number of a counsellor (either at work or outside), in case they want one. They may already have a psychologist or psychiatrist that they see – suggest a visit
- » If they say they are okay, but you are still concerned, check in with them in a couple of days, and continue to check in regularly until you are certain they are fine or they are seeking help



# Summary checklist for ongoing support in the workplace



To-do	Strategies required	Person responsible	Task complete
Regular and ongoing supervision sessions			<input type="checkbox"/>
Regular revision of support plan			<input type="checkbox"/>
Regular revision and modifications of current workplace strategies			<input type="checkbox"/>
Continuous education and training for staff in the workplace			<input type="checkbox"/>



## Summary



Autistic employees have skills that enable them to be successful in a variety of roles in the workplace

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More and more employers are beginning to explore this untapped pool of talent

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It is important to focus on the strengths of autistic employees because an employee achieves more when the workplace builds on their strengths instead of trying to balance out their weaknesses

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Strengths of autistic employees may include attention to detail, accuracy, rote memory, high levels of concentration and focus, reliability and loyalty, and trustworthiness

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Employing an autistic individual brings benefits to the workplace such as: increased productivity, low absenteeism and a reliable work ethic

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The IEST has been designed to assist with creating an awareness of autism, highlighting the strengths of autistic employees, identifying potential workplace difficulties, and providing workplace strategies to encourage success

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The IEST is a workplace tool that includes information on specific workplace requirements, tips and advice, questions to consider, and checklists

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The overall aim of the IEST is to improve employee productivity, job retention, employer confidence, and overall workplace success

# Major service providers

## Disability Employment Service (DES)

Disability Employment Service (DES) providers form part of a large network of organisations across Australia that assist with the employment of people with a disability. There are over 220 organisations nationwide, funded by the Australian Government. DES providers promote gaining and maintaining meaningful employment for people with a disability.

The main objective of DES providers is:

- » To assist people with a disability to find and secure employment opportunities
- » To assist employers who employ people with a disability
- » To provide continuous support for both people with a disability in employment and their subsequent employers

For more information, and a list of nationwide DES providers go to the website: [jobsearch.gov.au](https://www.jobsearch.gov.au)

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## JobAccess

JobAccess is an Australian Government initiative that provides free information, advice and workplace solutions regarding the employment of people with a disability. JobAccess provides information to employees with a disability, employers, services providers as well as members of the community.

JobAccess provides information on:

- » Disability and work
- » Making reasonable adjustments
- » Financial assistance (Employment Assistance Fund, Wage Subsidy and Supported Wage System)
- » Disclosure of a disability
- » Services available

For more information, go to the website: [jobaccess.gov.au](https://www.jobaccess.gov.au)

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## National Disability Recruitment Coordinator

The National Disability Recruitment Coordinator (NDRC) is part of a larger group called the WorkFocus group. The NDRC works with large Australian companies to increase their recruitment of people with a disability into their workforce. The NDRC helps employers to find the right people for the right job and empowers employers with the confidence to do so.

The NDRC works alongside employers to:

- » Increase their confidence in recruitment and employment practices of people with a disability
- » Assist with advertising job vacancies to a broader pool of applicants
- » Provide disability employment training to staff and close co-workers

For more information go to the website: [atworkaustralia.com.au/des](https://www.atworkaustralia.com.au/des)

# External online resources

## Understanding autism

- » Webpage: [About Autism – Autistic Self Advocacy Network \(autisticadvocacy.org\)](https://autisticadvocacy.org)
  - » Webpage: [Understand autism – Amaze \(amaze.org.au\)](https://amaze.org.au)
  - » Video: [What is Autism? – The National Autistic Society \(autism.org.uk\)](https://autism.org.uk)
  - » Article: [What is Neurodiversity & How Does it Relate to Autism? – High Speed Training \(highspeedtraining.co.uk\)](https://highspeedtraining.co.uk)
  - » Handout: [Understanding The Spectrum, A Comic Strip Explanation – The Art of Autism \(the-art-of-autism.com\)](https://the-art-of-autism.com)
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## Strengths of autistic individuals

- » Article: [Neurodiversity as a competitive advantage – Harvard Business Review \(hbr.org\)](https://hbr.org)
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## Inclusion and neurodiversity

- » Article: [Looking at the workplace through a neurodiverse lens – Diversity Council of Australia \(dca.org.au\)](https://dca.org.au)
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## Recruitment

- » Article: [Autism and job interviews: what it's like trying to find work when you have ASD – ABC News \(abc.net.au\)](https://abc.net.au)
  - » Resource: [Information about work trial laws – Fairwork Ombudsman \(fairwork.gov.au\)](https://fairwork.gov.au)
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## Disclosure of disability in a workplace

- » Article: [Disclosure in the workplace – Australian Human Rights Commission \(www.humanrights.gov.au\)](https://www.humanrights.gov.au)
  - » Legislation: [Disability Discrimination Act 1992 – Australian Government \(legislation.gov.au\)](https://legislation.gov.au)
  - » Legislation: [Commonwealth Privacy Act 1988 – Australian Government \(legislation.gov.au\)](https://legislation.gov.au)
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## Strategies for job commencement

- » Article: [Managing an autistic employee – The National Autistic Society \(autism.org.uk\)](https://autism.org.uk)
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## Workplace assistance and training

- » Resource: [Training and education for your co-workers – JobAccess \(jobaccess.gov.au\)](https://jobaccess.gov.au)
- » Resource: [Access for Employers – JobAccess \(jobaccess.gov.au\)](https://jobaccess.gov.au)  
*Support for Employers not associated with a DES provider*
- » Resource: [Disability Employment Services – JobAccess \(jobaccess.gov.au\)](https://jobaccess.gov.au)
- » Resource: [Employers Guide to Partnering with Disability Employment Services – Disability Employment Australia \(disabilityemployment.org.au\)](https://disabilityemployment.org.au)
- » Resource: [Find a DES service provider – JobAccess \(jobaccess.gov.au\)](https://jobaccess.gov.au)

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## Financial assistance

- » Resource: [Employment Assistance Fund – JobAccess \(jobaccess.gov.au\)](https://jobaccess.gov.au)
  - » Resource: [Disabled Australian Apprentice Wage Support – Services Australia \(servicesaustralia.gov.au\)](https://servicesaustralia.gov.au)
  - » Resource: [Employer Incentives and Financial Assistance – Disability Employment Australia \(guide.disabilityemployment.org.au\)](https://guide.disabilityemployment.org.au)
  - » Resource: [Supported Wage System – JobAccess \(jobaccess.gov.au\)](https://jobaccess.gov.au)
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## Job commencement

- » Article: [How to successfully onboard your new autistic employee – Neurodiversity Hub \(neurodiversityhub.org\)](https://neurodiversityhub.org)
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## Workplace modification and strategies

- » Employer toolkit: [Getting your workplace ready – JobAccess \(jobaccess.gov.au\)](https://jobaccess.gov.au)
  - » Factsheet: [Social Boundaries Information Sheet – Autism Spectrum Australia \(autismspectrum.org.au\)](https://autismspectrum.org.au)
  - » Article: [Meltdowns – The National Autistic Society \(autism.org.uk\)](https://autism.org.uk)
  - » Blog: [Aspie Works – Aspies@Work \(aspiesatwork.org\)](https://aspiesatwork.org)  
*Potentially useful articles for your autistic employees*
  - » Resource: [Cognition – Managing problem solving, thinking, attention and memory at work – JobAccess \(jobaccess.gov.au\)](https://jobaccess.gov.au)
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## Ongoing support

- » Article: [Neurodiverse Self-Care: Managing Anxiety Through Connection – Neurodiversity Hub \(neurodiversityhub.org\)](https://neurodiversityhub.org) *Potentially useful articles for your autistic employees*
  - » Website: [R U OK at work? – R U OK? \(ruok.org.au\)](https://ruok.org.au)
  - » Webpage: [Talking to someone you are worried about – Beyond Blue \(beyondblue.org.au\)](https://beyondblue.org.au)
  - » Factsheet: [Autism and mental health, A guide to looking after your mind – Autistica \(autistica.org.uk\)](https://autistica.org.uk)
  - » Article: [Mental health and autism – The National Autistic Society \(autism.org.uk\)](https://autism.org.uk)
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# Resource templates

Download the following resource templates here:

- » [Hygiene checklist](#)
- » [Weekly goal planner](#)
- » [Priority planner](#)
- » [Support plan agreement](#)
- » [Daily goal planner](#)
- » [Supervisor workplace handover](#)

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## Our values



### Inclusion

Working together with those with the lived experience of autism in all we do



### Innovation

New solutions for long term challenges



### Evidence

Guided by evidence-based research and peer review



### Independence

Maintaining autonomy and integrity



### Cooperation

Bringing benefits to our partners; capturing opportunities they cannot capture alone



### Autism CRC

The University of Queensland  
Long Pocket Precinct  
Level 3, Foxtail Building  
80 Meiers Road  
Indooroopilly Qld 4068

**T** +61 7 3377 0600

**E** [info@autismcrc.com.au](mailto:info@autismcrc.com.au)

**W** [autismcrc.com.au](http://autismcrc.com.au)



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