Employer Guide to Supervising Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)

Communication | Understanding | Accommodation

Many employers are interested in hiring a group of capable yet under-utilized individuals: those with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). With prevalence rates of about 1 out of 250 people in the United States, it is likely that you already know someone with ASD. You may also already be working with someone on the Autism Spectrum.

At Rochester Institute of Technology, we enjoy a diverse student population including many students with disabilities and a percentage of students who identify as being on the Autism Spectrum. The Disability Services Office, Office of Career Services and Cooperative Education, and the Spectrum Support Program at RIT work together to support these students in attaining their career goals.

You may encounter students on the Spectrum when recruiting and hiring RIT students for your organization. This guide will help you work effectively with these students as candidates and employees.

Objectives include:

1) Understanding the characteristics of ASD
2) Understanding the benefits of hiring individuals with ASD
3) What can you do as a manager, interviewer, co-worker, or recruiter
4) Resources for further reading

Characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorders

ASD is a **"spectrum"** disorder, which means that it affects each individual differently. No one descriptor is accurate for all people with ASD. Similarly, effective strategies for working with individuals with ASD can vary greatly. If you are working with (or think you are working with) someone on the autism spectrum, you may notice the following:

- Awkward eye contact, postures, or gestures
- Delayed verbal responses
- Difficulty understanding tone, facial expressions, or other subtle messages
- Strange vocal pitch, intonation, or volume
- Highly developed areas of interest
- Difficulty initiating conversation
- Blunt, pointed remarks ("brutal honesty")
- Use of calming strategies such as pacing or tapping

How do I know if someone is on the Spectrum?

They may tell you. We encourage our students to be open with their employers about any accommodations they might need and share any information that would be helpful for their manager to know. The information that they do or do not share is up to them. Any of the strategies included in this guide may be equally helpful whether or not the student has disclosed.

SSP *Spectrum Support Program*

Benefits of employing individuals with AS

Many managers are seeking individuals on the Autism Spectrum as job candidates. In addition to strong academic performance, individuals on the Spectrum often exhibit the following desirable traits:

Characteristics

- Focus, reliability, honesty, and a preference for work over office politics
- Tolerance of repetition and routine which is valuable many types of jobs

Growing and varied population

- ASD prevalence in the United States continues to grow. Advances in understanding and supporting individuals with ASD mean that more are completing college than ever before
- Individuals with ASD work successfully in many fields, and are often drawn to computing, scientific research, software testing, and media design and development

Efficiency

- Supports that help individuals with ASD in their adjustment to the workplace often provide clarity to all employees (such as establishing long-term and short-term goals for employees)

Enhanced supervisory and co-working skills

- Coworkers and supervisors can learn to communicate more effectively and better understand social dynamics

Skills

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Common areas of challenge for individuals on the Autism Spectrum are organization, reading social cues and understanding someone else's point of view, and sensory and motor integration.

Difficulty with organization means that a person with ASD may...	• Have trouble getting started with projects and appear not to take initiative • Not know how long an assignment should take • Focus too much on details • Become locked in black and white thinking • Have trouble with short-term memory • Take longer to complete a task • Need direction about what the finished product should look like • Require written instructions and notes • Need help prioritizing tasks and organizing information • Get overwhelmed with too many interruptions or requirements to multi-task • Ask too many questions in an attempt to clarify assignment • Act impulsively, based on too little information • Resist change
Difficulty reading social cues and understanding someone else's point of view mean that a person with ASD may…	• Take language literally and miss nuances like implied meanings or sarcasm • Speak to a supervisor in the same way that they would talk to a peer • Talk at length about areas of interest and not notice that others are bored • Not know how to make "small talk" and appear friendly and interested • Make statements that are too honest, unintentionally offending others • Neglect to make eye contact or to smile • Have difficulty controlling anger or frustration • Interrupt; talk too slowly/quickly; too loudly/softly • End a conversation simply by walking away
Difficulties with sensory and motor abilities means that a person with ASD may…	• Have sensitivity to lighting, room temperature, noises, smells, or textures • Require written instructions • Take longer to process spoken words and formulate a reply • Need breaks to avoid sensory overload

What you can do as a manager, interviewer, co-worker, or recruiter:

Communicate effectively

1. Be direct. Say exactly what you mean and identify exactly what you want. The more detail you can provide, the better your employee will understand.

Implied meaning	Clear, direct statement
"Are you going to work on the database assignment?"	"Please begin your work on the database assignment."
"Let's get lunch later."	"Please meet us in the cafeteria at 12:00pm if you would like to each lunch with us."

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2.   Put instructions in writing, and then follow up your verbal instructions with an email.

3.   Avoid any indirect pattern of speech, including clichés, implied meanings, and idioms.

Statement with idiomatic meaning	Statement with literal meaning
"This assignment is going to give you a run for your money!"	"This assignment is going to be challenging."

4.   Plan your directions ahead of time. Although re-learning can be a challenge for everyone, it can be particularly painful for someone on the Spectrum because they may rely on routines. Teaching it correctly the first time will save you time and frustration.

5.   Use primarily your words to communicate. Don't rely on non-verbal communication to get your message across.

Message sent with non-verbal communication	Message sent with clear, verbal directions.
Manager notices that a meeting with an employee has gone five minutes beyond scheduled time, and glances at her watch several times.	"Now that our meeting is over, I need you to return to your work station now because we have work to complete."

Provide clear expectations

Individuals with ASD may not be familiar with abstract concepts like corporate structure, hierarchies of responsibility, reporting requirements, and other structural elements of the workplace. Consider providing the employee with a mentor, who can instruct on the rules and social culture of the workplace. A mentor can also introduce the individual to new people, which someone on the spectrum may not due proactively.

1.   Provide details such as deadlines (time frames, schedules) and outcomes (what it looks like, formatting)

Unclear expectation	Clear expectation
"Please complete the data-processing project"	"I expect to have the first draft of the data-processing project by completed 1pm tomorrow. It has to be in electronic format so that I can check it and get back to you."

2.   Don't make assumptions about what your employees does or does not understand. Ensure that directions are understood.

Assumed confirmation	Confirmation
"Do you understand how to accomplish this?"	"Now that I've given you the assignment, what task will you complete first? Second?"

3.   Given your employee instructions on how you want them to communicate with you (email, face-to-face), and how often. Encourage alternative forms of communication, such as texting.

Supervisory role is unclear	Clear opportunity for supervision
"We can talk about the project later"	"The next time we will talk about the project is during our team meeting, tomorrow at 1:00pm."

4.   Provide detailed guidance and feedback; focus on behaviors that can be measured.

Undetailed feedback	Detailed feedback
"This report is sloppy."	"The proposal you presented as ready for delivery has numerous spelling and math errors."

5.   Establish long-term and short-term goals for employee. Assign projects in a systematic and predictable manner.

6.   Assist employees in assigning priority to assignments. For example, divide large assignments into several small tasks, provide a checklist of assignments, or use a wall calendar to emphasize due dates. Consider developing a cheat sheet for high priority activities, people, and projects. You might also try assigning new tasks only after the current tasks have been completed.

Suggested workplace accommodations and self-accommodations for employees on the Autism Spectrum

Employers often have questions about how to accommodate employees on the Autism Spectrum. There is no pre-established set of accommodations to use; some may only need a few accommodations to complete their jobs and others need none at all. The following is only a sample of the possibilities available. Work directly with your employee to discuss which, if any, accommodations may be helpful.

The following arrangements might be self-accommodations used by the employee, or accommodations that an employer may provide:

Sensory stimulation: People on the Spectrum often can exhibit strong focus on one task at a time. They may experience intolerance to distractions such as office traffic, employee chatter, and common office noises like ringing phones and photocopying.
- To reduce auditory distractions:
- Wear a noise canceling headset
- Hang sound absorption panels
- Use a white noise machine
- Assign to an office space with minimal audible distractions
- To reduce visual distractions:
- Use space enclosures (cubicle walls)
- Reduce clutter in the employee's work environment
- To reduce tactile distractions
- Ask co-workers to approach an individual in a way that is not startling, such as approaching from behind or touching the employee

Atypical Body Movements: Individuals on the Spectrum may exhibit atypical body movements such as fidgeting. These body movements often help calm the person or assist them in concentrating on tasks, but can also disturb co-workers at times.
- Use hand-held squeeze balls and similar objects to provide sensory input or calming effect
- Work from home if appropriate
- Private workspace allows individual room to move about and also not disturb others

Stress Management: Situations that create stress can vary from person to person, but could likely involve heavy workloads, unrealistic timeframes, shortened deadlines, or conflict among coworkers.
- Provide positive reinforcement
- Modify work schedule
- Provide sensitivity training for workforce

Recommended resources for working with individuals with ASD

Hawkins, Gail. How to Find Work that Works for People with Asperger Syndrome. 2004. Jessica Kingsley Publishers: United Kingdom.

Identified roles and responsibilities for the employer and employee, as well as other stakeholders such as family, job coaches, and other professionals. Also outlines details about how ASD looks and functions in employment settings and tips for effective communication.

Job Accommodation Network

Searchable database of possible accommodations for disabilities including ASD. Offers overview information on accommodation and disability-related topics. Ask a JAN consultant feature offers free, confidential technical assistance about job accommodations and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

National Autistic Society of England: "Employer Factsheet: Managing Someone with an ASD"

Working with someone on the Spectrum can be an enriching experience for managers and colleagues, but it may also present some challenges. This factsheet explains how to avoid or overcome any difficulties, in order to ensure enjoyable and effective working relationships.

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