

How to successfully onboard your new autistic employee

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ONBOARDING

Introduction

When hiring autistic people, transitioning them into your organisation through a great onboarding experience is critical to both their success and yours.

Keep your autistic talent happy, in six easy steps.

"Onboarding is a magic moment when new employees decide to stay engaged or become disengaged"

~Amy Hirsh Robinson of The Interchange Group.

Hirsch also says organizations need to start focusing on talent: "what has been successful in the past will not make a company be successful in the future... when it comes to attracting people, the companies have to think really differently about their positioning... companies need a good onboarding system to keep talent engaged".

Autistic people offer a new form of talent. While they have different onboarding needs to those who are not autistic or neurodiverse, with some minor adjustments delivering an engaging experience is easy.

About the author

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1. Ask *the autistic person* about any reasonable adjustment needs

When trying to accommodate the person, consider their individual experience in the world. While you may have a great psychologist on staff or a brilliant autism / disability advisor, it is the autistic person *themselves* that will best know their needs:

“First and foremost, the autistic person is the expert of their own brain”.

Autism is a spectrum and no two of us are exactly alike. We all have our own unique needs, preferences and approaches. Our experience should be tailored. Enable and support your new autistic employee to drive the ongoing conversation around any reasonable adjustments in the workplace.

2. Communicate clearly

“I don’t always ‘get it’ when there’s subtext to what you’re saying. Don’t patronize me but be clear when you communicate”.

For the autistic individual, the onboarding experience can be overwhelming because there is a lot of information — usually delivered verbally — to process and absorb. For example, I don’t instinctively read between the lines and I find it easier to understand information that is precise and direct. That’s not to say I need you to oversimplify my tasks or patronise me. I’m someone who doesn’t make assumptions and I base every decision on evidence — that’s a good thing! I need you to meet me halfway by communicating as clearly and directly as possible.

Erica Genda from Peoplebank explains, “It might be helpful for both you and them to give written instructions that they can refer back to at any point and have a reference point of things they can ask about if they don’t understand”.

3. Provide a mentor

Give the autistic person someone they can ask questions of, gain insight from, and mentor them as they transition into the job.

“Help me understand how to work in your organisation by providing me a personal guide, buddy or mentor”

Providing your new autistic employee with a mentor or buddy for those first few weeks can have a big impact. I tend to ask more questions than most neurotypical people do in those first few weeks. It really helps to be able to just ask someone. Carol Simpson from neurodiversity employer Focus Professional Services says “It is recommended two key contacts are assigned to the new employee — the person they report to for work assignments and a ‘buddy’ who can walk them around the workplace and be their go-to person about office protocols”.

4. Allow the autistic person to customise their environment

“Let us make our environment soothing and safe”.

Sensory differences are a big part of being autistic and workplace environments aren't always the most forgiving in that regard. Sound, lighting, temperature, textures and smells can negatively impact upon our productivity. It's important to support our differences from day one. Quiet spaces around the office can make a big difference and as Rob Wilson from Employco USA explains “A designated quiet place where employees can retreat during the day can do wonders for everyone's mental health” — not just your autistic employees. Also, by allowing the autistic employee to bring sensory objects from home, to adorn their workspace or carry with them during stressful times, may greatly improve their focus and productivity.

In terms of the space, hypoallergenic plants can help with sensory differences in the workplace and the ability to choose a desk or workspace in a location that suits the individual autistic person's needs is also an inclusive decision. From my own personal experience as an autistic employee, I've found hot-desking environments to be particularly challenging. Finding a new place to sit each day can negatively

impact my productivity. This has been easily resolved by past employers allowing me to return to the same desk each day.

5. Be flexible

Flexibility for the autistic person includes how, where and when they perform their job role. This is essential to gaining the full benefits of the autistic's differently wired brain.

“Autistic people think differently and don’t always thrive in traditional 9 to 5 environments”.

David Ballard leads the American Psychological Association’s Psychologically Healthy Workplace Program and notes that flexible working needs may include: more time working from home or adjustments to start and end times.

Being flexible means, you are open to our experience. When we’re forced to conform to rigid neurotypical driven structures, our capacity for creativity and innovation can be reduced because it takes a lot of mental effort to process and function under those conditions. It’s not that we lack resilience or an ability to adapt. But simply, our brains become so overwhelmed that we can’t think as well as we could do, if we were adequately supported.

Ballard also says, “Allowing for this flexibility in scheduling and letting people do what they need to do to cope with noise or environment—without judgement—is key”.

Meet us halfway and give us the flexibility to design and tailor our working week to our individual needs—and we’ll be able to give you the best our brains have to offer.

6. Always obtain consent from the autistic person before telling others in the organisation about their autism

“Never disclose or discuss an autistic employee’s specific needs, differences or diagnosis in the workplace without their consent”.

Your intentions might be good, and you might believe you are being helpful, however, this is a breach of privacy and trust that will likely undermine the foundation of the relationship you’re building with your new employee. Additionally, this approach can be problematic because your autistic employee won’t necessarily know what you’ve communicated and might not have a chance to correct any errors or assumptions that can have a lasting impact on other relationships around the office.

A better approach would be to come back around to my first point about asking us about what we want to do and take it from there.

If you want to successfully onboard an autistic person, they will need to feel supported, appreciated and understood.

THESE ONBOARDING TIPS ARE A GREAT STARTING POINT.

ULTIMATELY IT IS BEST TO BE GUIDED BY THE INDIVIDUAL NEEDS OF YOUR NEW AUTISTIC EMPLOYEE.

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