

Strategies in Training Autistic Employees

Researchers estimate around 50,000 young people with autism turns 18 every year. Is your organization ready to train these new employees?

What is Autistic Spectrum Disorder?

Autism Spectrum Disorder is a neurological disorder that includes a wide range (spectrum) of skills, symptoms and levels of support. Although no two people are alike, characteristics may include ongoing challenges with social skills that include difficulty and interacting with others. For those on the higher end of the spectrum, characteristics may include:

- A normal to high intelligence and good verbal skills
- Trouble understanding what someone else is thinking or feeling
- Difficulty understanding non-verbal cues
- May suffer from anxiety or depression
- Strong long-term memory
- May have executive functioning difficulties
- Being highly creative
- A high sense of justice and fairness
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It is important to note that autistic employees vary in the workplace. Younger employees may have received a diagnosis very early in their childhood while those in their 30's to 50's were more than likely diagnosed as adults. Many in fact may not realize they are autistic due to lack of information during their formative years. This rings true especially for women who did not fit the typical stereotype of autism.

Challenges Training Autistic Employees

The use of idioms, sarcasm, irony, metaphors and figure of speech may be difficult since most are literal thinkers.

Due to sensory sensitivities, harsh lighting and certain smells may be intolerable. May feel anxiety working with groups during an activity, which includes role-playing and case studies.

Discomfort with noise

Coping with the unpredictable

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- Structured breaks- give notice in advance
- Give visual instructions. Verbal instructions are difficult to remember
- Do not assume that the employee is not listening or paying attention
- When explaining, use explicit and concrete language

Accommodations

A diagnosis of autism also qualifies under the American Disability Act (ADA). While some may not want to disclose their diagnosis, It's always a good idea to make sure each person is comfortable in the training. The following are some suggestions:

- Provide advance notice of topics to be discussed if possible
- Allow employees to use items to hold such as hand-help squeeze balls
- Allow use of a noise-cancellation headset

Tips to Remember

Some autistic employees have a history of being bullied, which for many have carried over into the workplace. Set rules in the beginning of the training that all participants should be respected.