

# Assisting People with Autism

Guidance for Line Managers  
and HR Professionals



**NDA**

National Disability Authority  
Údarás Náisiúnta Míchumais



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## **Purpose of this Guide**

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The purpose of this guide is to assist those who are working as line managers, or in a HR role, to better understand autism and to effectively recruit, work with and support staff with autism in the workplace.

Within the workplace it is important that all staff have equal opportunities and support to deliver on their duties and realise their potential. The purpose of this guide is to assist line managers and HR professionals in ensuring that staff with disabilities, including autism, are supported to deliver on the objectives of their role. As with all staff members, people with autism often have a number of skills and abilities that can make them valued employees.

Autism can be described as a hidden disability and line managers and colleagues may not have awareness of the condition itself or the supports that may be required.

Users of this guide should bear in mind that not every person with autism will have the same characteristics or need the same level of support as set out below. The guidance that follows is a summary of good practice in relation to supporting and managing people with autism in the workplace.

## **What is autism?**

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Autism is a lifelong condition that may affect how a person communicates with, and relates to, other people. It may also affect how a person makes sense of the world around them. People with autism may also have difficulties with understanding and processing language.

Autism is a spectrum condition; this means that while people with autism share certain difficulties their condition will affect them in different ways and to differing degrees. Further information is available in Appendix D.

A range of resources and useful information is available from the organisations listed in the Appendices. These organisations will be happy to assist you in the event that you have taken the positive step to employ a person with autism. They may be able to advise you on how to get the best out of your new recruit and how to create the best working environment for them and their new colleagues

If you want to learn more about current autism-awareness raising projects in the public sector there are links available in Appendix C.

## Characteristics of autism and the workplace

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Given the right job and within the right environment, in some cases the characteristics of people with autism can become strengths for an organisation.<sup>1</sup> However, as a spectrum condition, it is important to be aware that no two people are likely to be identical, and different individuals will have different skills, knowledge, capacity and characteristics.

### Social Interaction

Some people with autism may avoid social contact in the workplace. Some people with autism may not like speaking or will speak only a small amount, but they usually understand more than they express<sup>2</sup>. Some people with autism can be very focused and productive.

### Communication Style

Some people with autism may speak very directly and mean exactly what they say, which can seem blunt to others. This can mean that their input is particularly 'to the point' and focused on the job or the issue at hand. This communication style may have an impact on colleagues, which can be addressed through building awareness of the characteristics of autism.

### Behavioural Patterns

Some people with autism can prefer structured and consistent work conditions and appreciate rules, regulations and strictly defined ways of completing their tasks. In these cases these employees can bring accuracy and attention to their tasks that can mean they are very reliable and dependable. Studies have shown that these employees follow rules, arrive on time, have equal or lower absenteeism rates and remain with their employers longer than some of their peers. Many people with autism also typically focus intensely on their job. Often, due to this work style, they can become 'experts' at what they do and this can be an advantage to companies.

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1 Adapted from: <http://hireaction.ca/the-autism-edge/business-case-for-hiring-people-with-asd/>

2 Taken from: <https://incluzy.com/benefits-employing-individuals-autism/>

## Particular work strengths of people with autism

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People with autism display a wide range of work strengths. Depending on the characteristics of each person with autism and where they sit on the spectrum, some people can show unusual aptitude or have particular strengths. Some of the strengths that some people may have can include:

- High attention to detail, accuracy and quality of work
- Long-term memory capacity, with ability to recall detailed facts and figures
- Strong adherence to routines, rules and regulations and appreciation of repetitious tasks
- Expert, in-depth knowledge of one or more chosen subject areas
- Enhanced ability for pattern recognition
- Being hard working and intensely focused

The skills and characteristics listed above are applicable to many different occupations. It is a common assumption to think about people with autism as capable of working well in IT. Some jobs in IT are suited to some people with autism who are visual thinkers, while others will suit those who are non-visual thinkers.<sup>3</sup> Some careers in engineering, art and design, maintenance and building work, will also be a good match for some people with these characteristics.

For some people with autism who are non-verbal, or who have limited verbal skills, jobs that involve set work patterns and routines may be more suitable. These could involve certain types of factory assembly work, restocking shelves, library work, sorting waste for recycling, etc.

People with autism often excel in many areas, and some will do so in particular areas of interest specific to the individual. Good job matching, as described below, will help an organisation make the best use of these skills.

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3 Indiana Resource Centre for Autism. <https://www.iidc.indiana.edu/pages/Choosing-the-Right-Job-for-People-with-Autism-or-Aspergers-Syndrome>

## Recruitment and interview

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Although people with autism may have a great deal to offer employers, getting the opportunity to demonstrate this may be difficult. Some simple adjustments at the recruitment stage can make the process of applying for jobs much more accessible for people with autism.

In addition to what is set out below an employer could also consider alternative routes to employment such as internships or job placements. A work trial may be a useful way to establish if someone can successfully do a job. Some of the organisations listed in the Appendices may be able to help in this regard.

### Job advertisements

Consider carefully the key skills needed for a job and put these into a clearly worded, jargon-free advertisement, job description and candidate specification. If 'excellent communication skills' are not necessary for the post, avoid stipulating this as a requirement, as it may unnecessarily deter some people with autism from applying.

### Application forms

If you don't already do so, include a section on the form for applicants to provide information about any adjustments they may require during the recruitment process and in the workplace to help overcome potential barriers or disadvantages.

### Interviews

An interview can be a stressful occasion for anyone. Difficulties with communication, sensory issues and meeting someone new in an unfamiliar place can all present a challenge to a person with autism.

It is good practice to let interviewees know in advance of the interview who will be on the panel (names and job titles); exactly where the interview will be held and what they can expect to happen during the interview itself. The more you are able to tell them, the more they will be able to prepare and the less stressful an experience it may be.

It is also good practice to ask the interviewee if they need you to adjust the room itself – for example, to adjust the lighting<sup>4</sup>. During the interview, it is important to consider the type and wording of questions you ask in order to give candidates with autism an opportunity to demonstrate their ability. Sometimes a short pause for a minute or two can help a person with autism compose himself or herself.

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<sup>4</sup> Some people with autism have a hyper-sensitivity to light or noise.

Interviewers may need to realise that social cues may not be read appropriately and allow for lack of eye contact and minimise the use of facial expressions and body language.

Some of the organisations listed in the Appendices can provide assistance with good practice for conducting interviews.

## Disclosure

The effectiveness of the application form and/or the interview process could depend on how comfortable a person with autism may be with disclosing that fact.

If there is a question on the application form in relation to disclosing a disability, then it should be phrased in a way that puts the applicant at ease. In the same manner whether autism has been disclosed prior to an interview - or during it – this information should be handled as something ordinary. It is worth stating clearly on application literature that disclosure should not be a bar to entry and that you are an employer that understands and respects people with autism.

Even if the person with autism is not successful on this occasion, a positive application experience will build their confidence when they are applying for future jobs.

## Job matching

Internships and job placements may benefit from job matching in order to get the most out of the experience. Matching the person with autism to the right role will play a big part in easing them into the induction and orientation process described below<sup>5</sup>. An employer may have this general capacity within the organisation, or may seek help from an organisation similar to those listed in the Appendices.

Characteristics of a good job match can be grouped into the following five themes; jobs which

- may be built on technical skills
- do not require advanced social skills
- follow clearly defined routines
- provide adequate time for learning new tasks
- do not result in excessive sensory stimulation
- allow for flexible work schedules

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5 Muller et al, Meeting the vocational support needs of individuals with Asperger Syndrome and other autism spectrum disabilities, *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* 18 (2003) 163–175. <http://content.iospress.com/articles/journal-of-vocational-rehabilitation/jvr00193>

Not every job will match all of these themes all of the time. You can try to match what are the most achievable and practical themes for your work place.

## Induction and orientation

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As is the case with all employees, it is important to match the person's particular skills to the requirements of the post in order to ensure they can achieve their potential to the greatest extent possible. A good HR department will work to build capacity throughout the organisation to support employees with disabilities, including people with autism. This will include making disability awareness training, and autism awareness training available to all employees. Some people with autism can be very focused and some may have considerable skills in specific areas.

As well as the job description, you may need to explain the etiquette and unwritten rules of the workplace. Make it clear that any adaptations for them in the workplace are there to help support them in the performance of their duties, rather than because of any doubt regarding their abilities.

Every person with autism is different in terms of what works best as a mode of communication. Some people cannot communicate effectively by phone, while others do not find it to be the same challenge. Many people prefer written instruction but others can over-analyse the written word and become anxious. It is important to identify the most suitable mode of communication and apply it consistently.

A new employee, and especially one with autism, may benefit from having a mentor or buddy in the workplace – an empathetic colleague who they can go to if they are feeling stressed, anxious or confused<sup>6</sup>.

### Suggested actions

- Match a person with autism to a colleague who can act as a mentor to help explain/translate workplace culture, instructions and comments.
- A co-worker could also help with egress in case of emergency evacuation, where this is necessary.
- In addition to explaining tasks and achievements, it is also useful for line managers to take time to clearly explain policies and/or expectations about staff conduct and workplace behaviour.

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<sup>6</sup> Case studies have been adapted from those featuring in the leaflet from the UK Department of Work and Pensions and the UK National Autistic Society (2011). Untapped Talent: A guide to employing people with Autism London: The National Autistic Society. <http://www.autism.org.uk/~media/nas/documents/get-involved/campaign%20for%20change/undiscovered%20workforce/untapped%20talent%20-%20english.ashx>

## Case Study I

When John first started in his role, his employers decided to ease him in to his new job to ensure that he was happy with the different aspects of his work. At first, he was uncomfortable using the telephone and so his managers carried out role-play exercises to show him how to deal with different types of call. He always had the option to forward calls through to his mentor but now rarely needs to. John has been praised for his eye for detail and ability to concentrate, as well as for his relationships with his colleagues.

## Reasonable accommodation

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Reasonable accommodation practices which benefit people with autism can have a positive outcome for all employees and for employers themselves. Reducing possible stress points in the workplace is good for everyone. It is also good for business outcomes, as a stress-free workplace helps employers to maintain maximum productivity and to retain staff. Reasonable accommodation practices help employers to:

- Enhance business outcomes by maximising the engagement and skills of employees in the workplace
- Create a positive working environment that is free from discrimination
- Retain skilled staff<sup>7</sup>

### Suggested actions

- Ensure work location/tasks do not have excessive stimulation such as distracting sounds, smells, or sights including the avoidance of fluorescent lights (humming or flickering can be distracting).
- People with autism sometimes benefit from things like screens around their desk, noise-cancelling headphones, or their desk being in the corner, due to the effect that the workplace could have on their senses.

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<sup>7</sup> Adapted from IHREC's: Equality and mental health: what the law means for your workplace. [https://www.ihrec.ie/app/uploads/download/pdf/equality\\_and\\_mental\\_health\\_\\_\\_what\\_the\\_law\\_means\\_for\\_your\\_workplace.pdf](https://www.ihrec.ie/app/uploads/download/pdf/equality_and_mental_health___what_the_law_means_for_your_workplace.pdf)

## Training and development

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Clear and structured training is invaluable. This can be provided informally on the job, by a manager, colleagues or a mentor, or may be more formal training.

It will also be helpful to provide autism awareness training for the line managers themselves, and this should be a feature of any organisation looking to build capacity in supporting employees with disabilities.

As mentioned above a person with autism can have many skills. These skills can be made more effective if on the job training for communication and inter-personal skills is available<sup>8</sup>, as these may be areas where a person with autism may need some assistance.

### Suggested actions

- It is believed that due to the way some people with autism learn, on-the-job training is most beneficial, but the person should be asked how they learn best
- Training done on site and first day activities should match the typical routine
- Any prompts provided during training should be the same ones as used during a typical work routine

## Line management

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It is important that there is a reporting structure in the work-place or unit in which the person is going to be placed. It may be helpful if the person with autism can, where possible, report to one person only; instructions should be clear and in writing where necessary.

Aim to provide lists of written instruction as opposed to long, hard to interpret and maybe even rushed verbal instruction.

You can help by prioritising activities, organising tasks into a timetable for daily, weekly and monthly activities, and breaking larger tasks into small steps. Some people with autism will appreciate precise information about start and finish times, and help getting into a routine with breaks and lunches.

Some people with autism may benefit from regular performance meetings to provide feedback on an ongoing basis. It may help to find out what format works best for them.

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8 <https://www.trainingindustry.com/workforce-development/articles/autism-at-work-hiring-and-training-employees-on-the-spectrum.aspx>

Some people with autism can be quite meticulous, and can become anxious if their performance is not perfect. This means they may become stressed in a situation such as an IT failure, or if they occasionally arrive late due to transport problems or other unpreventable factors. Managers should be able to offer reassurance that these occurrences are not a problem, and inform them what to do in these circumstances, e.g. phone line manager. Give information about changes to the workplace or tasks well in advance.

If difficulties at work do occur, it will be important to understand their source. Issues of bullying and harassment at work may be more common for people with autism, as with other people with disabilities. Working together, line managers and the HR function must tackle this issue as soon as they become aware of it and promote a positive working environment through awareness training and other methods

### **Suggested actions**

- Define work tasks clearly (complex tasks should be broken into smaller assignments and illustrated with diagrams, where required).
- Give an employee advance warning of any changes in routines, as well as an opportunity to practice new routines.
- Give an employee flexibility to develop their own way of organising their workspace and doing a task where possible.
- Consider providing a personal calendar, or appointment book and use technology like smart phones with scheduling software.
- Try not to make assumptions about what your employee does or does not understand. Ensure that directions are clearly communicated and understood.

## **Performance management**

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As with any employee, line managers should have regular one-to-one meetings to discuss and review performance and give overall comments and suggestions. For some people with autism, brief, frequent reviews may be more helpful than longer sessions at less frequent intervals.

People with autism can sometimes find it difficult to notice social cues, so make sure your feedback is clear, constructive and consistent. If they complete a task incorrectly, don't allude to, or imply, any problems – instead, explain tactfully and clearly why it is wrong, check that they have understood, and set out exactly what they should do instead. Be aware that they may not be feeling especially confident so ensure that any criticism is sensitive; give positive feedback wherever appropriate.

### **Suggested actions**

- Since some people with autism can be perfectionists it is advisable to explain what is seen as a successful achievement in order to avoid frustrations.
- Allow for the fact that there may be an issue affecting performance that is related to the employee's condition and how the work environment has been set up around them, or that it may relate to other issues.
- Where an issue is related to performance, be clear on what is expected and what standards performance is measured against, but also establish what supports the individual considers would be helpful to them.

## **Career progression**

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When opportunities arise for career advancement, some people with autism may require additional encouragement and support. This may include support in discussions and negotiations over new roles and responsibilities, as well as reasonable accommodation of their needs in the transition to a new role.

Depending on where a person with autism sits on the spectrum, some individuals may prefer to avoid changes in their routine and/or their physical environment, as these may cause significant stress. While this should be respected, highlighting opportunities for career advancement should not be avoided on this basis.

### **Suggested actions**

- Appropriate encouragement and support should be offered along any possible path towards career advancement.
- Ensure the person has access to training and development opportunities and that the training and development they avail of is autism friendly.

## Case Study 2

Within a year of joining the company, Peter was promoted, managing two other members of staff. The company had put in place practical support structures for Peter including offering him flexible working hours and location; providing structured objectives, frequent feedback and personal development sessions; and training on presentation, team working and networking skills.

Peter had demonstrated an ability to rapidly acquire new creative and technical skills and pass these abilities on to other staff. He also leads by example in terms of productivity, commitment and willingness to learn.

Colleagues were given training around autism and working with colleagues with autism, which has been supportive for Peter but also helped improve quality and customer service.

## Supporting colleagues

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If the person with autism consents to their condition being disclosed, then providing colleagues with information and guidance on autism can benefit everyone.

Sometimes the employee may find it helpful to write a document for other staff explaining what their colleagues can do to support them. Research illustrates that some people with autism felt their colleagues/employers needed training to help understand the condition and why they act in a certain way. Autism should also be included within the organisation's general disability awareness training.

Employers can also avail of autism awareness training and materials that have been previously been funded by the Department of Justice and Equality.<sup>9</sup>

### Suggested actions

- Employers and colleagues may require information about autism and what supports are needed in the workplace.
- Ensure all staff have access to disability awareness training and that it includes a focus on autism as well as mental health.

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.autismawareness.ie/>  
<https://asiam.ie/>

## Case Study 3

Before Mary joined the team, her company held an autism awareness-raising day for those who would be working with and around her; so that they were aware of issues she might have in the workplace and ways to deal positively with these. The company had scoped out the core functions they needed Mary to perform and then adapted that by adding additional responsibilities based on her comfort level, capacity and capability. Mary's placement was a great success, she fitted in well with colleagues and she was able to increase her duties as she settled into the role.

## Conclusion

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Raising awareness about autism is essential in order to change attitudes towards it. It is important that line managers and HR professionals are equipped with the skills to manage and support staff with autism and to appreciate that it is not a case of one size fits all, as some will need little-to-no support, while others may need a lot more.

Good autism-awareness benefits the workplace but also how an organisation performs and delivers on its services to all its staff and customers.

# Appendix A – Autism Organisations

<p><b>Autism Ireland</b></p>	<p>Coole Road Multyfarnham, Mullingar, Co. Westmeath N91 WC67</p> <p>Phone: 044 9371680</p> <p>Email: <a href="mailto:info@autismireland.ie">info@autismireland.ie</a></p>
<p><b>Aspire – Asperger Syndrome Association of Ireland</b></p>	<p>Carmichael Centre, Coleraine House, Coleraine Street, Dublin 7.</p> <p>Phone: 01 878 0027</p> <p>Email: <a href="mailto:info@aspireireland.ie">info@aspireireland.ie</a></p>
<p><b>Irish Society for Autism</b></p>	<p>Unity Building, 16/17 Lower O’Connell Street, Dublin 1.</p> <p>Phone: 01 874 4684</p> <p>Email: <a href="mailto:admin@autism.ie">admin@autism.ie</a></p>
<p><b>Shine Ireland</b></p>	<p>The Shine Centre, Weston View, Ballinrea Road Carrigaline, Co.Cork.</p> <p>Phone: 021 4377052</p> <p>Email: <a href="mailto:info@shineireland.com">info@shineireland.com</a></p>
<p><b>AsIAm.ie</b></p>	<p>Please visit the website: <a href="http://AsIAm.ie">AsIAm.ie</a></p>

## Appendix B – Employment Support Organisations

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<b>Specialisterne Ireland</b>	<b>SAP AppHaus</b> Waterside Citywest Dublin 24  <a href="http://www.specialisterne.ie/contact/">http://www.specialisterne.ie/contact/</a>
<b>EmployAbility</b>	Unit 15, Bluebell Business Park, Old Naas Road, Dublin 12  Phone: 01 878 0027  Phone: (01) 460 3081  Email: <a href="mailto:info@employability.ie">info@employability.ie</a>
<b>WALK</b>	1 Longmile Road, Walkinstown, Dublin 12  Phone: (01) 465 0388  Email: <a href="mailto:info@walk.ie">info@walk.ie</a>

## **Appendix C – Materials to support you**

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### **Reasonable Accommodations for people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (NDA, 2015)**

The purpose of this paper is to look at the challenges people with autism can face and suggest supports that may assist them.

<http://nda.ie/nda-files/Reasonable-Accommodation-for-People-with-Autism-Spectrum-Disorder-updated-20151.pdf>

### **Customer Communications Toolkit for the Public Service (2017)**

The National Disability Authority's Centre for Excellence in Universal Design has worked with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to produce this toolkit. While the content is aimed at making an organisation's external communications accessible to everyone, there are some underlying principles that would be useful in guiding how a HR department or line manager could establish an internal communication process that would benefit people with autism and others within the organisation. Whether your organisation is in the public or private sector good practice in external communications can also be applied to your internal communications using the principles in this document.

<http://publicservice.universaldesign.ie/introduction.html>

### **Other resources**

Shine Ireland have developed an Autism Awareness presentation designed to give public service staff an opportunity to increase their knowledge about autism. The Autism Awareness presentation is designed to give the user an overview of how a diagnosis impacts on people with autism and their families in their daily lives:

<http://www.autismawareness.ie>

AsIAM deliver autism-awareness training to front-line public services such as transport services, emergency services and public offices so they have an understanding of the condition and are able to ensure that their services are accessible to the needs of those with the condition:

<http://asiam.ie/asiam-public-sector-training>

## Appendix D – What is autism?

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Autism is a lifelong condition that affects how a person communicates with, and relates to, other people. It may also affect how a person makes sense of the world around them. People with autism may also have difficulties with understanding and processing language.

Autism is a spectrum condition; this means that while people with autism share certain difficulties their condition will affect them in different ways and to differing degrees. People with autism can be disadvantaged when it comes to getting and keeping a job because of difficulties with social communication and interaction, other people's lack of understanding and sensory issues. It is important to understand that this will include people at different points along the autism spectrum, for example:

People working in high skill areas (e.g. engineering, ICT or accountancy) who are on the autism spectrum, which may affect their social and communication skills, and interactions with colleagues and managers

People with an intellectual disability who are also on the autistic spectrum

People with autism along with other conditions such as learning disabilities and mental health difficulties

One condition you may be aware of is Asperger syndrome. This is a form of autism. People with Asperger syndrome are often of average or above average intelligence, but may still have difficulties with social communication and interaction.

Some people with autism are able to live relatively independent lives but others may need specialist support to varying degrees to help them live their lives. People with autism may also experience over- or under-sensitivity to sounds, touch, tastes, smells, light or colours.

It may be helpful to note that almost 80% of those with autism experience some form of mental health difficulty at some point in their lives, and so it is also critical that managers are aware of the importance of positive mental health supports.

## Characteristics of autism

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It may not be immediately obvious that a person with autism has particular needs. His or her behaviour may invite the attention of others, but in general, autism is a hidden disability.

It is important to note that how a person's condition manifests itself differs from individual to individual. The explanations below may not be applicable to everyone with this condition.

It is generally accepted, however, that a person on the autism spectrum may experience difficulty with some of the following behaviours:

### Social interaction

A person with autism may:

- not mix with colleagues
- be unable to read colleagues' social cues
- behave in what may seem an inappropriate or odd manner
- appear to lack empathy towards colleagues
- avoid eye contact with a colleague(s) when under pressure

### Social communication

A person with autism may:

- have difficulty in understanding a colleague's tone of voice, intonation or facial expression
- make a literal interpretation of figurative or metaphorical speech (for example, the phrases "has the cat got your tongue" or "he'd make mincemeat of you" could be alarming to a person with autism)
- find it difficult to hold a conversation with colleagues
- become agitated in responses or come across as argumentative or stubborn
- come across as over-compliant towards a colleague or line manager, agreeing to things that are not true

- use formal, stilted or pedantic language
- have poor concentration and thus poor listening skills
- not take instruction well
- be honest to the extent of bluntness or rudeness
- prefer information in a certain format

## **Social imagination**

A person with autism may:

- have difficulty in foreseeing the consequences of their actions
- have difficulty planning ahead for work
- become extremely anxious because of unexpected events or changes in routine
- like set rules, and overreact to a colleague's infringement of them
- often have particular special interests, which may become obsessions.

# nda

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