

OUR FAIR CITY EMPLOYER CHARTER FOR AUTISTIC ADULTS

A GUIDE FOR EMPLOYERS

This short guide has been produced by the Employment Working Group of the Sheffield Autism Partnership.

It takes the Commitments of the 'Our Fair City Employer Charter' developed with the support of the Sheffield Fairness Commission and articulates what that means for Autistic Adults.

This leaflet goes on to explain the benefits of employing an autistic adult.

Employers who take on autistic adults quote their experience and the leaflet provides information to employers about the ways that they can get support to employ someone on the autistic spectrum.

Sheffield has about 6000 autistic adults across the ability and skills spectrum, the majority of whom are currently unemployed, despite the fact that they provide a fantastic labour resource for the region. We hope that this leaflet is helpful in encouraging more employers to consider employing autistic adults and offers help in the ways in which employers and the adults themselves can get the most from that that experience.

WHO ARE AUTISTIC ADULTS?

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Autistic adults are people who have a neurodevelopmental disorder. They are of all levels of ability and their disorders fall across a wide spectrum. Previously, those with high IQ were classified as people with Asperger's Syndrome, which is part of the spectrum. Others have been described as 'severely autistic' or at the other end of the spectrum 'those with high functioning autism'. The spectrum is sometimes referred to the Autistic Spectrum Disorders Spectrum (ASD)

Particular features of the condition include difficulties with social situations, communication difficulties, sensory issues, intense interests and good memories.

All autistic adults are different but all of them perceive and respond to the world and other people in various different ways to other, neurotypical people. It often takes them significant energy simply to live and move around on a day to day basis and interactions, especially in unknown situations, can create severe anxiety.

Many autistic adults have strategies to manage their anxiety including establishing regular routines, engaging in repetitive, familiar behavior, and avoiding certain situations which they find create sensory overload. Because most work situations create stress at times, autistic adults often cope better with reduced hours and flexible working times and operating in a calm environment.

Many autistic adults are very creative and others are very logical. They can tend to take other people literally and misunderstand certain types of humour, though they may have a good sense of humour themselves. They can tend to see things in 'back and white' and not appreciate or discern subtlety. They have a strong sense of right and wrong and can be painfully honest.

Although they find social situations stressful, many autistic adults enjoy being with other people they know and can trust. Some have support from family, friends or a social care worker for part or all of the day, to help them deal with the everyday challenges of independent living. They find it difficult to interpret body and facial language and this is especially hard when they do not know people.

Autistic people are industrious and in a work situation, autistic adults will always try 110% and will expect that everyone else does the same.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF EMPLOYING AUTISTIC PEOPLE ?

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Autistic people have a great deal to offer the world of business and may have unique skills and abilities that will help an organisation thrive.

Each autistic person will have their own strengths and difficulties. Autism is invisible. There is a variation in autistic people in their own self awareness judging their own capabilities and difficulties. As well as their individual strengths and talents, candidates with autism may demonstrate above-average skills in some or all of the following areas (Not all of the following will apply to everyone):

Problem-solving skills: some autistic people prefer logical and structured approaches to their work, and often think in a very visual way, others may prefer a more creative approach to problem solving. They may enjoy problem-solving and could bring new ideas and take fresh approaches to their job.

Attention to detail: autistic people can have the ability to focus on detailed work.

High levels of concentration: autistic people may often find focusing on detailed work rewarding, and can tend to work persistently and without being distracted.

Reliability and loyalty: autistic people can be very conscientious and committed to their work, often with good levels of punctuality, honesty and integrity. For example, employers tell us that they notice that absenteeism is lower.

Technical ability and specialist skills and interests such as in IT: autistic people may develop highly specialist interests and skills, which can be very valuable in the workplace.

Detailed factual knowledge and an excellent memory: autistic people may develop highly specialist interests, which will mean that they develop very detailed factual knowledge in that area.

Research: because an autistic person can develop their special interest, then their ability to research can help business development.

Retention: autistic people can have a preference for a role with predictable outcomes and once settled in a job will often stay in that role considerably longer than others.

Resourceful: autistic people may also have had to find ways to overcome challenges and so can be resourceful. They may be able to overcome difficulties by increasing their self awareness.

Additional benefits to the organisation as a whole:

Organisations that are effective at managing people with disabilities (including autism) are usually better at managing their whole workforce. Becoming disability confident and employing people with disabilities positions disability as an issue to do with maximising talent, enhanced productivity, and investment in human potential. Being disability confident means you also understand that you need to treat people differently in order to treat them fairly, and this involves every part of your business not just your Human Resources department.

The disability confident business will attract and deliver:

The right people – a disability confident approach will help to ensure that recruitment is undertaken on merit rather than convenience.

Higher productivity, reduced costs - the effective line management and investment in reasonable adjustments that disabled people need in order to do the job, is shown to help the wider workforce make the most of their capabilities.

Innovative products and service offerings disability confident companies have demonstrated that products that can be used easily by older and disabled people are being adopted by wider customer markets.

Outstanding customer relationships, satisfaction & retention – a high percentage of disabled people choose businesses where they have received good customer service related to their disability.

Stronger stakeholder relationships & reputation - Government bodies are increasingly using procurement to promote good practice in diversity. A disability confident approach to procurement should therefore be considered by businesses as a means of developing stronger and more beneficial relationships with suppliers and partners.

QUOTES FROM PRESENT OR PREVIOUS EMPLOYERS

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“The difference in his confidence is overwhelming. The learning response has revitalised everyone’s enthusiasm”

“Working with her has been a learning curve for my staff. They enjoy working with her and have learnt to be more patient”

“He gets on with his jobs and then straight away looks for other jobs to do and takes the pressure off us. It’s taught us about autism”

“I wish there were more people here like him. He works hard and always puts in 100%”

“He always does a good job, he’s very thorough and I think his colleagues get a lot out of it too”

“He has brought to the team a better recognition and understanding of autism. When he first started the whole team pulled together to support him and this also encouraged them to brush up on their own communication skills”

“As an organisation it has made us re-address how we deliver our training”

Our Fair City Employer Charter

Sheffield is committed to becoming the fairest city in the country. Local employers will support this ambition, recognising that championing fairness is important for the city and also central to recruiting and retaining the most talented individuals and clients and contributing to the best type of economic growth.

Business leaders in Sheffield have therefore developed the Our Fair City Employer Charter.

Employers who sign the Our Fair City Employer Charter will:

1. Instil a culture of fairness, teamwork, engagement, accountability and enjoyment
2. Ensure that all staff have the opportunity to seek out innovative practices and products and contribute to sustainable growth
3. Aspire to exceed the recognised living wage, promote fair and flexible contracts of employment, and deploy recruitment and employment practices that identify and support talent, value diversity and promote aspiration and social mobility
4. Commit to the delivery of excellent working conditions, high ethical standards, positive health and wellbeing, and training, development and reward opportunities for all
5. Promote the Our Fair City campaign to other Sheffield organisations



CHALLENGE
CHAMPION
CHANGE

WHAT DOES THE CHARTER MEAN TO AUTISTIC ADULTS?

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WHAT CAN EMPLOYERS DO TO FAIRLY RECRUIT AND RETAIN AUTISTIC ADULTS IN THE SPIRIT OF THE CHARTER?

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Accountability, Fairness, and Employment practices

General

- Explain at every stage what you are about to do, what will happen next and the purpose
- The employer should understand how being autistic affects the individual and how they can best support him/her
- Give the person enough time to understand the information you are sharing and wait for a response
- Ask the person and/or business mentor/and/or advocate what support they might need
- Do not assume that autistic adults understand the feelings and thoughts of the managers/supervisors or can 'read' body language or expressions
- Repetitive behaviours might be a coping mechanism and therefore should be respected

Communication

- Questions should be clear and direct using language that is easy to understand and draw a picture where necessary if this helps. Do not rely on the person to pick up on the meaning of your questions or body language
- Autistic people might take what you say literally so avoid words with a double meaning and humour that can be misunderstood
- Ensure that enough context is provided for the individuals who often find this difficult to connect to the specific task.
- Use words and phrases which are not "woolly" and explain phrases and abbreviations and acronyms if necessary
- Do not bombard individuals with too much information all at the same time since that would require a great deal of processing which might be difficult
- Explore the optimum channel for communication which the individual is comfortable with and stick to it

- Ensure there is good and clear communication flow between the manager/supervisor and the individual with ASD
- Social difficulties may include lack of eye contact and unusual body language, talking at inappropriate moments or about inappropriate topics
- Autistic adults may need to be told more explicitly about things than would be the norm and usually prefer to be told directly so they clearly understand.

Dates and times

- Use opportunities to check the individual with ASD has noted key dates and times in a format which is acceptable to them
- Do not cancel or change meeting dates and times wherever possible
- If it is inevitable that a meeting date or time changes, then advise the individual with ASD with as much notice as possible and explain why it has changed
- Maintain a routine – familiarity and regular routines are important to many autistic people
- Wasting time is not good for autistic adults and they can be frustrated by this
- Inefficiency can also be frustrating for autistic adults who may want or try to do something a different way if they feel it is more efficient to do so.
- Respond to emails promptly

Environment

- The environment is important. Many autistic adults are particularly sensitive to light, movement, sounds, smell and touch. They can experience sensory overload which they can find extremely difficult to manage. Try to keep the immediate environment as calm as possible to help reduce anxiety
- Ascertain individual needs/stresses to share with colleagues. Examples can be loud noises, background noise of the other workforce, constant ringing of the telephone, bright lighting, and constant interruptions.
- Roles and responsibilities need to be made extremely clear to the ASD individual. It is more likely that given the appropriate conditions that ASD individuals can thrive and **enjoy** their role and responsibilities, and improve their **social mobility**.

Innovative practices and products

Give individuals mental and physical space to work and also the tools to explore possibilities to sustain the existing business and expand the business in a sustainable way. It is important to have regular meetings with the ASD individuals on a 1-1 basis and that an agenda is set each time. The frequency of these meetings and the length of time of these meetings have to be agreed with the individuals. These meetings are to set goals/review existing work and set/adjust targets. All objectives have to be realistic and take into account the ability of the

individual to achieve in a realistic timeframe. Encourage the individual to display their work and encourage their development opportunities where appropriate. This in turn should provide **reward opportunities** where appropriate.

Flexible contracts

It is important to understand how many hours the individuals can cope with in order to retain them. This should also be reviewed on a regular and agreed basis.

Valuing diversity

The vast majority of individuals with ASD have anxiety levels well above those of the NT adult. Ultimately, the outcome will be an individual who finds it difficult to understand the way in which they are expected to interact and communicate in everyday life, and who may have very little in the way of stability, i.e. areas of life which they can depend on as constant and consistent.

ASD individuals need key points during the day which can be relied upon in order to maintain stability. These will vary across all ASD individuals.

Ethical standards

The needs of the individual come first. Coping strategies are often used by individuals with ASD to reduce anxiety felt in every day situations that cannot be compensated for in the neurologically typical ways. The strategies themselves can manifest themselves in any number of different ways, and may be unique to the individual. Support should be about putting appropriate boundaries around a coping mechanism while not taking it away. Examples (preliminary) of strategies are:

- Physical (**excellent working conditions**)
- Routine
- Repetitive speech/ questioning
- Attachment to objects

Positive health and wellbeing

It is more likely that individuals with ASD respond better where the working environment is comfortable and that in turn can make them feel healthier and feel more connected and engaged. It could also allow them to generate new ideas, develop their own skills and knowledge. This also can be achieved by exploring **training and development** needs for the individuals.

WHAT HELP CAN EMPLOYERS GET IF THEY EMPLOY AN AUTISTIC ADULT?

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Access Funding

Disability Support/ Advice Agencies

Sheffield Disability Forums

NAS employer support