

## Tips: Avoiding misunderstandings by increasing awareness

There may be occasions where problems do arise for the person – particularly in social interactions, where communication can break down. If you become aware of any of these problems, try to deal with them swiftly and tactfully, and make colleagues aware of the potential for misunderstanding.

- ✓ If the person seems aloof or uninterested in talking to colleagues, or often says the ‘wrong’ thing, remember (and, where appropriate, remind colleagues) that this is probably unintentional and is likely to be due to the person’s communication difficulties.
- ✓ If the person tries too hard to fit in and irritates colleagues by seeming to ‘muscle in’ on a conversation, be patient, and explain the boundaries if necessary. Remember that reinforcing the boundaries may not just be necessary for the person with an ASD – other staff may also need reminding that their attitudes may have a strong impact on the job performance of their colleague with an ASD.
- ✓ If the person becomes anxious for any reason, try to find out what is causing the problem. One-to-one sessions are probably the best situation for doing this. You may need to think laterally. For example, the stress may not be caused by a difficulty in the job but by a colleague not being explicit in their instructions, by things not working efficiently (such as a computer crashing), or by difficulties in getting to their work. Trying to think around the immediate issue may help, as well as supportively asking the employee specific (though not invasive) questions to try to get to the root of the problem.

## To find out more

### Prospects factsheets

More factsheets are available from [prospects.london@nas.org.uk](mailto:prospects.london@nas.org.uk). Other topics include:  
What is an autism spectrum disorder?  
Recruiting someone with an ASD  
How can Prospects help you as an employer?

### Further reading

NAS Prospects Team (2005). *Employing people with Asperger syndrome: a practical guide*. Prospects Employment Service. Available at: [www.nas.org.uk](http://www.nas.org.uk) – click on ‘Shop online’.

Warman, R. (2003). *A guide to supporting employees with Asperger syndrome*. Berkshire Autistic Society. Available at: [www.autismberkshire.org.uk/employment](http://www.autismberkshire.org.uk/employment)

### Telephone support

The Autism Helpline provides an information service to those affected by autism or Asperger syndrome  
Tel: 0845 070 4004 Monday to Friday, 10am-4pm  
Email: [autismhelpline@nas.org.uk](mailto:autismhelpline@nas.org.uk)

### Support for employers

Prospects Employment Service provides a range of services for organisations that employ, or would like to employ, someone with an ASD. (See details below.)

## Employer factsheet

# Managing someone with an ASD

Working with someone with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD), including Asperger syndrome, can be an enriching experience for managers and colleagues alike, 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.

### Disability and the law

The adaptations detailed in this factsheet would be considered ‘reasonable adjustments’, which employers are required to make under the Disability Discrimination Act 2005. For more information, contact the Disability Rights Commission on 0845 070 4004 or at [www.drc-gb.uk](http://www.drc-gb.uk)

## What challenges might someone with an ASD face?

People with some autism spectrum disorders (ASDs), such as Asperger syndrome, are often well qualified for work, and many are successfully employed in roles ranging from accountant to administrative assistant, and journalist to statistician. However, in order to achieve these successes, they need to overcome certain difficulties – particularly in the following three areas:

- > social communication
- > social interaction
- > social imagination.

They may also have some difficulty in adapting their existing skills and knowledge to new tasks or environments. These difficulties can make the work environment hard for the person to deal with. They can also cause misunderstandings among other staff – particularly as an ASD is an ‘invisible’ condition. If staff are not familiar with the forms that an ASD can take, they may misconstrue the person’s behaviour as rude, insensitive or unfriendly. However, the good news is that there are plenty of simple ways to make sure that the person has the support they need and to ensure good positive working relationships.

# Managing someone with an ASD



## How can we help overcome these challenges?

There are two types of activities that employers can carry out to help overcome the challenges that an employee with an ASD will face:

- › **Formal activities** The formal support on offer ranges from job coaches to state-funded initiatives to help with extra costs such as adaptations in the workplace. Prospects Employment Service can provide more information about all the options available – see ‘To find out more’ on the back cover.
- › **Informal activities** In addition to providing formal support, there is much that you can do within your organisation to help make sure communication is clear and the necessary support is at hand. Many of these activities are extremely straightforward and easy to provide, and are detailed in the remainder of this factsheet.

## How can we ensure everything runs smoothly?

- › **Make sure instructions are concise and specific** Try to give the person clear instructions right from the start about exactly how to carry out each task, from start to finish, as this will lay the foundations for good working practices. Don't assume the person will infer your meaning from informal instructions – for example, rather than saying ‘Give everybody a copy of this’, say ‘Make three photocopies of this, and give one each to Sam, Mary and Ahmed’. You may also choose to provide written instructions. It can be helpful to ask the person to repeat back instructions so you are sure they have understood.
- › **Ensure the work environment is well structured** Some people with an ASD need a fairly structured work environment. You can help by working with them to prioritise activities, organising tasks into a timetable for daily, weekly and monthly activities, and breaking larger tasks into small steps. Some people will appreciate precise information about start and finish times, and help getting into a routine with breaks and lunches.
- › **Clarify expectations of the job** You may need to be more explicit about your expectations for a member of staff with an ASD. As well as the job description, you 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 them keep doing their job well, not because they are not good enough.

*“I have an excellent memory for facts and figures – for example, car number plates and timetables. I never have to write down telephone numbers. I have an excellent memory for jokes anecdotes and even whole movie scripts”*  
Person with an ASD

### David and Jacqui's story

“David already worked in my team as a Customer Sales Assistant when I became his line manager in 2002. I had no previous experience of working with people with ASDs, so I did some reading around the subject and David's Prospects support worker popped in and introduced herself early on, which was really helpful. David is very good with customers and has excellent interpersonal skills. In the time I've worked with him we haven't really had any particular challenges to overcome, mainly because Prospects has shown us how to prevent any difficulties from arising in the first place. But it's good to know that they are always there to provide back up if we need it. I feel I'm very fortunate to have someone like David in my team. Managing him has taught me that everyone is different, with their own individual strengths. Everyone in the team values David as a member of our working family.”

Jacqui Copas, Customer Reception Supervisor at First Great Western Railways

- › **Provide sensitive but direct feedback** People with an ASD often find it difficult to pick up on social cues, so make sure your feedback is honest, constructive and consistent. If the person completes a task incorrectly, don't allude to, or imply, any problems – instead, explain tactfully but clearly why it is wrong, check that they have understood, and set out exactly what they should do instead. Be aware that the person may have low self-esteem or experience of being bullied, so ensure that any criticism is sensitive, and give positive feedback wherever appropriate.
- › **Regularly review performance** As with any employee, line managers should have regular one-to-one meetings with the person to discuss and review performance and give overall comments and suggestions. When managing a person with an ASD, brief, frequent reviews may be better than longer sessions at less frequent intervals.
- › **Help other staff to be more aware** Evidence shows that if the person with an ASD consents to their condition being disclosed, then providing colleagues with information and guidance on ASDs can benefit both parties. Sometimes an employee with an ASD may find it helpful to write a document for other staff explaining how their ASD affects them and what kind of things they find hard. You may choose to distribute some Prospects Employment Service factsheets or other resources to your staff, or to provide staff training in disability issues in general, or specifically in ASDs. Prospects can help you with this (see ‘To find out more’, overleaf).
- › **Provide training and monitoring** When a person with an ASD starts a job or takes on new responsibilities, clear and structured training is invaluable. This can be provided informally on the job, by a manager, colleagues or a mentor, or may take the form of more formal training. Various organisations and schemes offer job coaches, and funding for this form of training may be available from the Department of Work and Pensions.  
  
In addition to training, the person 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. Having someone who the person can turn to at times of stress may help to nip any problems in the bud, and is a valuable experience for the mentor too.
- › **Provide reassurance in stressful situations** People with an ASD can be quite meticulous, and can become anxious if their performance is not perfect. This means they may become very stressed in a situation such as an IT failure. You can help by giving concrete solutions to these situations – for example, by explaining “If the photocopier breaks, use the one on the third floor.” Similarly, reassure the person that if they occasionally arrive late due to transport problems or other unpreventable factors, this is not a problem.

*“I have difficulty picking up social cues, and difficulty in knowing what to do when I get things wrong.”*  
Person with an ASD

*People with an ASD can be quite meticulous, and can become anxious if their performance is not perfect... reassure the person that if they occasionally arrive late due to transport problems or other unpreventable factors, this is not a problem.*