# Adapting Workplace Environments to Accommodate Autistic Adults

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

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**Introduction**

In the United States, nearly 99% of young adults have worked between the ages of 21 to 25 years old; however, only 58% of young adults with autism have ever worked at this age (Roux et al., 2015, p. 15). Not only is this percentage significantly lower than the national average, it is also the lowest rate of employment across all disabilities (Roux et al., 2015, p. 15). Rates of autism diagnoses have also been steadily rising (Rudy, 2023). Therefore everyone will soon be affected by how we as a society handle the employment of autistic adults, whether a person has a connection to someone with autism or not.

Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition (also known as an IDD or Intellectual and Developmental Disability) that has lifelong effects on a person's ability to communicate and interact with others. But there are other skills that people with autism actually exceed in comparison to people without. They are able to memorize more easily and learn quicker, can think in a more visual way and more logically, and often have very high honesty, punctuality, and adherence to rules ("Strengths and abilities in autism", 2018). So the claim cannot be made that people with autism will simply be "worse" employees across the board than other people, because that would be focusing on simply communication-related tasks and not considering all strengths involved.

I will be exploring this topic with the STS framework of neurodiversity. There is a vast spectrum of effects for people with neurological disorders, ranging from severely limiting disabilities to some areas of high-level functioning (Friedel, 2015, p. 1). I will be focusing specifically on employment opportunities for autistic adults, both in how more can be created and how existing ones can be meaningfully improved so that there is increased equality of opportunity for people anywhere on the neurodiversity spectrum.

We must act in response to these high rates of unemployment for multiple reasons. Under the principles of virtue ethics, we have a moral responsibility to care for the unprivileged and protect the vulnerable (Vallor, 2021, p. 92), especially in regards to long-term unemployment which has a negative relationship with life expectancy ("The link between employment & health", 2016). From a consequentialist perspective, there is also untapped cash value that autistic employees could bring to the table due to their unique skill sets, if companies are willing to invest in programs and partnerships to earn that value (Kupperman, 1981, pp. 307-311). Under either framework, steps should be taken to solve this issue. Unemployment will decrease and opportunities for autistic adults will be greater if corporations are willing to invest in and make changes to their environments to accommodate neurodiversity.

**Background**

As stated prior, autistic adults statistically have worse employment outcomes than adults without, proven by a variety of metrics including compensation and upward mobility (Roux et al., 2015, p. 15). This is largely due to a misunderstanding of the potential of an autistic candidate and too great of a focus on their weaknesses. Some examples of these weaknesses that lead to them being looked over in applications or interviews include a difficulty understanding complex directions, a lacking ability to "read between the lines", or asking too many questions and generally responding inappropriately (Hendricks, 2009, p. 81). These are all skills that are highly favored in the American corporate world, which values charisma and communication skills in leadership over task- or goal-oriented skills.

While it is true that leadership demands effective communication, people with autism can still be in charge of people and processes without completely being overwhelmed. It is just more often than not that they require a "buddy", or someone that oversees them and that they can feel

comfortable with asking questions and being social support (Müller et al., 2008). If corporations are willing to invest in these kinds of helper roles as paid positions in a company, they can decrease unemployment among adults with autism and even still increase their work output if they place the neurodivergent employees in the right roles.

But what would a "right role" be for an employee with autism? A study performed in 2017 pitted autistic and non-autistic employees against each other on a series of work performance criteria (Bennett et al., 2021, p. 23). Employees without autism performed better on metrics like flexibility, instruction following, and productivity. However, employees without autism performed better on the metrics of attention to detail and work ethic. So, clearly there are certain types of jobs that neuroatypical people would do even better in than their neurotypical counterparts. It's just a question of how corporations can help find the right autistic candidates for those jobs and how adults with autism can get to the point of being considered for those jobs in the first place.

Some smart companies have already started doing this. Feinstein (2019, p. 224) recounts how SAP, a software company, started partnering with multiple U.S. and global non-profit and governmental organizations that have dedicated programs for helping neurodivergent adults find and keep jobs. One such employee worked on a technical team and developed an innovation that saved an estimated $40 million. Beyond just hiring neurodivergent employees as a DEI push, there are clear benefits to having them be a part of a project team. For these "kings of logic and reason" (Feinstein, 2019, p. 223), the focus needs to be on what kinds of tasks they are given. Employers cannot expect an employee with autism to perform just like any other employee, but if they find the right jobs in the right field, these workers can be a strong asset.

Before they can be placed in those right jobs and work to their strengths, there is often the issue of job candidates or even already-hired workers feeling comfortable sharing the status of their neurodivergence in the first place. Disclosing neurological disorders to employers or colleagues can be a huge source of stress, and many times people will decide to either just quit or continually hide their disorders, leading to assumptions about their inadequacy that are likely misplaced (Hendrickx et al., 2010, pp. 164-165). Older guidebooks for this demographic group even suggest hiding any disabilities, calling it a "need-to-know issue" (Fast, 2004, p. 197). This operates under the assumption that autism is purely a negative trait for someone to have - which I have demonstrated is not the case in many careers, especially technical ones.

Autistic adults face more workplace discrimination than any other group; according to a 2021 Petty study, half of surveyed autistic employees reported regular bullying or harassment at work (p. 237). The reasons cited for this were usually a lack of knowledge about "unwritten rules" at their job and between coworkers. There are many social cues that folks with autism simply miss. The same paper discusses an act in the UK that was passed in 2009 to attempt to force employers to make "reasonable adjustments" to their workplace to better accommodate for this group and help them fit in with their coworkers, but employers reported low confidence in how to help and not knowing what the right resources would be (p. 237).

Low motivation and a failure to find the right support networks is plaguing the autism community, based on quotes from Costley et al.'s 2017 journal from autistic adults describing their life goals and aspirations:

> I want to become a photographer for a magazine but haven't been able to motivate myself to make and submit a portfolio. (p. 83)

> I am lacking the networking skills which seem more important where I live than any qualifications you have. (p. 83)
>
> I plan to run my own business from home, but even joining an agency wasn't helpful, there aren't enough specialized services to provide support. (p. 83)

A common thread is that these adults have desires to find or even create their own fulfilling jobs, but they don't have the platforms to get them there. That is also why they are more likely to work part-time (Costley et al., 2017, p. 86) and on average have much higher levels of schooling relative to the level of work they are able to do (p. 88).

People with autism are in fact usually acutely aware of their own incapabilities and often share a deep feeling of isolation from the rest of the world (Müller et al., 2008). This is not only a cue that they deserve more special attention as we strive to make places of employment that are hospitable to all, but also highlights a profound truth about neurodivergent people's understanding of their own limits. They are more often than not willing to accept help and ask questions rather than attempt a task by themselves that they are unable to perform (Nicholas, 2020, pp. 291-293). If a manager understands the unique skill set of a neurodivergent employee, they can carefully and methodically teach them the steps of certain key actions and put them in a position where they can be successful.

Any workplace that puts in extra effort to understand autism and have empathy with its autistic workers will have better employee outcomes, including employment retention (Nicholas, 2020, p. 290). Everybody wants to be successful in their career, and that is not just because of the financial incentives. A workplace that encourages and challenges someone to put in effort will give their life more meaning and fulfillment (Bailey et al., 2016). Adults on the autism spectrum

have this same base need as everyone else, and, under the perspective of virtue ethics and its core tenants of justice and compassion, deserve to be in a position where they can thrive.

Ultimately, this issue should be considered as under the category of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace. Many studies surrounding employment of the neurodiverse fail to consider social factors (Mpofu, 2023, p. 55). Thorough social research needs to be included in how we treat this large group of adults that are suffering disproportionately because of their uniquely specialized brains. How can the American culture at large become more accepting of different levels of mental functioning in the workforce, so that all have opportunities to be fruitful in a career? That is what I intend to uncover.

**Method**

My general approach to answering this question was to start by listening to the voices of those who are most affected; in this case, neurodivergent people. Researchers like Feinstein, Costley, etc. also use this focus, since anyone neurotypical cannot relate to or understand their struggles. Almost across the board, people with IDDs convey that they would rather not be treated as anything less than human. Despite this, most neurotypical adults think of an autistic person as a failure at or a departure from normalcy. An artist with Asperger's syndrome, from Feinstein's 2019 guide, expands on this discrepancy:

> Some people think of us as 'with autism', as if it's something optional or accumulative, as if we're broken or just plain failed neurotypical people. Language engenders attitudes - if you always look at a tree as being an evolutionary failed cat, you can never focus on the tree's beauty, perfect in its rightful niche in biodiversity. The same goes for neurodivergent people: we're just one part of innate human neurodiversity. (p. 227)

I find it worthwhile to let the affected groups speak on this root issue as it clearly is the

bedrock on which any hiring discrimination can stand. If an employer sees an autistic candidate as an intrinsically lower-value person, then their chances of being selected for that job are going to be significantly lower. By hearing these truths from the mouths of those discriminated against, we can grow past the misinformed assumptions many of us have grown up with about autism. It is important to elevate their views because most readers, being neurotypical, cannot relate or speak to the experiences of someone who is neuroatypical.

Criticisms of diversity programs and elevating voices usually revolve around the cost of such programs in the face of their lack of real change. For most companies that face these issues, they are trying to achieve diversity with hiring tests and performance ratings (Dobbin et al., 2024). However, granting employment to autistic individuals is different from other DEI programs because it involves specifically tailored roles as opposed to hiring people generally to increase diversity. Also, programs that benefit oppressed minority groups are worthwhile because of the long-term impacts they can have on said groups.

In addition to learning from the source, I also sought out scholars who do targeted research for the benefit of autistic adults. I focused my investigation toward journals or books that have been published since the year 2000. Specifically, I wanted to find work from scholarship-level authors that exists either to encourage employers to consider hiring more autistic candidates, or to teach autistic adults strategies and new skills that could help them earn a spot at an interview or anywhere else along the hiring process. This meant I was following trails of authors referencing past work or other authors, as well as doing broad scoping searches on the topic of employability for autistic adults. The benefit of researching such a narrow area as this was that the sources I came across almost always had relevant and unique perspectives that were useful for me to include in my study.

All of the sources I regularly reference agree that adults with autism would benefit from working, and that decreasing unemployment in general would be beneficial to society. Some of these claims are indisputable. However, I also looked into older sources from the 1980s or earlier that shed some light on the history of the issue and explained why it is ongoing. Treatment towards the neurodivergent has clearly evolved over time. Whether it is using slurs to refer to them or talking about their work potential as necessarily limited, scholars of the past generally demonstrate a lack of understanding about people with IDDs. Despite the misinformed conclusions, it is still helpful to read these papers and see some of the root problems that are causing unemployment to be so high for this group.

Neurodiversity is a necessary framework to consider this problem through. Based on the scientific and psychological evidence provided by these reputable scholars, autism is not a limiter of mental functioning but rather an amplifier of unique skills. Based on the historical treatment of autistic individuals and their continued low rates of employment, it is clear that employers found and still find reasons to treat them differently from others. When these biases come from the people that are making the structures upon which employment forms, those who are treated poorly will receive in consequence (Booth et al., 2016, p. 30). Only by evaluating these structures and their origin can we ensure equality for the neurodiverse.

**Recommendations**

Upon performing this research, I have been able to make several inferences about what is lacking in the employment sphere for the neurodivergent as well as what could possibly be done to improve it. While there are a variety of minor details and formalities that negatively affect workplace conditions for the neurodivergent, most of the problems are on the broader system level. I will discuss what these problems are and attempt to propose a new system for

employment that honors neurodiversity and is also economically viable.

The first foundational roadblock that seems to exist for most neurodivergent adults is getting the opportunities to be considered for a job in the first place. Many adults get hired by networking, which is a tall order for someone with social anxiety because of the way they are wired neurologically. I propose a new way of hiring that levels the playing field for candidates and allows them to be considered on the basis of their strengths and weaknesses alone, not who they have connections to. This would be pushing back against a hiring culture that elevates "weak ties" (Bojinov et al., 2022) a candidate has to others. But if each resume can be presented before a hiring agent without any privilege given to particular candidates, it is more likely that it would represent a broader spectrum of neurodiversity due to the disadvantage neuroatypical candidates have in networking.

When a candidate is given an interview, they also should be given fair treatment if they have a neurological disorder like autism. This means that no interview questions should be trick questions or ones that require reading between the lines. Autistic job candidates can give honest, well-thought-out answers to interview questions, but they will be even more genuine if they are presented with the questions clearly and potentially even allowed to read them beforehand (Maras, 2024). This eliminates the need to be worrying about facial expression, body language, etc. when giving responses.

Similarly, there needs to be stricter rules surrounding workplace harassment and discrimination against colleagues with autism. There should be no need for employees to fear missing "unwritten rules" and be treated differently because of it. In many situations, HR should be much more closely involved in the workplace relationships of neurodivergent employees than with others. Considering more than half of neurodivergent employees face workplace

discrimination (Petty, 2021, p. 237), they should be treated as a vulnerable group and protected as any other such group would. This could look like HR giving regular briefings to their company about what neurodivergence means and what neuroatypical employees bring to the table. It could also look like a "buddy system", pairing neuroatypical employees with a neurotypical colleague that can be on the lookout for them. There are many affordable steps that could be taken to make an autistic employee feel safe at work.

As explored previously, neurodivergent employees can bring significant cash value to a company compared to another employee if placed in the right kind of role. However, those roles tend not to be as high-paying, since leadership roles are the most profitable and require the most social and emotional intelligence. Promotions need to be updated to account for this. This will likely be the most difficult to get companies to actually implement due to the costs involved. But based on research on the productivity, work ethic, and attention to detail found in neurodivergent employees, raises should be given to them for more reasons than just leadership responsibilities. A hard-working autistic software engineer, for example, should be able to get a pay raise for their creative solutions, even if that raise doesn't put other employees under them. And employers could also offer training programs for autistic employees to work on communication and leadership skills. By doing so, companies may be able to put some of their most intelligent and profitable workers on a path to new skills and new job opportunities.

Along with these massive system-based recommendations, there are smaller changes an office or worksite could make to become a more inclusive environment. People with autism are particularly sensitive to smells and sounds. Placing down calming scented candles or other aromatic devices, restricting volume levels, or allowing autistic employees to listen to music or other background noise while they work are great ways to practically make a job site

neurodiversity-friendly. One framework for doing this at an organizational level is the concept of "universal design," a way of describing a setting or product that doesn't discriminate in its use, like open floor plans or collaborative spaces (Indeed Editorial Team, 2023).

All of these recommendations, if implemented, would go a long way towards making neurodiversity in the workplace equitable. But there are large structures at play here and some decisions that, if a company's bottom line was being prioritized over anything else, may never see the light of day. This is why I believe non-profit programs are a necessary intermediate step to connecting autistic employees to companies where they can thrive. Whether government- or publicly-funded, neuroatypical job placement programs/groups could give autistic adults a footstool into a career path that would be difficult to reach on their own. Companies would willingly partner with these non-profit programs and be fed ready and willing employees, targeted at specific roles with specific accommodations for someone on the autism spectrum. One program that already does all these things is called VIAble Ventures.

For my Capstone project with UVA, me and a team of fellow systems engineering undergraduates were tasked to work with VIAble Ventures and increase their online sales by way of sales analytics and a website redesign. VIAble Ventures is a part of VIA Centers for Neurodevelopment, which has programs that care for and teach youth through adults with a spectrum of neurodevelopmental disabilities. Adults with autism who are connected with VIA Centers for Neurodevelopment can choose to work for VIAble Ventures and make candles, bath salts, sachets, and other spa products. The employees are paid for their work and can choose to work however much they want, but the possible hours are limited due to a low number of sales. Our task was to revamp the website and increase revenue with the end goal of being able to hire more adults to go through the program.

More than just giving its employees a paycheck, VIAble Ventures prepares adults with autism to enter the workforce. The tasks employees are given are usually very specific, attention-to-detail focused, and allow lots of room for error. There are different jobs tailored to each person; if a mistake is made in the process, they simply clean it up and try again with no consequences. It is a low-stress and low-stakes environment where they can start learning what it means to be given directions and to work hard for financial compensation. VIA also has connections to companies that the employees can have a smooth transition into if they so desire. These kinds of programs would be necessary stepping stones to making employment more equitable for the neurodiverse.

**Conclusion**

Overall, autistic adults will have more opportunities and less unemployment if corporations are willing to make changes to accommodate for neurodiversity. This includes reworked role requirements and promotion systems, special attention to office atmosphere, and more non-profit training programs that can connect candidates to employers with roles that they can succeed in. This is an important issue because diversity in the workplace is proven to improve outcomes (Risby, 2021) and neurodiversity is just another expression of each person's unique human experience. An employee with autism can be an asset, not a burden, to a company if they are put into a position that requires attention to detail and a strong work ethic. Increasing pay and the number of job listings for these kinds of jobs will demonstrate care for this vulnerable community.

The main limitation of the work presented in this paper is the fact that companies are led primarily by their finances. To suggest, for example, that an employee should be given a "buddy" that is paid to take care of them at work may be assuming too much of a CEO that just wants

their company to stay afloat. But if an employer can understand the great value an autistic employee can bring to their company, they will hopefully see that some of these sacrifices could easily become long-term gains for them. Additionally, it would be making a dent in the problem of unemployment for the neurodiverse and broadly improving our economy.

Bringing in diverse perspectives will enrich the solutions a company is able to provide. There could be a future where employers see a neurological disorder not as a curse that will limit a person's employability, but rather as a distinctive lens through which they could see their work. To make this future a reality, companies need to start small and be willing to adjust their practices - one person at a time.

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