

Make Your Workplace More Accommodating For Autistic Employees



By Jim McKinley

Autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) are very prevalent in the United States. One in 68 children is diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder, according to the Centers for Disease Control's autism prevalence report in 2016. The number was unchanged from the previous report in 2014. That means that there are many on the autism spectrum among us that need to be reached and understood, especially in the workforce.

There are 54 million Americans with disabilities. According to a national survey of consumer attitudes, 92 percent of Americans view companies that hire people with disabilities more favorably than those that do not, and 87 percent would prefer to give their business to companies who hire disabled people. This means that companies should work toward more inclusiveness in the workplace for those with disabilities, including autism spectrum disorders.

Only 58 percent of young adults in their late teens and early twenties on the autism spectrum work for pay outside the home after high school, which is far lower than those with other disabilities, according to the 2015 National Autism Indicators Report. Those with jobs tend to work part-time and in low-wage jobs.

The following are some ways to make your work environment more accommodating to those with autism:

- **Small, calmer spaces work best.** Many autistic people are overwhelmed with lots of noise or distractions. This is different for everyone, so asking people what they need is the best course of action.
- **Allow headphones.** Being able to tune out the distractions around you is helpful for everyone, but especially to those with autism. Environments where headphones are not allowed could make work more difficult for those on the spectrum.
- **Give them time to adjust.** People with autism might have a more difficult time feeling comfortable in a new environment. Allowing them time to adjust (more than usual) is helpful. They may not speak up a lot at first, but eventually they will blossom.
- **Be gentle.** When you give people with autism negative feedback, they may internalize the negativity and blame themselves. Make sure you give gentle feedback and reinforce that you're invested in their success.

- **Allow independence.** Studies have shown that people with autism who had greater independence in their work environments benefitted in ways that can spill over into their personal lives.

- **Have a predictable schedule.** Those with autism see more success if their schedules are predictable, but in most low-wage environments, this is rarely the case.

For those with a **family member** on the spectrum, all of the above is true at home, too. Keeping the place calm and soothing is especially helpful, as well as removing as much clutter as possible. Living in a quiet neighborhood will also help ease the stress of someone with autism.

Autistic people — just like the rest of us — are different from each other, and all have different needs. Getting to know those needs is the first step in being accommodating in the workplace. Spend some time talking with them and find out what would make them more comfortable. That will go a long way to diversifying your workplace. You'll also find you'll be employing some amazing workers who might become lifelong friends and employees.