

AUTISM'S HIDDEN STRENGTHS: INTERVIEWING & HIRING INDIVIDUALS WITH AUTISM

High attention to detail. Logical thinking. Perseverance for repetitive tasks. Ability to retain information. Ability to be precise. Focused. Accurate. Diligent. Timely.

These are just a few of the abilities that can make individuals on the autism spectrum extremely valuable employees to your organization. And, people with autism are among the most honest, loyal, and committed people you may ever employ, which can help to reduce your turnover and training costs significantly.

However, traditional approaches to hiring tend to favor people who are excellent communicators; well-spoken and highly social. Because those on the autism spectrum often struggle with interpersonal and communication skills, the typical interview can be challenging for them to effectively communicate their talents and suitability for a particular job. But with some simple modifications to the recruiting, application, and interview processes, you could land some very highly qualified candidates who are on the autism spectrum.

Our series of video interviews (*unscripted mock interviews filmed with candidates on the autism spectrum*) along with the following information will provide you with a new perspective on interviewing and hiring and will help you to find the best person for the job, not just the person who interviews best.

Things You Should Know About Autism

Autism does not define the person. Everyone is a person first and has his or her own unique characteristics that play a part in who they are and who they can be. The autism spectrum is very broad, meaning that the skills and strengths of each person who is diagnosed with autism can differ greatly.

However, there are some common characteristics which could include:

- They tend to be literal thinkers, so there may be challenges with open-ended or vague questions.
- They are rarely dishonest and can be brutally honest, sometimes challenged with knowing when to use a filter. Coaching with clear expectations works best in these situations.
- Needing direct, honest feedback. Respectfully tell them what to do, rather than what not to do. They are often challenged to “*read between the lines*” with what is said to them.
- Social interactions in which there are mutual interests can be enjoyable, whereas general social interactions are not typically enjoyable.
- Typically lack in idle chit chat or involvement in office gossip.
- An expectation to participate in large group activities or on teams may cause anxiety. Individuals with autism can be successful team players if you prepare them by breaking down and explaining expectations and role responsibilities to make group work clearer for them. Define the overall goal and how the person’s role fits and provides value to the larger goal.
- Money, material objects, and advancement may not be strong incentives or motivators. There is contentment in stability, predictability, repetition, and mastering skills. Work motivators are having a purpose, making an impact, nature of the work, and consistent work relationships.
- Accuracy and perfection is a priority over speed.
- Individuals with autism may think and process differently, can think outside of the box, are creative and innovative, and adept at identifying change that leads to efficiencies.
- Persons with autism will often give direct and honest answers to questions rather than scripted answers based on what they feel the interviewer wants to hear.
- They tend to be detail and task oriented.
- Prefer routine and predictability.
- Repetitive tasks are welcomed. Can easily take on more responsibility as mastery occurs.
- Eye contact may be challenging for some people. Inconsistent eye contact does not mean the person is inattentive. It can be a processing strategy.
- Be aware of possible sensory sensitivities which diminish attention and focus. These can include:
 - *Smells such as hand lotions, colognes, breath, permanent markers*
 - *Lighting, especially fluorescent lighting*
 - *Sounds (unpredictable, silent buzzing from fluorescent bulbs, or sudden loud noises)*

Some of the characteristics that are often considered red flags when HR recruiters are hiring can be characteristics common to autism. Companies that define or dismiss a person because of these characteristics may be missing out on people who have the skills and strengths to fill the job requirements.

Consider if these characteristics are ones that would interfere with the job they are applying for. Sometimes yes, but sometimes no.

- Unusual greeting, handshake, or body proximity
- Inconsistent or too much eye contact
- Reduced or flat affect or exaggerated facial expression
- Slouching posture
- Monotone or unusual voice tone, overly loud or soft voice
- Slight rocking back and forth while sitting

Interview Modifications and Adaptations

There are many simple modifications and adaptations you can make before and during the interview to help a candidate on the autism spectrum feel comfortable and communicate their skills.

Here are a few suggestions:

- If requested, provide sample questions ahead of time to assist the person in processing and understanding the intent of questions and prepare examples.
- If a writing sample is requested, allow keyboarding as an option.
- Allow candidates to have a copy of the questions in front of them during the interview. Most individuals with autism are visual thinkers and seeing the questions in writing may assist with this learning and processing style.
- Offer a glass of water. This may help to relax the candidate.
- Explain ahead of time what the interview will entail. For example, will assessments be completed? How long will the interview take? Does the candidate need to bring anything to the interview? What is the preferred dress attire?
- Be flexible with repeating or rewording questions in a direct manner and allow ample time for the person to answer. An individual may ask for a question to be repeated or asked in a different way to better understand the question and the intent of the question. Sometimes the person may pause or hesitate before answering. Often this is because individuals with autism have been coached to use their “filters,” (as a way to soften their sometimes brutally honest nature) and they are using this time to process and filter their response. This is another reason for providing examples of questions ahead of time and will help you get more complete information from the individual.
- Be aware of the environment and potential distractions. If you notice that the person seems agitated or distracted, simply ask, “Is there something I can do to make you feel more comfortable?” Common distractions include lighting (especially fluorescent lighting), noises, and scents.
- Help candidates feel comfortable. Help them to shine and share their talents!
- “Do not try to imagine how you would perform a specific job if you had the applicant's disability. He or she has mastered alternate ways of living and working. If the applicant has a known disability, either because it is apparent or was revealed by the applicant, you may ask him or her to describe how he or she would perform the job.” *[From US Dept. of Labor, Office of Disability and Employment Policy, Focus on Ability: Interviewing Applicants with Disabilities]*

Interview Question Modifications and Adaptations

Obviously, asking questions of the candidate is the core of the interview process, so it's important to understand simple modifications you can make to help individuals with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) to provide appropriate and complete answers. And, like with all candidates, it's helpful to put the person at ease by starting the interview with general information about the company.

- If possible, avoid too many behavior-based interview questions. These questions use past behavior to predict future performance. Statistics reveal that working-aged individuals with ASD may not have held an array of employment positions that they can reference. For candidates with limited experience/working history, consider transferable skills/experiences from school, volunteer placements, etc. or use direct situation based questions.

- Questions that ask potentially abstract concepts or using terminology that can have varied interpretations may be difficult for a person with autism.

For example, if you say, "Tell me about a problem that you solved," the person may think, "What kind of problem? There are many types of problems." (a math problem, a personal problem, a task at work that was problematic for a variety of reasons) Instead, ask the person to tell you about a situation where there was a challenging task at work and how he or she managed to solve it.

- It is helpful if the interview questions or process can be experiential. Can the interview be active to show performance? Could you walk around the workplace with the candidate and have other employees show their work processes?
- Before asking a question, provide an example to demonstrate the intent of the question.
For example, instead of saying, "Are you willing to work overtime?" say, "In the fall, due to large demands, we sometimes have to work 45 hours a week. Are you willing to do that?"
- Try to keep the interview questions relevant to the job. Small talk can be challenging and distracting for people on the autism spectrum.
- You may need to reword questions or ask them another way to help the person understand the intent of the question. Using a branching method where you restate or summarize the person's answer and then ask a follow-up question can help the person expand on their answer and provide the full content you are looking for. Providing examples or scenarios to clarify the intent of the question is also helpful.
- Reframe questions to be directly relevant to the job. Keep questions literal and not abstract.
- It can help to break down questions, slow the process, and use examples.
- Use open-ended questions to get the information you need.
For example, "Tell me more about" or "Can you give me an example of ..."
- Work to discover the person's passion to pull out relevant answers.

Use of Employment Specialists or Job Coaches

Some individuals with autism may request or be more comfortable with the presence of a job coach or employment specialist.

For the interview:

- Determine your company policy on accommodations such as the inclusion of a job coach in the hiring process.
For example, you may receive written request from a candidate to have a job coach present.
- Set expectations for the job coach.
For example, the coach may attend the interview but the candidate must answer the questions on his/her own. Consider asking the job coach to sit in an area of the room that is not distracting to the candidate, for example in a chair to the side of the candidate, away from the interviewer.
- You may consider asking the job coach to support you in the process by rewording or reframing questions when appropriate.
- Share your expectations with the candidate in front of the job coach to set realistic expectations.
For example, you may decide to share interview feedback with the candidate directly, but it is up to the candidate to decide whether or not to share that information with his/her job coach as he/she chooses.

For Employment Support:

- Working with a job coach can help an employee settle in and learn expectations and work strategies to be successful. Depending on the job, the environment, and the needs of the individual, they can also be a support to the employer in assisting the new employee to be successful. These supports can be during work hours, after work hours, or during break times.
- A job coach can create universal tools for communication.
- A job coach can assist in setting up schedules, time strategies, etc.

Job Accommodations:

The job accommodations that may be needed for individuals with autism can also benefit most other employees in the company. Here are a few suggestions:

- Providing comprehensive information, communicating in a direct manner, and giving clear expectations is key.
- Adjust the work space environment to limit distractions and increase productivity.
For example, avoid large open spaces. Small offices or cubicles work better. Use lamps or other non-florescent lighting. Minimize distracting smells or choose work spaces away from noticeable smells. Implement a "no fragrance" policy if possible.
- For more ideas go to: Job Accommodation Network (JAN) Accommodation Ideas
Job Accommodation Network (JAN) Accommodation Ideas for Autism Spectrum Disorders
<http://askjan.org/media/ASD.html>

Resources

Autism Research Institute: Autism Employment Resource Center

Job seekers, parents and caregivers, job coaches, and employers can access practical information that helps candidates become "job ready" and helps employers create autism-friendly workplaces.

<http://autism.jobs/>

Autism Speaks Employment Tool Kit

This link accesses a downloadable pdf: "Employer's Guide to Hiring and Retaining Employees with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs)"

https://www.autismspeaks.org/sites/default/files/docs/employer_guide_to_hiring_and_retaining.pdf

Autism Society of Minnesota: Information for Employers

In partnership with local business diversity committees, human resource departments, hiring managers and leadership, AuSM provides all the knowledge you need to attract and retain the gifts of autism. From recognizing and supporting the employees living with autism that you currently have to attracting new employees to enhancing your customer relations, AuSM provides the tools you need to become the company of choice for families living with autism.

<http://www.ausm.org/index.php/employment/information-for-employers.html>

Job Accommodation Network (JAN)

JAN provides free, expert, and confidential guidance on workplace accommodations and disability employment issues. JAN helps people with disabilities enhance their employability, and shows employers how to capitalize on the value and talent that people with disabilities add to the workplace.

<https://askjan.org/>

JAN Accommodation Ideas for Autism Spectrum Disorders

<http://askjan.org/media/autism.htm>

The Spectrum Careers

This site provides a place for employers to post positions targeted toward persons on the autism spectrum and to reach the large and dedicated workforce of the autism community.

<https://hiring.thespectrumcareers.com/>

Campaign for Disability Employment

The Campaign for Disability Employment is a collaborative effort to promote positive employment outcomes for people with disabilities by encouraging employers and others to recognize the value and talent they bring to the workplace.

<https://www.whatcanyoudocampaign.org/>