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PAGES

PATHWAYS  
FOR GUIDING EMPLOYMENT SKILLS FOR ASD

# AUTISM @ WORK

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HIRING PEOPLE  
WITH AN AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER



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## Table of contents

Introduction .....	4
Work-based learning .....	8
Job advertisement & application .....	12
Pre-selection .....	14
Interview .....	17
Offer .....	19
Follow-up.....	21
Conclusion .....	25
National Recommendations .....	26

# Introduction

## AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder that affects social communication and social interaction and might include restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviors, activities or interests.

ASD is a complex lifelong disability, defined by some standardized criteria (APA, 2013). They are:

1. Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, as manifested by the following, currently or by history:
  - a. Deficits in social-emotional reciprocity, ranging, for example, from atypical social approach and failure of back-and-forth conversation; to reduced sharing of interests, emotions, or affect; to failure to initiate or respond to social interactions.
  - b. Deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviours used for social interaction, ranging, for example, from poorly integrated verbal and nonverbal communication; to atypical eye contact and body language or deficits in understanding and use of gestures; to a total lack of facial expressions and nonverbal communication.
  - c. Deficits in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships, ranging, for example, from difficulties in adjusting behaviour to suit various social contexts; to difficulties in sharing imaginative play or in making friends; to the absence of interest in peers.
2. Restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities, as manifested by at least two of the following, currently or by history:
  - a. Stereotyped or repetitive motor movements, use of objects, or speech (e.g., simple motor stereotypes, lining up toys or flipping objects, echolalia, idiosyncratic phrases).
  - b. Insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualized patterns of verbal or nonverbal behaviour (e.g., extreme distress at small changes, difficulties with transitions, rigid thinking patterns, greeting rituals, the need to take same route or eat the same food every day).
  - c. Highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus (e.g., strong attachment to or preoccupation with unusual objects, excessively circumscribed or

- perseverative interests).
- d. Hyper- or hypoactivity to sensory input or unusual interest in sensory aspects of the environment (e.g. apparent indifference to pain/temperature, adverse response to specific sounds or textures, excessive smelling or touching of objects, visual fascination with lights or movement).
  3. Symptoms must be present in the early developmental period (but may not become fully manifest until social demands exceed limited capacities, or may be masked by learned strategies in later life).
  4. Symptoms cause clinically significant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of current functioning.
  5. These disturbances are not better explained by intellectual disability (intellectual developmental disorder) or global developmental delay. Intellectual disability and autism spectrum disorder frequently co-occur; to make a comorbid diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder and intellectual disability, social communication should be below that expected for general developmental level.

ASD affects one person every 100 births, all over the world, with no differences between countries, races, or cultures.

## **AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER AND EMPLOYMENT**

The employment of people on the spectrum is still rare today, although there have been small advances in the awareness of the business community about their value as productive workers. There are still many social and cultural prejudices and false beliefs about the ability and capacities of people on the spectrum to work. Companies usually believe that they are less qualified and less productive than other workers are. Hiring autistic people is not a priority for most business companies, and opportunities of professional development according to their qualifications and interests are extremely infrequent.

To promote access to the ordinary labour market, as a guarantee of full and effective participation of people in society under equal conditions one of the measures used is employment with support. Supported employment is defined as a set of individualized services and actions focused on the person. This way, the disabled person can access, maintain and be promoted in a company with the support that they need (professional or other kinds of support).

This kind of support is specifically aimed at people with disabilities and for people at risk of social exclusion who are at greater risk of being excluded from the labour market or have difficulties in accessing it. It provides support, throughout their working life, inside and outside the workplace and similar employment conditions (task, salary, etc.) as other workers without disabilities in a comparable position within the same company.

One of the key elements of supported employment is the individualized support they have to access, perform and develop their career. People on the spectrum need continued support during their working lives. This support may vary in frequency, intensity and typology (Vidriales, Hernández y Plaza, 2017).

Employment is a human right that influences the quality of life and the full participation of any person in society. Obviously, it is a central dimension for the life of people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) too. It is also an essential way to improve social inclusion and to enhance autonomy and independence in adulthood.

The incorporation of people with ASD into the labour market is still rare, although there have been small advances in the awareness of the business community about the importance of social diversity during the last few years.

According to Eurostat, even if people with disabilities are protected by employment legislation and receive social support from civil society, they will experience disappointingly low employment rates. With regards to autism, studies shown that between 76% and 90% of adults with the condition are unemployed. Furthermore, autistic workers usually tend to occupy unskilled and poorly paid roles.

This underemployment is the outcome of working cultures which continue to underestimate the abilities of those with ASD, and which takes into consideration only their limitations and disabilities, rather than their abilities and skills. Autistic employees may in fact prove to be a sound investment for employers provided those workers receive appropriate training and support. This approach resonates well with the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), as this recognizes that compliance with legal obligations is not in itself sufficient to improve all aspects of society. CSR recognizes that there is a need to go further and this implies investing in human capital, protecting and securing the environment, and developing

relations with all stakeholders.

Given the difficulties that employers may have in applying national regulations governing supported employment, a turn to CSR may offer a way forward. CSR requires, in particular, a human and intellectual rethinking of job positions and tasks, and a focus on the idea that work habitates: it nurtures the 'human' aspect of work which is composed of desires, expectations, needs, and capabilities, and it is these, together, which can really help the worker achieving a sense of fulfilment.

The aim of **PAGES** ('**Pathways for guiding employment skills for ASD**') is to support companies to understand the added social and market value that autistic workers can provide. In doing this, it provides practical recommendations and guidelines which can help ensure the suitable placement of autistic individuals in employment.

In particular, these recommendations will provide guidance to employers in facilitating the inclusion of autistic individuals, but more importantly aims to help them identify the appropriateness of a role for the autistic person. The recommendations are structured in nine sections, reflective of a typical recruitment exercise and the career stages that might be encountered:

- On-the-Job Training
- Advertisement
- Application
- Pre-selection
- Interview
- Offer
- Follow-up

In addition to these generalized recommendations, national recommendations are provided for the specific situations prevalent in the partner countries of Bulgaria, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom. These National Recommendations are defined by the national research and analysis done by the partners. They are tailored to the specific needs of each country.

# Work-based learning

Work-based learning schemes such as traineeship or apprenticeship are the first opportunity that both a trainee/apprentice and company have to get to know each other and to plan the transition to work.

If a company provides on-the job training activities to young people, it will come across people who may be autistic but do not have a diagnosis.

Trainees with a demand avoidant profile<sup>1</sup> will need differing interventions and approaches. Young people on the autism spectrum often need routine in order to help them understand the world around them. This means that they can find unstructured times such as lunch and break times particularly difficult.

They may need longer to process information and can also find socialising and communicating challenging. Many want to make friends, but find it hard as they lack the appropriate social skills. They are often bullied as their peers can lack awareness of autism and do not accept diversity. Some may have intense interests, or lack organisational and planning skills that can affect their ability to take part in activities during the day.

In addition to this, many will have difficulty when processing sensory information. This can occur in one or more of the seven senses. Their senses can be intensified (hypersensitive) or under-sensitive (hyposensitive). The degree of difficulty will vary from one individual to another and according to other factors such as mood and levels of stress and stimuli.

Trying to cope with the above during the working day can lead to anxiety, behaviour that challenges and meltdowns. Often, autistic trainees will not show the stress they are feeling for due to school-work transition. The behaviour of some autistic young people can be challenging in this transitory time. This behaviour is often due to an underlying anxiety, frustration or sensory sensitivity. It is not always clear what has triggered it, making it hard to control the situation and identify useful strategies.

It is helpful to monitor this behaviour to start to recognise when

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<sup>1</sup> People with a demand avoidant profile share difficulties with others on the autism spectrum in social communication, social interaction and restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviours, activities or interests.

anxiety or frustration is starting to build. The employer can then talk to them about what would help and put appropriate support in place.

Here are some simple tips the employer can put into practice to help autistic trainees who perform on-the job training in his/her company:

### **Profile the trainee.**

Find out additional information about the trainee including their sensory profile and communication preferences.

### **Match students' skills.**

Match the skills and interest of the trainee to the demands of the appointed position in order to assure that the assigned tasks are appropriate.

### **Define the training programme.**

Prepare for the induction programme and ensure the trainee is prepared and knows what is going to happen, where it's going to happen, who is going to be there, how the induction will happen and for how long, and when the working day is going to end.

### **Set the learning outcomes.**

Focus the induction programme on the acquisition of key working skills such as organisational and planning skills and on the acquisition of self-awareness and self-determination.

### **Focus on social aspects.**

Simplify communication and allow time for them to process information. The use of social stories to develop greater social understanding as well as the introduction of social skills programmes such as time to talk and socially speaking may be helpful.

### **Schedule.**

Use a routine they have created or which has been mutually agreed and make sure that you prepare them for any change to their routine.

## ➡ Provide supports.

Use visual supports to help them better understand their routine and the working day; this can include resources such as a time timer.

## ➡ Adapt the working environment.

Consider the working environment and think about how you can make it more comfortable. For example, a trainee who struggles to block out background noise may benefit from wearing ear defenders.

## ➡ Manage stress.

Use a stress scale to turn emotions into more concrete concepts. For instance, the Incredible 5 Point Scale (Figure 1) is a much used resource allowing autistic apprentices to have a time out card or exit pass to indicate to staff that they are feeling anxious and need to leave the room. A good idea may be to have an agreed safe and quiet place for autistic apprentices to go to when they feel anxiety building or are overloaded by sensory stimuli.

<b>5</b>	<b>Over the edge</b> - I'm ready to go off. I could lose my job at this point so I need to use my "help" card and ask my supervisor for assistance.
<b>4</b>	<b>Close to breaking point</b> - I can feel myself starting to lose control. I can leave and take a walk.
<b>3</b>	<b>Rumbling</b> - I'm feeling overwhelmed and having difficulty concentrating. I can ask my boss for a break.
<b>2</b>	<b>Uneasy</b> - I know something is not right. I can Self Talk (Stay Calm!) and do deep breathing.
<b>1</b>	<b>Awesome</b> - I feel good and feel confident with doing my assigned tasks.

Figure 1. the Incredible 5 Point Scale (Adapted from Buron & Curtis, 2003)

## **Communicate with parents.**

Establish good communication with parents/carers/teachers. They know the young person best and may be able to suggest interventions to use. Please, note that the parents may also be autistic.

Trying these informal techniques can help autistic young people to feel better supported in an on-the-job training programme. However, it is important to remember that each autistic person is an individual and what works for one autistic apprentice may not work for another.

# Job advertisement & application

The job advert is the first step for a company to recruit new personnel to the company. For potential candidates, job adverts can be their first interface with an organisation.

If a company wants to ensure the advert is inclusive, there are some requirements which need to be included in order for the company to be effective and successful:

## ➡ Network with ASD-related organizations.

Contact organisations or social networks that promote employment to have a clearer idea and vision about the strengths of autistic applicants as well as being supported in the planning and publicising of job vacancies.

## ➡ Clear language.

Job adverts are always concise and written in clear language.

## ➡ Essential information.

They should list essential skills, avoid jargon or unnecessary information, focusing on functions and tasks to be performed in the position.

## ➡ Simple layout.

The advert should be clearly presented, avoiding complex designs. Make sure that the company logo is visible.

## ➡ List necessary skills.

Try to be really objective about what abilities and experiences are genuinely essential for the job to be done well, and leave out any that are not. Job descriptions and job adverts can sometimes

inadvertently include items which that are likely to deter potential autistic applicants. Common examples include "must be a strong communicator", "good communication skills required", or "excellent written and spoken communication skills". If these skills are crucial for the position they need to be clearly identified and specified in terms of tasks (e.g. ability to speak over the phone, attend networking events, speak and work appropriately with people of varying levels in the company).

### **Be autism-friendly.**

Reassure candidates that the organisation will accept candidates from diverse backgrounds and encourages applications from the autism community. Conduct targeted outreach to attract qualified candidates on the autism spectrum.

### **Provide a reference contact.**

Add contact details for candidates to obtain clarity about the advert. This contact should be an email or online portal as well as a telephone contact. It is advisable to appoint someone who can prepare and support applicants on how to apply for the position.

It is crucial to specify how candidates can apply for the advertised job: different methods can be proposed such as replying by e-mail, uploading a request on job portals. However, in most cases there will be a face to face interview. Another option may be to use written communication (e-mail), however, a telephone call should be avoided: if the selection procedure involves a telephone interview, many applicants with autism will fail at this stage.

# Pre-selection

Pre-selection is an early step of the recruitment process. The aim of this task is to filter out candidates that do NOT match the job profile. The ability to identify and deselect the people that will not perform well in the job (negative selection), and to look for the best candidates that meet the job requirements (positive selection).

Pre-Selection is an activity in which the organisation or the company selects a fixed number of candidates from a large number of applicants. Selection means the placement of the right person to the right job. The process of selection is a time-consuming one because the HR managers have to identify the eligibility of every candidate for the post.

Below are some tips or recommendations about the pre-selection stage:

## ➡ Establish internal recruitment policies.

In order to prioritise employing people with disabilities and in particular with ASD, a company's overall recruitment plan should be developed. There should be more than one person carrying out the recruitment process to reduce the risk of prejudice or bias.

It is necessary to provide training in ASD for in-company professionals, especially for HR professionals, to ensure they take into account the needs of each candidate, both in the selection process and in the workplace. Keep in mind that not everything fits all so, in order to avoid a "Procrustean Bed"<sup>2</sup>, design specific actions in relation to the size of the enterprise.

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<sup>2</sup>Plan or scheme to produce uniformity or conformity by arbitrary or violent methods.

## **Define a reasonable adjustment policy.**

In many companies, there are misconceptions about the cost of making reasonable adjustments for the autistic employees, which could have a positive impact on the organisation and the work environment. Determine the company policy such as the inclusion of a job coach in the recruitment and employment process. A job coach can create universal tools for communication. A job coach can assist in setting up schedules, managing time strategies, etc. Providing comprehensive information, communicating in a direct manner, and giving clear expectations is key.

## **Communicate effectively.**

Be direct. Say exactly what is meant and identify exactly what the company wants. The more detail provided, the better the employee will understand. Put instructions in writing, and then follow up verbal instructions with an email. Avoid any indirect pattern of speech, including clichés, implied meanings, and idioms. Provide clear expectations. Provide details such as deadlines (time frames, schedules) and outcomes (what it looks like, formatting).

## **Communicate clearly.**

When communicating with the job applicant with ASD it is better to use written communication (e-mail) than a phone call. It is helpful to be systematic with clear instructions that are concrete and concise. This will avoid ambiguous and abstract messages that can create misunderstandings and difficulties for the candidate.

## **Implement reasonable adjustments.**

In many cases there is a lack of flexibility during the recruitment process. It is important to consider whether reasonable adjustments could be made to enable autistic candidates to meet company's requirements. This should guide the process of recruitment. A reasonable accommodation is a modification or adjustment to a role, the work environment, or the way things

are usually done that enables a qualified individual with a disability to enjoy an equal employment opportunity: 1) to ensure equal opportunity in the application process, 2) to enable a qualified individual with a disability to perform the essential functions of a job, and 3) to enable an employee with a disability to enjoy equal benefits and privileges of employment.

## **Extract unwritten information.**

An autistic person will not necessarily know and be able to identify and describe soft 'skills', especially communication and interpersonal skills and, therefore, they may not be able to work towards improving these, or demonstrate them on their CVs or during the interview, even if they happen to be very skilled for the position. It is necessary to review in depth the applicants' previous experience and to be aware of this in the PRE-SELECTION stage.

It is important to remember that during this stage the company is seeking the best employee for the job, and not for the job seeking procedure itself. Always keep in mind that working tends to be even more important to autistic people than it is to the rest of the workforce, as it is likely to be their primary route to social inclusion; it also offers them an opportunity to engage with their skills and interests in a structured environment with clear rules and goals.

# Interview

When employers know that they are dealing with an autistic candidate, reasonable adjustments can be implemented to the interview process. Reasonable adjustments are adaptations that are made for people with disabilities in the workplace. Sometimes it may be possible that some suggestions and requirements come directly from the candidate.

Here below, there are some key adjustments that companies have to take into consideration before, during and after the interview with an autistic person.

## Adjustments **before the interview**

### **Be informative.**

Provide clear information on what will be expected at the interview, how long the interview will take, what needs to be brought along and how to get to the interview. Describe any tasks that they will have to do and the types of questions that may be asked. Provide an opportunity for an accompanied interview where the autistic person is supported by an expert/coach of autism<sup>3</sup>.

### **Request a support.**

Companies can ask for a support worker to attend the interview to act as a facilitator or 'translator'. They could help with:

- rephrasing unclear questions

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<sup>3</sup> Fostering a barrier-free society for people on the autism spectrum, Autism Europe

- giving context to a question
- prompting to give more information.
- Adjustments **during the interview**

### **Ask for concrete examples.**

Ask clear and specific questions such as, 'Describe your work history for the last three years', rather than, 'Tell me about yourself.' Ask questions based on past experience, relating specifically to skills needed for the job applied for, such as, 'In your last job, did you do any filing or data input? What processes or procedures did you use to do this effectively?'

Avoid hypothetical ('What if?') questions such as, 'How do you think you'll cope with working if there are lots of interruptions?' A better question would be, 'Think back to your last job. Can you tell us how you coped with your work when people interrupted you?'

### **Guide the interviewee.**

Prompt and ask additional questions to get all the information needed. Tell the interviewee clearly if an answer is too long. A polite but direct way of the interviewer doing this would be to say, 'Thank you, you've told us enough about that now and I'd like to ask you another question.'

### **Correctly interpret body language.**

To be aware that body language and eye contact may be different from other candidates and this should not be interpreted as a lack of interest in the job.

An alternative to interview may be to suggest to an employer that a work trial or placement evaluation would be a more suitable method than an interview to assess whether the candidate has the suitable skills to perform the appointed role. Some employers have found that a placement evaluation – a period of work experience – is a better way of assessing individuals' talents than a formal interview.

# Offer

The approach to informing the candidate that he/she is selected for employment will depend on their preferred communication style.

The selected candidate can be communicated with either by phone, by e-mail or inviting him/her to a second face-to-face meeting

in order to have a detailed conversation with him/her to explain the conditions for starting work, the induction process and to discuss any adjustments.

In order to make a job offer, it is crucial to follow these instructions in order to ensure the positive conclusion of the recruitment process:

## Give time.

After the official offer is made to the candidate, the employer should give him/her sufficient time to consider and make the final decision. The deadline for this should be clearly stipulated to the candidate.

## Consider job expectations.

Be aware that the job offer has taken into consideration the specific needs of the appointed autistic person. This requirement is very important when providing a working environment which enables him/her to succeed in the workplace.

## Make an individual plan for placement.

Develop an individual plan aimed at empowering and supporting the employee. This plan should be drawn up with and agreed by the employee.

In order to be supported in this phase, social services can be involved in order give tutoring support to both the company and the ASD worker in making choices aimed at personal self-determination and self-awareness and in training employees who are preliminary introduced with the qualities of the new candidate.

# Follow-up

The employment of people on the autism spectrum is still rare today, although there have been small advances in the awareness of the business community about their contribution to the labour market.

There are still many social and cultural prejudices and false beliefs about their ability to work. It is believed that they are less qualified and less productive. Hiring autistic people is not a priority for most companies and much less giving them the opportunity to develop a professional career.

As discussed earlier, to promote access to the ordinary labour market for autistic people, as a guarantee of their full and effective participation in society under equal conditions, it is necessary to ensure specific and specialized support systems. One of the most relevant support systems related to work is supported employment. This methodology is defined as an individualised set of services and actions focused on the person's needs and interests that facilitate their performance in the work place. This support system contributes to accessing employment, maintaining employment and professional development in the labour market.

It provides professional support for people with additional needs in the work place to be included in the employment environment. This specialized support includes the learning of technical tasks, but also the acquisition of social and communication skills that are important in the work place.

One of the key elements of supported employment is the individualised support, adapted to the individual's needs. Autistic people ASD need continued support during their working lives. This support may vary in frequency, intensity and typology (Vidriales, Hernández y Plaza, 2017).

In order to ensure **follow-up and professional development**, we have to take into account the following issues:

## ➡ **Provide a detailed activity and time schedule.**

One of the characteristics of ASD is the difficulty to adapt to changes in the environment and daily life. Therefore, people with ASD may need structure and routine in which they feel comfortable. It is important for them to have a clear schedule, with established breaks and a weekly work plan. Details about the order and priority of each task should be established and clarified, as well as other important details, as the period of implementation or the delivery calendar.

## ➡ **Communicate simply and clearly.**

ASD affects social communication and interaction and social skills, so social interaction could be a great challenge in the working environment. For example, people with ASD may have a good understanding of the formal aspects of language but they may have difficulties with the interpretation of non-literal meanings, such as ironies, jokes, metaphors. Therefore, it is important to avoid ambiguous and abstract language. In addition, they may need more time to process verbal messages and instructions simultaneously. These instructions must be clear, direct and concise, avoiding ambiguity. In addition, it is recommended, to structure information and to give this as clearly as possible. It could be useful to use visual aids, as lists of written tasks or pictograms, and to break down every task into different phases to develop it in an ordered way.

## ➡ **Equip the employee with social rules.**

People with ASD may also have problems extracting the key information and meaning of the social context when it is not very explicit, so adapting their behaviour to the non-written social rules could be a very challenging task for them. As well, they may have difficulties understanding the diverse types of relationships and, may not adjust their language and behaviour to the familiarity of the relationship in each case. For these reasons, a facilitating resource in the work places may be to have a list of all those unwritten rules and to review them one by one with someone that can clarify them in the working context. Explaining those unwritten codes helps to avoid and prevent conflicting situations and misunderstandings. Examples of

unwritten rules could be: knowing the hierarchy of the company, respecting the dress code, prioritising tasks, etc.

## ➡ **Set a suitable environment.**

People with ASD process environmental stimuli differently. They can be hypo or hypersensitive to different sensory stimuli related to visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile or proprioceptive senses. It is important to be aware of this when hiring autistic people, in order to adapt (if possible) the working environment to the person's needs. For example, the artificial lights could be ameliorated; the person could be seated next to a window in order to use only natural light; the person could use ear plugs or other devices in order to minimize noise levels even if they are tolerable for other people.

The company must know the person's preferences and sensibilities, and should provide him or her with specific adaptations that can help to manage the environmental sensory demands.

## ➡ **Identifying social and natural supports**

Social and informal support is essential at the work place for people with ASD. This kind of support should be oriented to facilitate social participation and social inclusion, and to manage difficult situations.

This non-professional support should be provided by other workers at the company, or by working colleagues. Sometimes it should be monitored by the job supervisors, detecting emerging needs and anticipating difficult situations for the person.

During the adaptation period to the work place, the person could have a professional support that helps him or her with these demands. However, and after the adaptation period, this professional support should be substituted by an informal and natural one, provided by other colleagues or partners at the working place. The natural support role should help the person with ASD with the organisational and performance demands of the job and also with the social challenges at work.

The intensity of this kind of support could be gradually withdrawn once the autonomy and independence of employee with ASD

increases.

However, this natural support is fundamental to help people on the spectrum to manage the new demands and challenges that can appear at the workplace. It is recommended to assign a peer mentor who can support the employee with ASD, both in their work and in managing the social demands of the employment context, trying to maintain the consistency of this support person, and his or her coordination with the formal or professional support system that assists the person with ASD.

# Conclusions

This guide provides some recommendations that can help the companies to adapt and include people with ASD in the labour market.

The guide has taken into account the complexity and heterogeneity of autism spectrum disorders and the need for a coordinated approach, which integrates the employee interests and priorities; with the support systems provided by institutions, professionals and families.

It is possible for people on the autism spectrum to be included in the labour market and to perform as valuable employees.

It has been shown in different international experiences with social enterprises and cooperatives where it is possible to create real working environments and adjusted contexts that include and multiply the employees' talent.

A company that invests in employing people on the autism spectrum shows itself to be forward-looking and socially responsible. It increases the social awareness and the productivity of the company, and contributes to the motivation and engagement of its staff.

# National Recommendations

Based on specific researches and interviews made by Partners with the support of national experts, in addition to general instructions above mentioned, Partners also developed more specific recommendations in order to customize results to country features and needs.

In order to have a more detailed overview of the country situation about ASD initiatives and regulations, the PAGES Consortium invites to read National Reports available at <https://pagesproject.eu/>.

## BULGARIA

The professional realization of people with ASD is more and more in the focus of the state and the society. Achieving real and sustainable results would require constant and focused efforts at every level as well as precise coordination of all policies addressing the issue. Therefore, it is to be lauded that there are already long-term strategies in place aimed at fostering the right conditions for an adequate integration of people with ASD in the economic and social life of the country through access to appropriate forms of vocational training and employment. Several measures can be undertaken in order to make the implementation of the strategic documents more efficient. For example, targeted efforts should be exerted with the aim to make the communication and relationship between people with ASD and their potential employers less administratively burdensome for both parties.

There should be a specialized system for monitoring and evaluation of the socio-economic status of the people with ASD who have benefited from the existing policies to ensure efficiency of the applied measures and so that amendments can be made swiftly.

The lack of adequate data on the beneficiaries of such programmes is one of the main obstacles for developing and coordinating programmes for stimulating employment among

people from disadvantaged groups. Bulgaria is among the pioneers in the EU to develop Unified Information System for People with disabilities, which involves people with ASD, but its existence won't be of any help if it is not adequately used.

There should be a greater diversity in the programmes aimed at improving the employment opportunities of people with ASD which would make them more efficient. This may be achieved through better defined target groups, based on age, education, experience and other relevant factors.

Stimulus programs can be used to encourage the business sector to develop their own programmes for integration of people with ASD. People with ASD and /or their organisations might apply jointly to receive such funding.

There should be more emphasis on the integrated working environments since specialized and protected workplace are rarely sustainable and they do not contribute towards social inclusion of people with disabilities.

Funding should be more accessible to small enterprises. Currently only companies employing three people or more can apply for funding. This prevents a large amount of small businesses from participating which ironically contributes to the lack of employment opportunities in smaller and rural communities.

## ITALY

The regulatory framework in Italy shows the evolution of the approach to disability from healthcare to recognition of the assurance of 'quality of life'.

Labour inclusion extremely contributed to the achievement of a good quality of life as it can guarantee the acquisition of integrating skills, meaning a series of skills that allow the disabled person to acquire a necessary autonomy and to have the means to take advantage of the services offered by the community and to activate rewarding relationships with the most diverse elements of the life (Cottini, 2009).

Specifically referring to autism, the "normalization" process which prioritized the importance of providing support to autistic workers in order to improve their performance of 'normal' functional outcomes (e.g. social, intellectual and manual capabilities) has proved to be unsuccessful as it was motivated by the question 'what symptoms he/she has' and 'how can be rehabilitated' which tended to exacerbate disability and loose

autonomy and competence. The alternative path that national initiatives are inspiring at, is aimed at allowing every person with autism the possibility of expressing one's own personality and potential through work, in a path of social and work inclusion.

At this regards, here below we list the national recommendation to improve the labour inclusion of workers with Autism Spectrum Disorder:

**1. Incentivize work-based learning and traineeship in SMEs.** In order to prepare ASD people to work it is necessary to provide specific work-based learning placement and traineeship programme even before they enter into the labour market. Subsequently, VET Providers that can benefit for instance of the work-based learning programme (alternanza scuola-lavoro) should design ad hoc placement service in accordance with the partner business in order to develop specific working skills.

**2. Incentivize SMEs in hiring ASD workers.** If it is true that current legislation incentivizes the employment of people with disability in general with the provision of tax benefits, it is also true that main incentives and obligations refer to big enterprises while no reference is made in particular to micro, small and medium enterprises which effectively represent the main components of the Italian working environment. As a result, it would be necessary to promote the culture of labour inclusion also within this business system.

**3. Promote culture of social inclusion enterprises.** Educating SMEs (managers and other employees as well) to recognize the talent of ASD workers, means to educate them to invest in people rather than simply meet commitments. As a result, it is advisable to promote among enterprises a culture of labour inclusion which not necessarily is in contrast with profit-making and competition while instead can perfectly trigger a more attractive image which is in line with the requirements of responsible market.

**4. Design customized placement services for ASD workers.** As demonstrated by the case studies above mentioned, the design of a customized placement to be specific for each single person in accordance with the support of experts and local authorities represents the best solution to effectively place and integrate people with ASD. When speaking about ASD workers it is impossible to apply the same placement mechanism adopted for other workers while it is required to have a customized plan which is built on the specific expectations, desires, capabilities, potential and needs of the single person. Furthermore, this is

also enforced by the fact that standardized approaches do not fit Autism itself given the different aspects that this disorder – which is a ‘spectrum’ disorder - can show.

**5. Job security training customized for companies with ASD personnel.** In Italy, all enterprises are obliged to provide job security training to its personnel to avoid and manage safety risks that may occur when performing their job. In case of emergencies, it is important to provide a structured and prompt reply in order to limit consequences.

Considering that even in ‘normal’ conditions ASD workers can manifest difficulties in interacting and managing situations, it could be very hard for them to manage dangerous situation such as earthquake, fire etc. as they may not recognize the peril or show a hyper reaction. As a result, on the one hand Autistic workers have to be specifically trained about job security according to their needs in order to be able to identify a dangerous situation and behave in a correct way. On the other hand, also their colleagues have to be specifically trained in order to correctly behave and deal with their Autistic colleagues when such situations occur.

**6. Provision of accessible professional training for ASD.** In a hyper-technological work where IT solutions have changed the way we perform work and access to training, it is necessary to keep an eye on the limitations that these tools represent from ASD workers. In this sense, the employer should evaluate the benefits and eventually identify alternative solution that match better with the profile and needs of ASD workers in order to make them comfortable.

**7. National health authority (ISS) enhances cooperation with Ministry of Labour, business sector and social partners for developing specific guidelines.** National authorities should cooperate altogether in order to provide official guidelines for companies and managers in order to support the placement of ASD workers. The inter-sectoral cooperation between the National health authority and the Ministry of Labour will in fact assure the coverage of both parties’ needs facilitating the demolition of prejudice and facilitating comprehension.

**8. Develop additional assessment criteria / indicators for ASD workers: Quality of Life.**

As the effective and customized Personalized Plan, as above mentioned, is focused on the identification of desired life experiences and goals and of needed support of the single

worker, it is subsequently necessary to monitor and evaluate progress based on the effective enhancement of personal outcomes in terms of expressed in terms of:

- personal satisfaction and happiness
- improvement of the Quality of Life
- behavioural, functional, health, clinic and environmental progression

giving priority to the accomplishment of personal satisfaction and happiness rather than on the improvement of social, practical and intellectual capabilities.

## SPAIN

The special needs of persons with autism require appropriate legislative and policy development for the adoption of measures that facilitate the integration of people with autism and allow them to enjoy the most independent life possible. This should be reflected in the different areas of their life: education, health, employment, social benefits, political participation, entertainment and leisure, and so on.

According to the Labour Market Report of Persons with Disabilities (2017) the employment situation of people with disabilities is devastating. There is a very low participation in the labour market, only the 35.16% of people with disabilities are active; in the non-disabled, this rate for non-disable people is 77.98%. This fact must change.

Nevertheless, in Spain there are no actions specifically aimed to people with ASD in terms of employment. There is still too much to do:

- More state aid in training and employment specifically addressed to them.
- Make visible the collective in the business world showing their job skills.
- Design specific assessment tools for people with ASD.

- Specific training to people with ASD.
- Specific training in ASD for professionals of the entities.
- Specific training in ASD for HR professionals, to ensure they have into account the needs of each candidate, both in the selection process and in the workplace.
- More resources (financial and human) for supported employment.
- Ensure the necessary adaptations for good performance in the workplace, including supported employment.

## UNITED KINGDOM

In recent years, autism has increasingly become a more prominent issue for employers in the UK as many adults who would not have had access to a diagnosis in childhood are receiving their diagnosis later in life, often as a result in difficulties in the workplace. The National Autistic Society are a UK wide charity who support people on the spectrum and their families, and recently ran a campaign called "Too Much Information". This campaign aimed to raise awareness of the employment gap within autism and the ways in which employers could support autistic employees to enter the job market and succeed in their roles.

The research from "Too Much Information" highlighted that only 16% of autistic adults are in full time employment; only a 1% increase since 2009. This means that many businesses are missing out on the talent, skills and insight that autistic employees have to offer. Often, the reasons for these barriers into work are due to inaccessible recruitment methods, a lack of reasonable adjustments when someone is in the workplace and a lack of employer awareness. This same research also highlighted that 60% of employers were worried about getting support for an autistic employee wrong and felt that they were unsure of who to ask for advice on how to appropriately support an autistic employee.

As increasing numbers of people across the UK gain a later in life autism diagnosis, it is crucial that as many employers as possible are showing that they have an understanding of autism within work and that they are taking positive actions to develop their own recruitment and retainment processes for autistic talent.

One of the ways that the National Autistic Society is supporting employers to do this is with the launch of the Autism Friendly Employer award. This awards not only to highlight the positive work that employers are already doing but also to encourage more employers to take affirmative action and show their dedication to encouraging and supporting autistic employees. The Award allows companies to assess where they're already at, discover the areas where they need improvement, easily access training and advice and provides them with the opportunity to develop their own pathways to encourage applications from people on the spectrum and to harness the skills and ability that they can bring. In addition to training, employers are also able to access specialised Workplace Assessments that provide high level reports on the adjustments and adaptations that can be made to an autistic employee's role in order to support them to succeed.

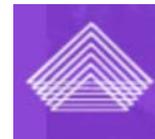
There is a broader challenge here: the employment figures for autistic adults are still relatively low and there are many more people on the spectrum wanting to work than currently employed. However, there are positive steps being taken across the UK to increase the understanding and awareness of autism within work and to open up opportunities through schemes such as these and through campaigns to raise awareness of the skills people on the spectrum can bring to work. As this awareness is increased and more of the big companies show their dedication to empowering autistic employees to thrive within their careers, it paves the way for a change in the landscape of autism and employment. The hope is that we start to see a more rapid increase in the number of people on the spectrum in full time employment, that the confidence of employers in how to work with and support their autistic employees increases and that as this happens, people on the spectrum are empowered to live more fulfilling and diverse lives.

Some key ways to empower employers to be more autism friendly include:

- Provide high level training that educates employers on the benefits of autistic employees in addition to focusing on practical strategies for providing reasonable adjustments.
- Ensuring that employers know where to go to receive advice, support and consultancy.
- Prioritise the "autistic voice" and make sure that training and consultancy approaches involve people on the spectrum
- Highlight the skills and talents that are being wasted by not employing people on the spectrum

- Ensure that autistic employees and job seekers are provided with high level support to succeed in their careers by trained autism professionals who value their abilities.

## PAGES Consortium



### **AUTISM @ WORK. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HIRING PEOPLE WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER**

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