

Tips for creating more inclusive small and medium-sized workplaces

Many Autistic people bring valuable skills, perspectives and strengths to the workplace. Creating an inclusive workplace can help businesses attract and retain talented employees while fostering a positive workplace culture for everyone.

Our research with Autistic adults and parents of Autistic employees working in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) found that positive employment experiences were often shaped by supportive leadership, clear communication, flexibility and workplace cultures that valued people as individuals. Many of these approaches are simple, low-cost management practices that benefit all employees, not just Autistic staff.

This guide outlines five practical ways owners, managers and supervisors in SMEs can create workplaces where Autistic employees can thrive while also supporting the success of the wider team.

Creating an inclusive workplace

Small, practical changes – such as providing clear expectations, being open to flexibility where feasible and regularly checking in with staff – can make a meaningful difference to employee wellbeing, engagement and performance.

Creating an inclusive workplace is not about special treatment or costly changes. It is about reducing unnecessary barriers and making practical adjustments, where appropriate, so employees can contribute their skills and strengths effectively. Many of these approaches reflect good management practices that can help everyone do their best work.

“Small businesses are much more human and people centred.”

Autistic research participant

Tips for creating inclusive workplaces



1. Be proactive, not reactive

Regular check-ins can help identify issues early.

- Regularly check in with employees about what is working well and what could be improved.
- Ask what helps them do their best work.
- Encourage breaks, sustainable workloads and wellbeing.
- View adjustments as part of good management rather than special treatment.

Ask: "Is there anything we could change that would help you work more comfortably or effectively?"

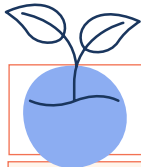


2. Make expectations clear

Many workplace difficulties arise from unclear or unwritten expectations.

- Provide clear instructions and priorities.
- Be as clear as possible about deadlines and expectations.
- Check understanding without making assumptions.
- Consider following up verbal instructions with a written checklist for more complex tasks.

Remember: Clarity benefits all employees, not just Autistic employees.



3. Offer flexibility where possible

Flexibility was one of the most valued aspects of SME employment.

- Consider flexible hours where feasible.
- Where feasible, consider how work might be organised to make the best use of employees' strengths.
- Small adjustments to tasks, schedules or workspaces can support employees to perform at their best.
- Focus on outcomes rather than prescribing exactly how a task must be completed.

Small adjustments can make a big difference.



4. Create an environment that supports success

Where practical, workplaces can reduce unnecessary barriers that make it harder for employees to do their best work.

- Reduce unnecessary sensory distractions where possible.
- Where feasible, identify a quieter area that employees can use when they need it.
- Allow the use of headphones, fidget tools, or other self-regulation strategies where appropriate.
- Give advance notice of significant changes.

The work environment can have a big impact on comfort, focus and performance.



5. Build a culture of respect and inclusion

The most positive workplaces were those where employees felt understood, valued and respected.

- Create opportunities for employees to share what helps them work effectively.
- Get to know the individual rather than relying on assumptions about autism.
- Focus on strengths, skills and contributions.
- Address inappropriate comments or behaviours that make people feel excluded.
- Foster a culture where differences are accepted and respected.

You don't need to be an autism expert. Being open, flexible and willing to listen often matters most.

"My bosses have created a very neuro-affirming place ... when I need something or when I ask for something, they usually take my advice."

Autistic research participant

Want to explore how your workplace can become more accessible to Autistic people?

[Contact Aspect's Autism Friendly team](https://www.aspect.org.au)