

Employment Barriers for Autistic People



How stereotypes shape systems – not capability

Stereotypes and misconceptions contribute significantly to employment challenges faced by Autistic people, often resulting in limited opportunities, inadequate workplace support, and ultimately significantly higher rates of unemployment and underemployment¹.

Research shows that these biases are not just passive influences, they actively shape hiring practices, disclosure decisions, workplace support and the overall employee experience of Autistic people. Changing workplace attitudes and structures – not Autistic people – is central to improving outcomes².

Disadvantaged from the beginning

The recruitment process for Autistic people remains a challenge – but before we even get to the interview stage, Autistic people face significant barriers³.

Up to half of all employers state that they would not hire someone who was neurodiverse in any way⁴, despite research showing that Autistic employees make fewer employment errors and are up to 140% more productive than neurotypical employees⁵.

This is in large part due to the perpetual deficit-oriented narratives around autism at work⁶, with employers continuing to favour the “neurotypical personality”, with factors irrelevant to job performance being preferred⁷.

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The burden of masking

In an attempt to avoid discrimination, social isolation or bullying, Autistic people invest significant time and cognitive effort into masking or camouflaging Autistic traits at work³.

For example, avoiding stimming behaviours which act as regulatory mechanisms, forcing eye contact even when uncomfortable, engaging in small talk, and tolerating sensory discomfort are common mechanisms for avoiding stigma⁸.

Masking is not only emotionally and cognitively taxing, but can hinder self-acceptance and lead to negative mental health outcomes.

Undoing these misconceptions and promoting acceptance is key to creating inclusive workplaces that actually reflect their employees’ diverse skills, attributes, needs and preferences.

Invalidating the Autistic identity

Stereotypes about autism are often rigid and overly simplistic, leading to an Autistic archetype which is not genuinely representative of the diverse Autistic community.

These misconceptions cause significant harm to both individuals and organisations. At work, often Autistic people have two choices – work hard to mask their Autistic traits and fit in, or risk discrimination and exclusion.

Faced with this dilemma, the majority of Autistic people are compelled to mask at work, which often leads to lack of support, misunderstanding, decreased confidence and in many cases loss of employment.

Such invalidation can result not only in increased stress and disproportionate workloads, but a fundamental misunderstanding of the individual which is at odds with their self-image and central role of autism in shaping their identity⁹.

The disclosure problem

Disclosing an autism diagnosis at work is a complicated process, and one which many Autistic people choose to avoid due to its associated stigma stemming from harmful stereotypes³.

While disclosure is frequently positioned as a prerequisite for accessing workplace adjustments, this places an unfair burden on Autistic employees to expose themselves to potential discrimination in order to receive basic workplace adjustments¹⁰.

Responsibility for inclusion must therefore shift away from individual disclosure and toward systemic workplace practices that anticipate and accommodate neurodivergent needs as standard.

Addressing this imbalance is a critical first step toward the development of employment practices that are genuinely inclusive, equitable, and sustainable for Autistic employees.

What's the solution?

Employment barriers for Autistic people do not arise from a lack of capability, motivation, or willingness to work, but from workplace systems grounded in narrow assumptions about how a "good employee" should think, communicate, and behave⁷.

These assumptions, reinforced by harmful stereotypes, continue to shape the employee experience across every stage of employment.

The solution lies in shifting responsibility from Autistic individuals to organisations, by redesigning recruitment, normalising flexible and accessible work practices, and embedding inclusive principles into workplace culture, policy, and leadership as standard rather than as the exception.

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How Autism Friendly employment can help

Together, we create inclusive, autism-friendly organisations that work for everyone. Through our partnership, Autism Friendly employment brings a structured, evidence-based approach that drives lasting, systematic change, realising workplaces where Autistic people and all employees can thrive.

