

AUTISM SKILLS @ WORK

INTRODUCTION

How Leaders, Managers and Front-Line Supervisors Can Create an Inclusive and Supportive Environment

Jonathan Pierce, PhD

This is the first of what will be a series of nine articles based on Dr. Jonathan Pierce's dissertation case study at Aspiritech, an organization in the greater Chicago area that has hired and supported autistic employees since 2008.¹ The results of this study revolve around eight emergent themes, each of which is worthy of its own article. The hope is that parents find these themes and topics useful in preparing their autistic children for employment, independence and fulfilling lives.

While much of the historical research on autism focused on childhood and adolescent phases, little work has been done on autism in the workplace and how to ensure it is a supportive and accommodating setting. It is worth noting that the prevalence of autism is increasing, and most mandated supports for the autistic community end after high school. As autistic individuals leave school and seek meaningful, gainful employment as a way to lead fulfilling and independent lives, they are finding that many leaders, managers and front-line supervisors in organizations and businesses are ill-prepared for the influx of autistic employees.

Autistic Individuals in the Workplace

Our 21st century economy is characterized by a declining workforce with more jobs available than employees to fill the vacancies. Given that fact, leaders, managers and front-line supervisors need to become aware of the unique and beneficial skillsets of autistic employees.


The goal of this article is to raise awareness of the benefits of hiring autistic individuals and encourage leaders to engage in business practices that provide supportive and accommodating work environments, particularly for the autistic community. We are currently seeing what has been termed an "autism tsunami."² There could be lasting negative consequences for various stakeholders if organizational leaders do not engage in adapting and adjusting workplace practices. These consequences will affect the autistic individuals and their immediate families and caregivers; the local and broader community, including organizations and businesses; social services, including those related to unemployment, underemployment and disability; and society as a whole.

Autism Prevalence

In a recent lecture (<https://uis.mediaspace.kaltura.com/>) on this topic, I asked attendees to stand up if they had a connection to someone with autism. This connection with an autistic individual could be through immediate family members, such as parents or siblings; other relatives, such as cousins, aunts or uncles; or friends, acquaintances or current or former coworkers. I was surprised when nearly 75 percent of those in attendance stood up.³ This example clearly demonstrates the need for supportive and accommodating work environments.

In order to get the best from their employees, leaders need to develop strategies that ensure the workplace is inclusive and free of barriers or impediments.^{4,5} Such strategies begin at the top with organizational leaders. The following are eight important topics related to the workplace needs of autistic employees that will be examined in greater detail in subsequent articles.

- 1 Advocating for Self and Others**
It is vital to create a work environment that allows and encourages individuals with autism to speak up for themselves and in which others who are not on the spectrum speak up on behalf of those who are.
- 2 Vision, Mission, Values, and Corporate Social Responsibility**
Many organizations now embed an autism focus that aligns with one of their overarching goals. In addition, individual departments or divisions are similarly adopting constructive practices to support individuals with autism.
- 3 Supporting Challenges**
Since leaders and managers may view autism in terms of challenges and any accompanying symptoms seen in the workplace, they must learn to understand and mitigate for those challenges. Autism is associated with intellectual, cognitive and social impairments, and represents a condition that affects a segment of the population that benefits from workplace accommodations and support.
- 4 Nonphysical Supports**
Nonphysical supports encompass a range of mechanisms that can make an autistic employee's work experience more sustaining and beneficial. Such measures could include, but are not limited to, the following: flexible breaks; flex time and work schedules; interviewing, onboarding and training; social activities; general supports; and a supportive culture.
- 5 Physical Accommodations**
A common view of physical accommodations is that they involve providing a wheelchair for someone with mobility limitations or a larger monitor for someone with a visual impairment. The needs of autistic individuals, however, are not readily apparent, ordinary or customary but are necessary for them to achieve their full potential.
- 6 Support Personnel**
Proper funding is required to secure additional personnel who provide social and psychological services. These may include individuals trained to support employees with autism, such as mental health counselors; coaches who specialize in social skills and executive functioning; and other employment support specialists.
- 7 Policies, Procedures, and Funding**
Once a goal has been established to support and accommodate autistic employees, leaders need to ensure that organizational policies and procedures align with the workplace needs of employees with autism. This includes appropriate funding to secure all physical and nonphysical supports or accommodations needed.
- 8 Unique Skillset**
The skills that individuals with autism bring to the workplace can confer a potential competitive advantage over those of neurotypical employees. I will take a closer look at these skillsets in a subsequent article.



“In order to get the best from their employees, leaders need to develop strategies that ensure the workplace is inclusive and free of barriers or impediments.”

It is incumbent on organizational leaders to put in place strategies that ensure the workplace is inclusive and free of barriers to peak performance.⁶ Such strategies should support and accommodate autistic employees while building on their strengths, and provide a means for employees to reach their full potential and be productive and independent in society. The need for supportive and accommodating workplaces is increasing, especially for autistic individuals. My future articles will delve into the respective topics with a view to raising awareness and understanding. Ultimately, the goal is for organizational and business leaders to release the power of a unique labor force and benefit from the competitive advantage that it offers.

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Part 1

ADVOCATING for Self and Others

Jonathan Pierce, PhD

This article is based on Dr. Pierce's dissertation case study at Aspiritech, an organization in the greater Chicago area that hires and supports employees on the autism spectrum since 2008.¹ The results of this study revolve around eight emergent themes, each of which is worthy of its own article. The hope is that parents find these themes and topics useful in preparing their autistic children for employment, independence and fulfilling lives. This article discusses how to advocate for yourself and others.

Advocating

The theme of advocating for self and others came about as a direct result of studying a workplace that was already supportive of autistic employees. Leaders at Aspiritech established the importance of accommodating autistic employees to such a degree that other individuals within the organization would speak up on behalf of individuals who faced various struggles.¹ In fact, the workplace culture saw autistic employees advocating for their fellow autistic employees and even for themselves. By creating a work environment in which employees can advocate for their specific needs, the leaders at Aspiritech were able to foster higher productivity in workers while simultaneously securing the rewards of their labor. This process is described in labor process theory.²

Disclosing Autism

Disabled employees are generally reluctant to disclose the full nature of their disability and the accommodations they need in the workplace, which can limit their contributions.³ Accordingly, an organization that focuses on employee support and accommodation needs will likely achieve higher performance from its employees. Self-advocacy and advocacy for others can prompt leaders to create an environment in which employees who need support and accommodation are not only identified but are put on a path toward receiving the support needed to maximize their potential.

Self-advocacy

Self-advocacy involves employees with disabilities informing their managers of specific supports or accommodations they need to manage their daily tasks. While individuals with disabilities are required to disclose their disability under the Americans with Disabilities Act and its associated regulations, many disabled employees do not disclose the full nature of their disability.^{3,4,5} Self-advocacy

Checklist for Employers

- ✓ Establish the importance of accommodating employees
- ✓ Create an open work environment where employees know their concerns will be heard
- ✓ Focus on employee support
- ✓ Ensure an environment in which employees are comfortable disclosing autism
- ✓ Ensure an environment in which employees are encouraged to advocate for their needs
- ✓ Do not dismiss supports that are requested

remains an important facet of obtaining the requisite support or accommodations necessary to maximize productivity.⁶

Establishing Supports

Once disclosure has occurred, it becomes the responsibility of organizational leaders to assess what supports and accommodations are appropriate and necessary in the workplace.⁷ When leaders create a work environment that is inclusive and accepts employees with disabilities, the latter feel empowered and experience fewer negative psychological effects.^{8,9,10} Employees also feel they belong and are appreciated. In essence, they feel like they are valued members of the team. This highlights the fact that leaders need to create a work climate and environment that are conducive to self-advocacy on the part of employees.¹⁰ Positive and accommodating work environments flow from an organization's mission, vision and values, and its overall stance on social responsibility.

Conclusion

To help optimize the contributions of autistic employees in the workplace, leaders need to create an environment that welcomes and supports those employees. When appropriate supports and accommodations are put in place, autistic employees feel a sense of empowerment, appreciation and belonging, which leads to higher levels of productivity and a more engaged workforce. A work environment that allows for and appreciates self-advocacy and advocacy for others will result in a workforce that is more content, well-balanced and able to exceed expectations.

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Benefits of allowing employees to advocate for their needs

- ✓ Employees feel empowered
- ✓ Positive work environment
- ✓ Higher productivity
- ✓ Feelings of belonging and appreciation
- ✓ A more engaged workplace



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Part 2

Vision, Mission, Values and Corporate Social Responsibility

Jonathan Pierce, PhD

This article is based on Dr. Jonathan Pierce's dissertation case study at Aspiritech, an organization in the greater Chicago area that has hired and supported employees on the autism spectrum since 2008.¹ The results of this study revolve around eight emergent themes, each of which is worthy of its own article. The hope is that parents find these themes and topics useful in preparing their autistic children for employment, independence and fulfilling lives. This article discusses the vision, mission, values and corporate social responsibility of organizations.

This theme of vision, mission, values and corporate social responsibility came about as a direct result of a workplace that was already supportive of autistic employees. Leaders at Aspiritech established the importance of creating a workplace that values autistic employees and the unique skillset they bring to the workplace.¹ Indeed, Aspiritech's very foundation is centered on the benefits that autistic employees bring to the workplace.

Vision, Mission and Values

It is important that leaders develop comprehensive training and learning programs that align with the mission, vision and values of the organization as a means of supporting all employees, including those with autism.² Companies should create an organizational environment based on overarching strategies that attract autistic employees and that work to retain its employees by providing a safe, productive and inclusive environment.² Leaders need to espouse the same values held by the organization.³

Aspiritech's mission statement is a good example of this goal. It states: "Aspiritech empowers individuals on the autism spectrum to fulfill their potential through meaningful employment combined with social opportunity."¹ The organization's mission aligns with labor process theory, which looks at how people work, what skills they use in their work and how they are paid.⁴

Parents and caregivers often worry about finding employment for their autistic teen, young adult or adult. The following are some key questions to determine an organization's preparedness for hiring and supporting autistic employees.

- Ask about the company's mission statement.
- Ask what training the company provides to support an inclusive environment.
- Ask what the company does to attract autistic employees.
- Ask how the company's mission statement aligns with labor process theory, which considers how potential benefit or power is extracted from employees, or labor.

Key Questions

- ✓ Ask about the company's mission statement.
- ✓ Ask what training the company provides to support an inclusive environment.
- ✓ Ask what the company does to attract autistic employees.
- ✓ Ask how the company's mission statement aligns with labor process theory, which considers how potential benefit or power is extracted from employees, or labor

One leader in Aspiritech made the following statement.

What is our end goal? Is our end goal to be a profitable business, or is our end goal to be a support to people on the spectrum? They are one and the same. We need to make money; otherwise we can't exist. We need to make our employees feel as comfortable and as safe as possible; otherwise we won't exist. So that's what we do here. Our mission doesn't only align with this idea, our mission is this idea; and it always has been and always will be, even if it means that management is sometimes really thin; even if it means that people step into a role they are not entirely comfortable with in order to accommodate, help or support somebody. It's not ever a question, and our founders are incredibly serious about being there and providing support and helping the people who work for us.



Corporate Social Responsibility

Corporate social responsibility involves businesses considering social and environmental concerns. They aim to contribute positively to society beyond just earning money. It entails taking responsibility for the impact of a company's activities on the community and the environment. It plays a key role in an organization's overall effectiveness. An organization that engages in robust corporate social responsibility initiatives will improve workers identification with the organization and the community, which ultimately benefits the organization through improved effectiveness and outcomes.⁵ A focus on social responsibility initiatives creates a competitive advantage.⁶

The following are some corporate social responsibility initiatives put in place by several well-known companies that can serve as examples of what is possible.

- **Patagonia, Inc.** is an American retailer of outdoor recreation clothing. It is known for its environmental advocacy, focusing on fair labor conditions and charitable contributions. The company is committed to minimizing its environmental footprint.
- **Microsoft** is recognized for combating climate change and supporting education. The company aims to be carbon negative by 2030.
- **Unilever** is a British multinational fast-moving consumer goods company. It is committed to sustainability and social responsibility and aims to improve health and well-being, reduce environmental impact and enhance livelihoods.
- **Salesforce** is a company that makes cloud-based software designed to help businesses. It is known for its 1-1-1 model, donating 1 percent of its product, equity, and employee time to philanthropic causes.
- **IKEA** is a Swedish company that designs and sells ready-to-assemble furniture. IKEA is committed to sustainability and has initiatives to reduce its environmental impact, including using renewable energy, promoting sustainable sourcing and creating products that are more environmentally friendly.

- **Ben & Jerry's** is an American company that manufactures ice cream, frozen yogurt and sorbet. It is renowned for its social activism. Ben & Jerry's is committed to using responsibly sourced ingredients, supporting fair trade practices and engaging in social justice issues.

Although Aspiritech does not explicitly list a corporate social responsibility statement on its website, its very existence and purpose are solely tied to hiring, supporting and accommodating autistic employees. Leaders, managers and front-line supervisors at Aspiritech “are passionate about people, purpose, and the power of neurodiversity.” Its website states: “We believe kindness drives growth and innovation. Watch it work. Aspiritech’s leadership team is committed to being a business with a mission. We strive to create a kind and progressive work environment where our team members can reach their full potential. We believe that by creating a space where innovation and people thrive, our clients and organization will thrive right along with them.”¹¹

Leaders need to espouse the same ideals as the company to create a work environment that promotes inclusion of people with disabilities.³ Values have the greatest impact on organizations when they are shared with organizational stakeholders, including employees with disabilities.^{7,8} Leaders sometimes implement supports and accommodations for employees based on core values and organizational missions.⁹ In the case of Aspiritech, its very foundation and reason for existence are to provide employment to individuals with autism who need specific workplace supports and accommodations.

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Part 3

Supporting Challenges

Jonathan Pierce, PhD

This is an article based on Dr. Pierce's dissertation case study at Aspiritech, an organization in the greater Chicago area that has hired and supported employees on the autism spectrum since 2008.¹ The results of this study revolve around eight emergent themes, each of which is worthy of its own article. The hope is that parents find these themes and topics useful in preparing their autistic children for employment, independence and fulfilling lives. This article focuses on providing support to autistic individuals in the workplace.

The Need for Support

The theme of supporting autistic individuals came about as a direct result of observing leaders and managers who portrayed autism in terms of its associated challenges. Autism is a developmental condition. While it may come with significant strengths, it can also include challenges within social settings, such as isolation, and issues related to managing anxiety, anger and emotions.² Some autistic employees also have difficulty with verbal communication, which means they are unable to request necessary accommodations.^{3,4} In addition, they may be afraid to disclose their disability for fear of prejudice, stigma or harassment.⁵

Disclosing Autism

Research shows that organizations that employ autistic individuals often place the burden of disclosing a disability on the employee.² In the case of Aspiritech and other companies that embrace and value autistic employees, leaders are aware of the challenges associated with autism and make every effort to anticipate possible supports or accommodations that may be needed. This ensures that the entire onus is not placed on the autistic individual to request such supports.

There are different types of disabilities and impairments, and they present in symptoms that can be physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, visual and auditory in nature. Autism is associated with intellectual, cognitive and social impairments, and affects a segment of the population that benefits from workplace accommodations and support.⁶ Disabilities of other types have their own presenting symptoms, such as impaired vision, reduced mobility, or speech issues.⁷

Common Challenges Facing Autistic Individuals in the Workplace

- Communication
- Sensory Sensitivities
- Social Interactions
- Routine and Structure
- Task Organization and Time Management
- Training and Awareness

Providing Support for Challenges

Leaders at Aspiritech provide supports and accommodations directly related to the specific challenges associated with autism. The organization's support staff manual addresses this concern in the following direction provided to staff:

As a member of Aspiritech's support team, one of your primary responsibilities will be to work directly with our employees, most [of] who[m] have been diagnosed with some form of social-communication disorder, including autism. Aside from social challenges, members of this population frequently have difficulties in areas such as executive functioning (planning, organizing, time management), anxiety and mood disorders, sensory processing, and regulating certain behaviors, all of which may have limited their vocational opportunities.

One participant in the study was asked about the process used to determine whether an autistic employee needs additional support or accommodation. The participant responded with the following statement:

There are situations where it is just one thing. So many of these diagnoses come with just a whole boatload of other things, and so a lot of our people have autism in addition to something else. They are autistic in addition to, and it's usually something like anxiety, generalized anxiety or depression, or a lot of obsessive-compulsive behavior.



Strategies to Support Challenges

Supporting autistic individuals in the workplace involves recognizing and addressing the unique challenges they may face. The following are some common challenges facing autistic individuals in the workplace and some suggested strategies to help address them.

Communication

Encourage clear and direct communication, and provide written instructions or visual aids when possible. Offer regular check-ins to ensure understanding.

Sensory Sensitivities

Create a sensory-friendly work environment. This can include minimizing fluorescent lighting, providing adjustable desks or chairs, allowing for flexible work arrangements, and establishing quiet zones for relaxation or concentration.

Social Interactions

Provide clear guidelines for expected behavior and offer social skills training or mentoring programs. It is important to foster a supportive and inclusive work environment.

Routine and Structure

Provide clear expectations and schedules, and minimize unexpected changes whenever possible. Offer flexibility when changes are necessary.

Task Organization and Time Management

Provide tools such as calendars, task lists or productivity apps to help with planning and prioritizing tasks. Break down complex tasks into smaller, manageable steps and offer support as needed.

Training and Awareness

Educate coworkers and supervisors about autism, including the common challenges associated with autism and appropriate accommodations. Foster a culture of acceptance, diversity and inclusion to create a supportive workplace environment for all employees.

Workplace accommodations and support generally lead to reduced anxiety in the workplace.⁸ Accordingly, when organizational leaders provide the necessary remedies for the presenting symptoms associated with autism, they foster higher productivity in employees while securing the benefits from their labor. This process aligns with the conceptual framework outlined in labor process theory.⁹ Similarly, providing the necessary supports or accommodations to autistic employees means leaders can maximize the use of rare resources, a practice that is in keeping with a resource-based view of companies and organizations.^{10, 11}

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Part 4

Nonphysical Support

Jonathan Pierce, PhD



This is an article based on Dr. Pierce's dissertation case study at Aspiritech, an organization in the greater Chicago area that has hired and supported employees on the autism spectrum since 2008! The results of this study revolve around eight emergent themes, each of which is worthy of its own article. The hope is that parents find these themes and topics useful in preparing their autistic children for employment, independence and fulfilling lives. This article looks at the provision of nonphysical supports in the workplace.

Work is the culmination and sum of all efforts put forward by individuals within organizations aimed at initiating and preserving organizations.² It is the responsibility of leaders to structure, lead and influence employees' work and labor processes.^{3,4} Organizational leaders must rely on workers to perform their tasks at optimal levels to achieve organizational goals and objectives.² As such, the former need to provide the necessary accommodations and supports to maximize employee productivity.⁵ Supports and accommodations come in various forms, including nonphysical supports. The present article confirms and extends knowledge related to the findings of a 2015 study in which employers who had previous positive experiences hiring individuals with cognitive disabilities continued to seek out those employees.⁶ In the study, the organizational leaders focused on continuous provision of nonphysical support as a means of maximizing employee performance. This created a work environment that was supportive for future employees who were part of the autistic community.

The list on the right outlines 25 distinct supports provided to autistic employees. By providing nonphysical supports to autistic employees, leaders at Aspiritech are better equipped to extract benefits derived from labor, which aligns with labor process theory.⁷

The supports most often referenced by employees include: breaks; flex time; interviewing, onboarding and training; social activities; general supports; and supportive culture. Given their importance to employees, these supports merit further consideration.

Breaks: This involves providing ample flexibility throughout a shift for breaks, especially if an autistic employee is exhibiting emotions and distress.

Types of Nonphysical Supports

- Assessing needs
- Check-in meetings
- Counseling support
- Interviewing
- Life skills
- Noise reduction
- Recognition
- Structure
- Opportunity for growth and advancement
- Behavioral support
- Coaching
- Flex time
- Onboarding
- Hygiene
- Minimal talking
- Competitive pay
- General supports
- Breaks
- Communication system
- Gender neutral restrooms
- Training
- Morale
- Patience
- Social activities
- Supportive culture

Flex time: Flexible schedules and absence policies, as well as a focus on work-life balance, are important. One of the support personnel at Aspiritech said the following to one of the analysts: “If you don’t feel good, it’s perfectly fine for you to go home. Go ahead, and thanks for coming in and trying.” This level of flexibility is vital to help autistic employees mitigate their challenges.

Interviewing, onboarding and training: Comprehensive training and development programs are essential elements of employee supports that may lead to a reduction in overall costs associated with hiring and training new employees.^{8,9}

Social activities: This support focuses on the social aspects in and out of the workplace, and on overall employee well-being. Leaders at Aspiritech established a formal employee socializing event called “Stepping Up and Out” that is also open to members of the local autism community.

General supports: This involves creating an underlying philosophy and overall organizational awareness about autistic employees and the varying approaches that can be used to support and accommodate them. It’s an environment in which all employees can reach their full potential and capitalize on their strengths.¹⁰

Supportive culture: Creating a positive and supportive organizational culture is an essential element for supporting and accommodating employees.¹¹ Leaders need to create and maintain an organizational culture that is accepting of people with disabilities, particularly since organizational norms and values predispose the organization to inclusion and support.¹²

Conclusion

The supports mentioned highlight the singular focus of leaders on creating a work environment that is conducive, supportive and accommodating for employees with autism. As noted previously, this focus flows from the organization’s mission statement: “Aspiritech empowers individuals on the autism spectrum to fulfill their potential through meaningful employment combined with social opportunity.”

One of the study participants said the following about the supports by Aspiritech:

We are sitting in a room right now that we call a sensory room. If [individuals] were to have sensory overload, we have different things in here to help them get [their] mind off what’s happening and relax a little bit. There are snacks being provided. There’s encouragement to go take walks outside; we have a Stepping Up and Out program on Sundays that motivates people to be more social with each other. So, there are a lot of opportunities that are provided here to make people feel welcomed and wanted and needed.

Parents and autistic individuals should prioritize advocating for non-physical supports in the workplace. Seeing Aspiritech as a model can help employers recognize the advantages of implementing such support systems.



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Part 5



PHYSICAL Accommodations

Jonathan Pierce, PhD

This article is based on Dr. Pierce's dissertation case study at Aspiritech, an organization in the greater Chicago area that hires and supports employees on the autism spectrum since 2008.¹ The results of this study revolve around eight emergent themes, each of which is worthy of its own article. The hope is that parents find these themes and topics useful in preparing their autistic children for employment, independence and fulfilling lives. This article considers the provision of physical supports in the workplace.

The emerging theme of “physical accommodations” came about as a result of asking study participants about supports or accommodations to the physical environment that employees receive. Support and accommodation for employees of any ability or disability may involve altering the physical aspects of the workplace to mitigate for the employee's deficiency.² Certain aspects of the physical work environment, such as lighting, acoustics, noise, smells and proximity to coworkers, are barriers that can impede optimal performance and cause an undue amount of stress. This is particularly true for autistic employees where these physical factors directly relate to challenges associated with autism, as described in earlier articles.^{3,4,5}

Employers and their staff need to recognize various facets of disabilities and provide training related to acceptable accommodations for autistic employees. Leaders who engage in positive diversity management initiatives that are inclusive toward disabled individuals can create a work environment in which employees gain feelings of inclusion and appreciation, and the organization benefits through their ingenuity and increased productivity.⁶

The table to the right outlines 31 distinct supports associated with this theme. While each represents an important element related to how leaders at Aspiritech support their autistic employees, this article focuses on those with the highest reference percentages or those that may be the most meaningful. They include: decompression rooms; fidget toys; headphones; individualized accommodation; quiet break room; social break room; and the Tardis.

Types of Physical Accommodations

- Art therapy
- Customized job
- Earplugs
- Food and snacks
- Hammock
- Massagers
- Quiet break room
- Slack room
- Tardis booth
- Workspace area – cubicle
- Blanket, pillow, couch
- Decompression rooms
- Exercise bike
- Foosball table
- Noise-canceling headphones
- Open areas
- Quiet work environment
- Sleep mask
- Transportation
- Workspace area – private office
- Casual dress code
- Dim lights
- Fidget toys
- Furniture
- Individualized accommodations
- Parking
- Quiet spaces
- Social break room
- Weighted vest and blanket
- Workspace area – open
- Workspace area – different types

Decompression Rooms

Leaders at Aspiretech have recognized various presenting symptoms in their autistic employees and have made accommodations to mitigate potential negative impacts. Aspiretech's website, which provides insight on the types of support it offers to employees with autism, states that the organization's "accommodating and understanding environment (including a sensory breakroom, fidget cubes, etc.) is designed to help alleviate stress."

Fidget Toys

Autistic individuals tend to experience sensory overload in response to the many sensory stimuli from the environment. When an autistic person reaches a level of overstimulation, the resulting behavior typically manifests itself in irritability, outbursts and difficulty communicating. The introduction of fidget toys helps reduce overstimulation symptoms.⁷

Noise-canceling Headphones

Excessive noise in the workplace can impede autistic individuals from performing at optimum levels and can cause an undue amount of stress.⁵ Noises of various types and sources, such as abrupt and sudden noises, high-pitched sounds, and various background sounds typical of work and social settings, can severely hamper an autistic employee's performance. It can also lead to mental health issues and emotional disturbances.⁸ Changing the work environment for autistic employees significantly diminishes the stressors that impede performance.⁹ To mitigate what many would perceive as normal workplace noises, leaders of Aspiretech not only provide noise-cancelling headphones but also promote their constant use.

Individualized Accommodation

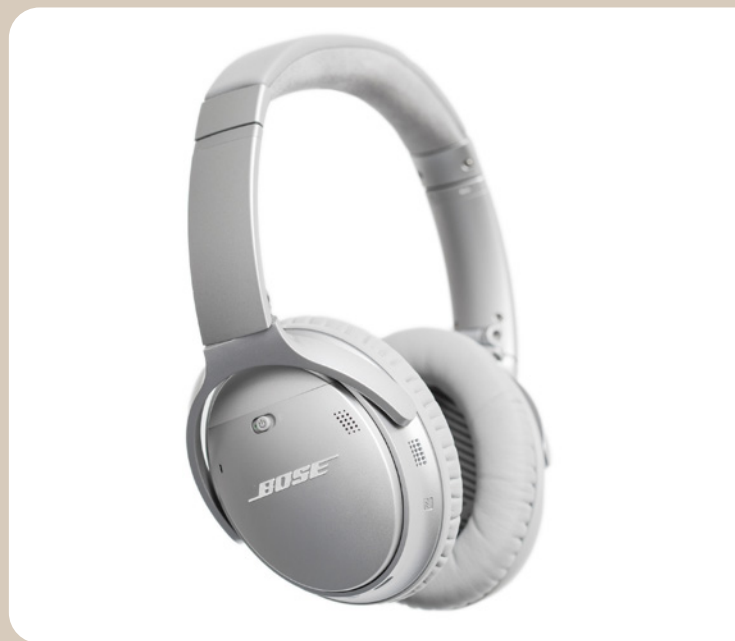
Just as every able-bodied person is different, so too is every individual with a disability. Each disability requires specific and individualized supports or accommodations. This is particularly true for autistic individuals because they often exhibit a variety of symptoms that require mitigation. Employers should tailor appropriate accommodations and supports to maximize individuals' strengths while simultaneously minimizing their weaknesses.⁹ Individualized work-life balance plans are most effective when leaders tailor them to individual workers and their specific needs.¹⁰

Quiet Break Room and Social Break Room

It is important for leaders to match individuals who have cognitive disabilities with suitable jobs and, in general, create appropriate organizational conditions that foster productivity and output.¹¹ Virtually all employees experience work-related stress at one time or another.^{1,2,3} As such, the leaders of Aspiretech established two separate break rooms for all employees: a social break room where talking is not only allowed, but encouraged; and another quiet break room where no talking is allowed. This provides yet another quiet space where employees can decompress when they are feeling anxious, overstimulated or stressed out.

The Tardis

The Tardis is a replica of the fictional time travel booth featured in the British Broadcasting Corporation's television series Doctor Who.¹³ The Tardis features a small, unlit, freestanding booth with a soft chair and a stand to place a drink on. Employees who encounter stress, anxiety, or overstimulation can enter the Tardis to decompress and have some solitude. Some aspects of an employment work environment produce excessive noise, and this can become a barrier that impedes autistic individuals from performing at optimum levels and cause undue stress.^{5,8} Autistic employees often experience issues associated with managing anxiety, anger and mood swings.¹⁴ The presence of the Tardis further exemplifies the length to which leaders will go to provide unusual accommodations to their employees.



Conclusion

As outlined above, accommodations within the physical environment encompass a variety of dimensions. No single measure applies universally to all employees, but each accommodation makes it possible for autistic employees to function at optimal levels or to the best of their abilities. Modifications to the physical environment flow not only from the organization's mission statement, but also from explicit policies, procedures and funding meant to address various aspects of employees' needs.

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Part 6



SUPPORT PERSONNEL

Jonathan Pierce, PhD

This is an article based on Dr. Pierce's dissertation case study at Aspiritech, an organization in the greater Chicago area that hires and supports employees on the autism spectrum since 2008.¹ The results of this study revolve around eight emergent themes, each of which is worthy of its own article. The hope is that parents find these themes and topics useful in preparing their autistic children for employment, independence and fulfilling lives. This article looks at the important role of support personnel in the workplace.

It is important for employers to make available proper funding to secure additional personnel to provide social and psychological services to autistic employees. This can include trained and credentialed individuals such as mental health counselors, job coaches who specialize in social skills and executive functioning, and other employment support specialists. In addition to other supports and accommodations, support personnel bridge the gap between autistic employees and leadership and neurotypical employees.

Types of Support Personnel

Organizational leaders need to support both internal managers and supervisors who oversee autistic employees, and ensure the availability of an adequate number of support personnel. Some research has identified enhanced support services as a primary means for improving employment outcomes for autistic employees.² Specialized services require the engagement of personnel who have received training that is specific to employee needs. Companies should also ensure support personnel participate in ongoing training and development related to assisting and accommodating autistic employees. Additional research has indicated that a common barrier for individuals with disabilities is lack of knowledge on the part of supervisors regarding the provision of accommodations.³ This is why it is important for supervisors to have direct knowledge or training associated with autism. It helps remove this barrier for autistic employees.

The importance of integrating specialized support personnel within Aspiritech is reflected in the number of individuals who serve in that capacity or who are better equipped to help autistic employees through personal experience with autism. This aligns with the conceptual framework of resource-based theory which taps into underused, unused or rare resources.^{4,5} The table below shows some of the key support personnel that make a difference at Aspiritech. They include

Types of Support Personnel

- Autism Specialist
- Community Support
- External Support
- Social Worker
- Job Coach
- Tech Specialist
- Therapist
- Counselor
- Psychologist
- Psychiatrist

internal staff hired by the leaders, and external personnel who typically associate directly with autistic individuals and their families, such as therapists, counselors, psychologists or psychiatrists.

Autism Specialist

Community Support

External Support

Social Worker

Job Coach

Tech Specialist

Autism Specialists

By availing themselves of philanthropic and private giving, leaders should hire autism specialists who focus their efforts on various needs.

Such specialists can provide: job coaching; workplace accommodations; and counseling and support. They can also offer free vocational training programs and serve as resources and information sources for the broader community. Their involvement can also encompass social activities through the “Stepping Up and Out” social enrichment program, or similar programs, and staff workshops in team-building, health and fitness, communication, art therapy and more.

Aspiritech’s website states the following: “Our nonprofit status enables tax deductible contributions which support our training programs, autism specialists and accommodations to ensure the optimal performance of our Test Engineers, and assures high quality work by employing neurotypical managers and autism specialists who make sure that the work proceeds efficiently.”

Community Support

By collaborating with various community organizations and members, leaders of Aspiritech are able to host or participate in various community events, including lectures by well-known authors in the field of autism, collaboration with local universities that have established centers for autism research, and attendance at various employment summits throughout the community. Aspiritech’s support staff manual states that “having a strong community presence also benefits Aspiritech by putting us on the radar of potential business clients, prospective employees, potential donors, and the media.”

Job Coach and Tech Specialist

When one study participant was asked about his role in providing support or accommodation to employees with high-functioning autism, he replied:

My role is as a Job Coach and Technical Support Specialist at Aspiritech. My role didn’t exist before, and I think there is a desperate need for job coaching in this sort of atmosphere to help people [gain] confidence in what they are doing and direction and assurance that they are on the right path to accomplishing their goals. But also they are in a management role to ensure that they are doing things appropriately, following the correct technical guidelines on some of the complicated work that we do. At the moment, I am helping lead a project for one of our clients. There are 24 individuals who I’m helping manage who are all on the autism spectrum, and I answer simple how-to questions for troubleshooting technical issues with this client. I also get a little head start to learn about new items that we’re [working on] and maybe easily explain those things that may be a little bit complicated or lack directions that were created. I, by no means, am the main manager of anyone. I would consider two of my colleagues who are on the autism spectrum to be the leaders of this project, and I am more of a helping hand and guide to make sure that they’re meeting their goals. The role of the job coach is foundational to the success of autistic employees. Whereas most employees function adequately within the confines of organizational parameters, employees with autism often face ongoing and unexpected issues due, in part, to the fact that autism is not cured, but rather, mitigated for.



When one top leader at Aspiritech was asked what process determines whether an autistic employee needs support or accommodation, she replied:

It's been fantastic hiring the job coach. We need more job coaches who provide hands-on help technically with their work, more than anyone else, and we probably will have more job coaches as we go along. So that's very helpful. First of all, sometimes they say that they need help; some of them say they need more; they just have no self-sense of what they need. Some never ask for help. It's either because of communication barriers, or they don't want to appear like they need help. So, you really have to look at their work output, which the job coach looks at. A lot of times their peers will say, "So-and-so is struggling," "So-and-so is pounding on the desk again," or "So-and-so is raising his or her voice and I can't focus." So even if you don't observe it, sometimes someone will come.

Working Together

Another study participant made the following special mention of various support personnel that leaders hire.

"It's mostly just observational. We have our Social Worker and Program Services Specialist, and then my time right now is technically 25 percent on the support side depending upon the day, and it's also for the managers if they are noticing something coming up. The Program Services Specialist and Social Worker, Counselor, meet regularly with each Analyst to talk about any things that are coming up."

While the role of internal or external support personnel was not a central focus of this study, it is interesting to note that leaders not only allow their inclusion during interviews and training but also collaborate with them as needed to identify specific support or accommodation needs of autistic employees. Companies can use Aspiritech as an example of how to engage support personnel through an employee's entire lifecycle, from the hiring, interview and onboarding process, through to full integration into organizational life.

Conclusion

As the themes and narratives in this article illustrate, companies should strive to have a wide variety of support and accommodations, including necessary support personnel who are central to assisting autistic employees. Leaders must first determine the types of situations they may encounter as a result of hiring autistic employees, and then commit to providing the necessary support personnel who can help mitigate the various challenges that autistic employees face in the workplace.

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Part 7

POLICIES, PROCEDURES AND FUNDING

Jonathan Pierce, PhD

This is an article based on Dr. Pierce's dissertation case study at Aspiritech, an organization in the greater Chicago area that hires and supports employees on the autism spectrum since 2008.¹ The results of this study revolve around eight emergent themes, each of which is worthy of its own article. The hope is that parents find these themes and topics useful in preparing their autistic children for employment, independence and fulfilling lives. This article focuses on policies, procedures and funding in the workplace.

The emergent view of disability is to recognize it as another facet of diversity in the workplace. Leaders need to focus on removing barriers to employees with disabilities.² Their strategies for accommodating and supporting all employees should include organizational policies and practices that capitalize on employees' strengths and minimize their weaknesses.^{3,4} Policies related to such strategies include recruitment, employment, accommodation, accessibility, retention, advancement, funding, preemployment screenings and case-by-case mechanisms that are necessary for accommodating employees.^{5,6}

Types of Policies, Procedures, and Funding

Dr. Pierce's study confirms the findings that employers are concerned about the costs of accommodations, but that a percentage of employers do have the requisite funds to provide them. The study looked at established organizational policies and procedures related to supporting and accommodating employees with disabilities. It is clear that legislation does not adequately address the needs of disabled individuals.⁷ To maximize the impact of disability policies and procedures, leaders need to show empathy, communicate their willingness to provide requisite support and accommodations, and recognize that individuals with disabilities face significant barriers in their places of employment.⁸

In seeking to understand the strategies that leaders within Aspiritech used to support and accommodate autistic employees, an analysis was done of measures reflected in interview transcripts, internal communications and document data. Some recurring topics included discussion of policies and procedures for specific supports and accommodations, and how the organization funds some of the supports. Internal e-mails and other documents also corroborated the interview data. This aligns with the principles of resource-based theory as leaders created policies and procedures that specifically helped a rare resource: autistic employees.^{9,10} The table below outlines themes related to policies, procedures and funding associated with provisions for autistic employees. This article looks specifically at those with the highest occurrences.

Federal Contracts	Foundations and Grants	Management Preparation
Philanthropy	Resource Allocation	Retention
Strategic Planning	Supports for Managers	

Foundations and Grants

Aspiritech is a not-for-profit organization that relies, in part, on revenues generated from its contract services to cover salaries, and on external philanthropic funds acquired from various private sources, foundations and grants to fund support personnel and various accommodations. All the information related to funding came from one of the top leaders of the organization. When asked about the types of support or accommodation to the physical environment that Aspiritech provides to autistic employees, he stated the following:

When we started — luckily for us — a healthcare foundation gave us money to hire a support person. Not a full salary but a big chunk of it, maybe close to 50 percent. Now at least one of the people that we support is being financed by a donation from the foundation. So, it's very important that foundations [assist] companies by giving them the money to hire people that can help. You need to educate the charitable foundations that there is a need for such a thing, and private companies and small ones already struggle with money. Aspiritech is not Facebook or Google. [We] need help for this.

As stated above, funds obtained from foundations and grants are critical to the ability of the organization and its leaders to hire support personnel.

Management Preparation

Managers and frontline supervisors must be prepared for the challenges they will face when supporting and accommodating autistic employees. Leaders should develop comprehensive training programs that align with the organization's mission, vision and values as a means of supporting all employees.¹¹ Leaders bear the responsibility for educating and training all employees, including management, on issues related to disability and inclusion in the workplace.¹²

In an internal e-mail between support personnel, a job coach mentioned two books that he was required to read in preparation for his support role over employees with autism. He stated, "The Executive Director recommended a few books, which I skimmed and read: *Asperger's on the Job* (I read a lot of this book), [and] *The Hamburger Syndrome* (skimmed through most of it)."

Preparing managers and frontline supervisors for the challenges they will face is important. Unless a supervisor enters the organization with direct experience in supporting and accommodating autistic employees, he or she will need to be open-minded and willing to receive training.



Retention

Another strategy that organizational leaders focus on when developing support and accommodations for employees with disabilities is retention. One measure that can be key to such efforts is the provision of flexible work schedules.¹³ Improved support can also lead to higher retention rates among the general population of employees that are not disabled.¹⁴

Dr. Pierce's analysis of interviews with leaders, managers and frontline supervisors surprisingly showed that retention of employees was not a central focus. The consensus among those interviewed was that leaders were responsible for providing a safe and conducive work environment during employment. Their overall objective is not to retain employees over the long term, but to better prepare them for competitive employment opportunities if employees choose to leave. When participants were asked about the retention strategies that lead to establishing support for autistic employees, the top leader stated the following: "We lose a lot of our senior QA analysts because they move on. And that is part of our mission. It's hard."

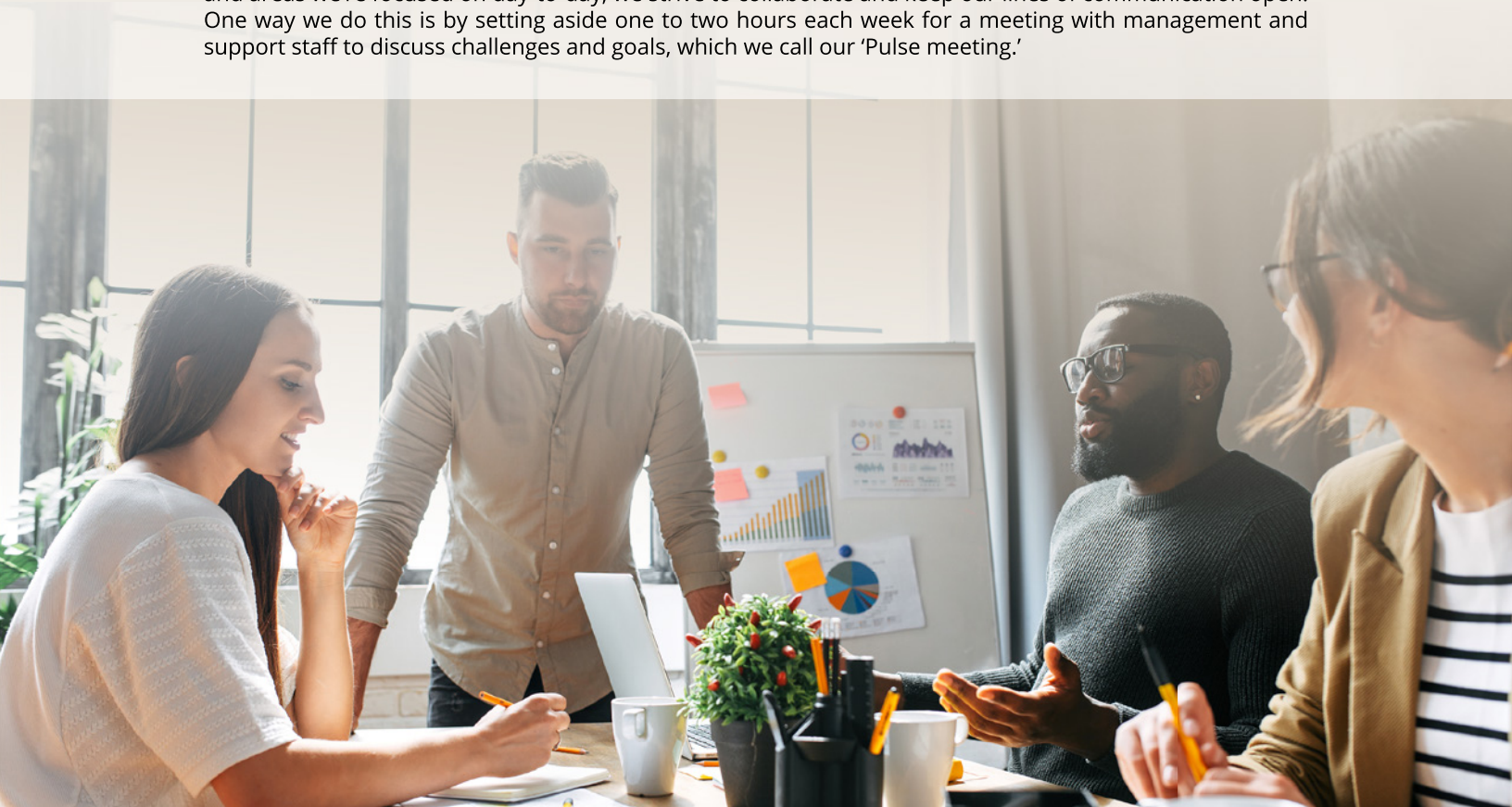
When further queried about whether or not retention of employees is a focus, she stated, "It isn't. It's to help them get gainful and meaningful employment. For some, it's here. For others it's 'now I feel really good with my skills and I'm going to go out and get a corporate job where maybe I'll be paid more.'"

Supports for Managers

At some point, all employees need additional supports or accommodations to perform at optimal levels.¹⁵ Employing and supporting the right employees is essential to attaining a competitive edge.¹² Leaders can facilitate higher performance from employees if the workplace climate is conducive, supportive and positive.¹⁶ Leaders' strategies for accommodating and supporting all employees, both those with and without disabilities, need to be all-encompassing organizational policies and practices that capitalize on employee strengths and minimize their weaknesses, including the ranks of employees who serve as leaders, managers or supervisors.^{17,18}

Within Aspiritech, managers often face challenging and difficult situations that require internal support mechanisms to help them cope with stress. Careful analysis of the data showed this theme as another vital aspect of organizational support. The support staff manual addressed this concern in a section dedicated to support personnel as they begin to undertake their tasks. It states the following:

Lastly, please know that you are part of a team that is here to support you. While we all have our own roles and areas we're focused on day-to-day, we strive to collaborate and keep our lines of communication open. One way we do this is by setting aside one to two hours each week for a meeting with management and support staff to discuss challenges and goals, which we call our 'Pulse meeting.'



Conclusion

Support and accommodation should be provided to all employees. This includes those in management or supervisory ranks, particularly since they may deal with individuals who face challenges or they may be on the autism spectrum themselves. This approach speaks to the idea that all employees need some type of support.¹⁹ To ensure employees with autism receive the support and accommodations they need, leaders at Aspiritech both invested in hiring various support personnel and established policies and procedures that align with its mission of supporting autistic employees.

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AUTISM SKILLS @ WORK

Part 8

UNIQUE Skillset

Jonathan Pierce, PhD

This is the final article based on Dr. Pierce's dissertation case study at Aspiritech, an organization in the greater Chicago area that hires and supports employees on the autism spectrum since 2008.¹ The results of this study revolve around eight emergent themes, each of which is worthy of its own article. The hope is that parents find these themes and topics useful in preparing their autistic children for employment, independence and fulfilling lives. This article looks at the unique skillset of the autistic population.

Autistic employees face difficult workplace challenges and barriers that may prevent them from engaging in competitive employment. Common stigmas and stereotypes may diminish their potential to use their unique skillsets and abilities.² When these barriers go unchecked in organizational settings, it can negatively affect the employability and overall well-being of such employees.^{3,4} They represent an untapped sector of workers that possess unique abilities.⁵ Previous research suggests these employees are not receiving the workplace supports and accommodations needed to capitalize on their talents and strengths.^{6,7} Industrial and organizational psychologists can contribute to progress in this field by examining how leaders can accommodate and support individuals with autism.⁸

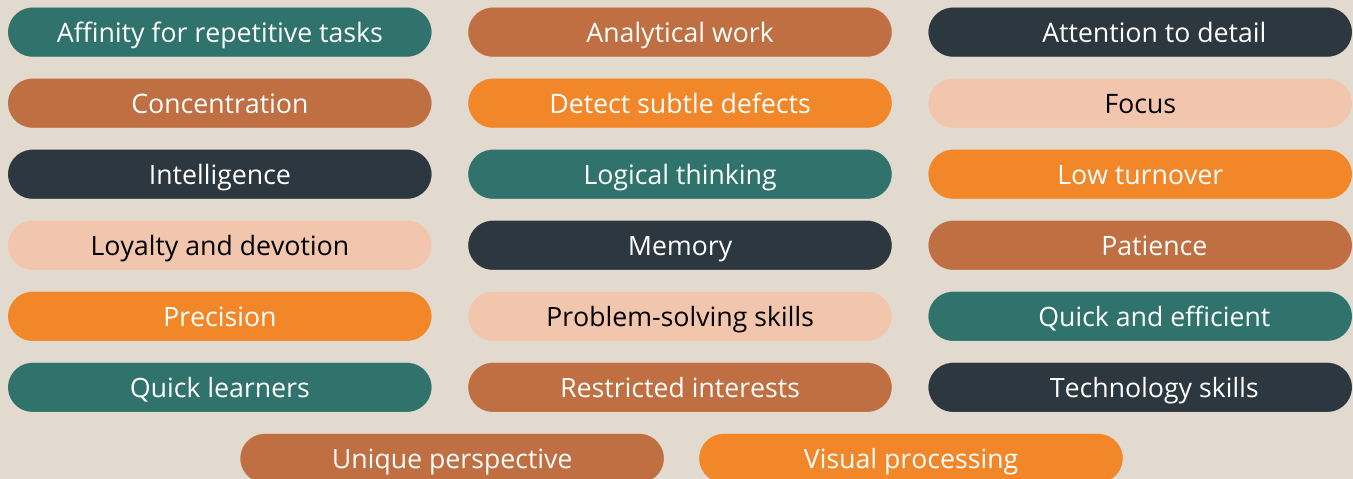
The central phenomenon of Dr. Pierce's study was the approach leaders take to providing support and accommodation for autistic employees. Leaders often neglect to tap into this source of human capital that could provide a competitive advantage if only they understood, supported and accommodated individuals with high-functioning autism in the workplace.⁹ Leaders have recognized the unique skillset such employees bring to the workplace but lack strategies for supporting and accommodating them.³ To reach maximum productivity from employees, leaders and managers must both ensure the work environment is free of barriers that impede productivity and provide all employees with the proper tools, supports and accommodations necessary to fulfill their job requirements.¹⁰ Organizational leaders can maximize their competitive edge by understanding this underserved population of employees, strategizing how to create a work environment that taps into this population's strengths and learning how to minimize different weaknesses.¹¹ It is worth noting that a focus on support and accommodation may also be of benefit to all employees, including those without disabilities.^{12,9}

Unique Skills

A unique skillset is what sets autistic employees apart from their neurotypical peers, and can result in a competitive advantage. Especially difficult workplace challenges, as well as common stigmas and stereotypes, can diminish the potential of autistic employees to use their unique skillsets and abilities.¹³ Their unique skillsets that can offer a competitive advantage include keen attention to detail, an ability to detect patterns, and excellent visual recognition skills.³ They are trustworthy, efficient, consistent, precise, and have outstanding skills in visual processing, visual thinking and information processing.⁶ Leaders who capitalize on the unique skillset

of this population and create a work environment that is supportive and conducive are able to draw on the skills and abilities of employees who have traditionally not been valued, creating a competitive advantage and increased organizational performance.^{14,15}

Throughout the information-gathering and analysis process of this study, interview participants spoke of the unique skillsets that autistic employees possess. Various documents and artifacts obtained from managers at Aspiritech also pointed to the particular skills that autistic employees bring to the workplace. These skillsets emerged as the eighth and final theme. The table below illustrates 20 unique skills that autistic employees tend to possess. While each skill is important and represents a potential competitive differentiation for organizations, some of the skills with the highest percentage of references include: an affinity for repetitive tasks; attention to detail; an ability to detect subtle defects; focus; precision; and technology skills. Leaders employ these unique skills in ways that create a competitive advantage.



Aspiritech’s website highlights the unique skillset its employees bring to the workplace. One section of the website states:

Aspiritech harnesses the strengths of people with high functioning autism – attention to detail, precision, an affinity for repetitive tasks, outstanding technology skills – and provides our Test Engineers with a combination of intensive training, structure, and support to mitigate potential workplace challenges.

Another section of the website states the following:

Aspiritech provides high quality, competitively-priced, domestic software testing and other quality assurance (QA) services. We do this by harnessing the strengths of people with high functioning autism – attention to detail, precision, an affinity for repetitive tasks, outstanding technology skills Aspiritech’s Test Engineers learn quickly, are experienced in testing a diverse array of technologies.

The awareness of the unique skillset does not merely reside within the organization itself. A testimonial from a client company offered the following:

Aspiritech’s partnership with Astella seamlessly merges proficiency, creativity and corporate social responsibility. By harnessing the strengths of adults with high functioning autism – attention to detail, precision, an affinity for repetitive tasks and outstanding technology skills – Aspiritech is providing high quality domestic software testing and other quality assurance services to Astella.

Aspiritech’s website also outlines the detailed qualifications of applicants who wish to seek employment with the organization. They include: intellectual curiosity and the ability to approach problems creatively and think “outside of the box”; strong analytical and problem-solving skills; be well acquainted with and an avid user of technology; dedication to continuous learning, quality work, self-development and providing best-in-class service to [the organization’s] clients; an ability to communicate effectively in writing; strong observational skills, attention to detail and the ability to maintain focus; and the ability to work both individually and as part of a team.

The organization’s support staff manual includes the following statement: “Autistic employees have incredible strengths, including a high level of intelligence, strong attention to detail, ability to focus intensely on tasks they are interested in, and a unique way of seeing the world and solving problems.” An internal document that speaks to the specific problem the organization seeks to address states, “While you’d think that close attention to detail, an affinity for logical thinking, strong visual processing and intensity of focus would be desirable attributes, too many companies overlook the strengths of individuals on the autism spectrum.”

Conclusion

The eight Autism Skills @ Work articles point to one overarching theme: Autistic, or neurodiverse, employees have tremendous abilities and skills that can bring a competitive advantage to their employer when they are adequately supported and accommodated to mitigate for their weaknesses. Just as neurotypical employees need and are granted various accommodations to support work-life

balance, autistic employees also need adequate support from their leaders. Since there is not just one strategy for supporting and accommodating autistic employees, no single theory from the fields of neuroscience, psychology, health, sociology and education leads to an exact explanation of how best to provide such support and accommodation. Too often, organizational leaders lack strategies for supporting and accommodating employees with autism. The implications for managers who work with the adult autistic or disabled population, or any employee with special needs, is that all employees at some point need additional support or accommodations to perform at optimal levels. Managers need to create a workplace climate that is conducive, supportive and positive to achieve higher performance from employees. When they do so, it capitalizes on employee strengths, mitigates for their weaknesses and unleashes the unrealized potential from underserved and underrepresented populations of employees.

The goal of this series of articles has been to offer readers insights about the benefits that autistic employees bring to the workplace and about how autism skills at work benefit organizations and society as a whole. The overall conclusion of the study is that organizational leaders need to develop and implement inclusive, supportive and accommodating policies and practices that capitalize on autism skills at work.

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