My Virtual World – 3D Job Environment for Autistic People
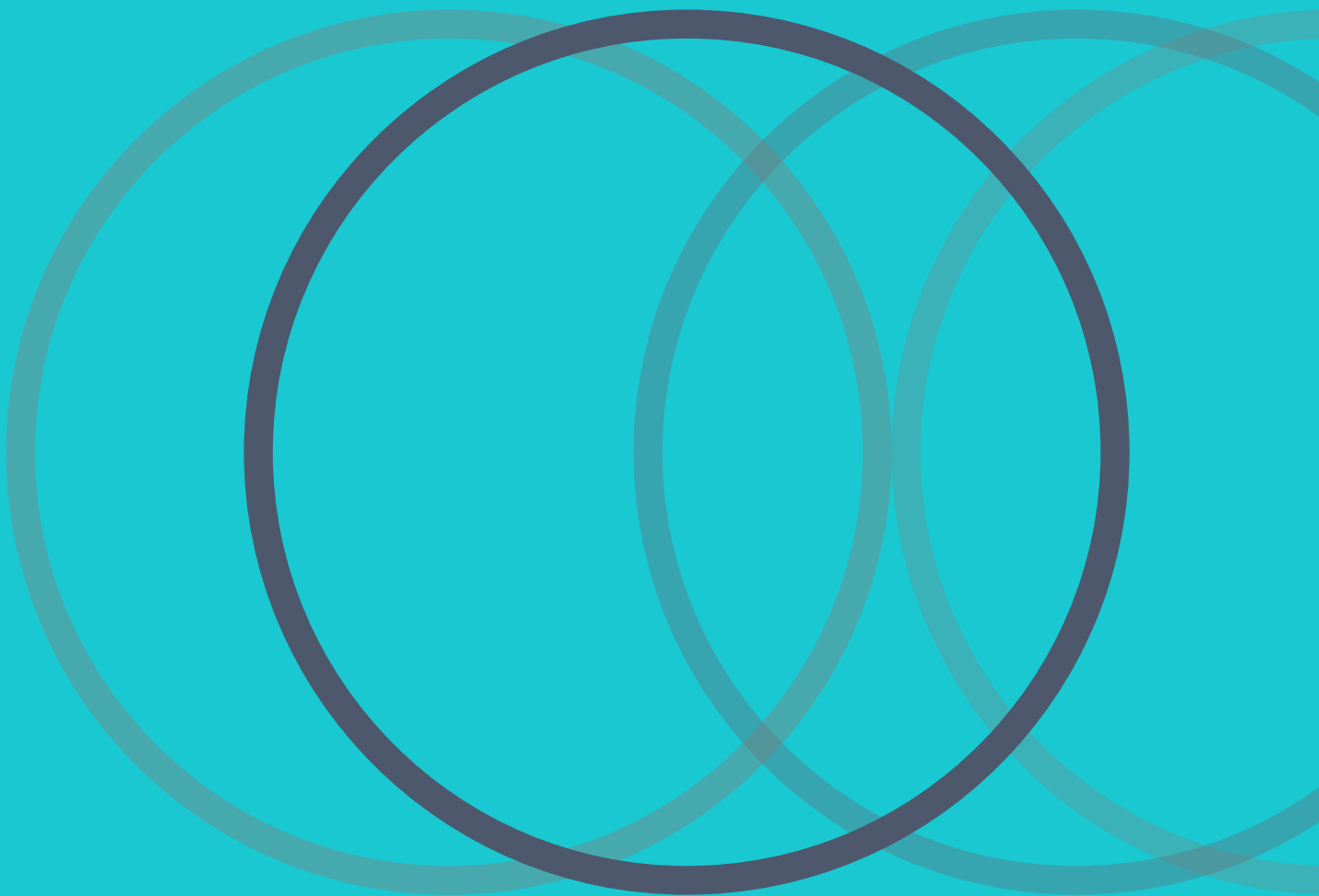
Methodology and Training Curriculum

Content

Introduction

My Virtual World - 3D Job Environment for Autistic People is an Erasmus+ Programme that is being coordinated by the French organisation called Institut Regional d'Insertion Professionnelle et Sociale (IRIPS), in collaboration with five other organisations, Elderberry - Sweden, School of Coding - Ireland, Autism- Europe - Belgium, IDP Sas Di Giancarlo Costantino and Universita Degli Studi Di Napoli Federico II from Italy.

The 3D Autism Methodology and VET Curriculum is designed to provide educational models, practical examples, recommendations, best practices, and didactic notes. The context of My Virtual World is centred around autism. Autism is a complex lifelong disability experienced differently by each affected person. An estimated 5m people in Europe are on the autism spectrum. Autistic people, irrespective of their support needs, face a high level of discrimination in all aspects of life, including education and vocational training, resulting in poor employment outcomes. Through this project, we will provide training resources for teachers, trainers and other key workers working in Vocational Education Training that can be used to help autistic people to gain more sustainable employment thus live more meaningful lives in the long term. The project will address the issues and needs within VET so that there is a link that bridges the gap between the autistic community and the business world.

The resources in this handbook can be used to support theory into practice and give inspiration through the following areas:

Educational Essays
Will give ideas for theory into practice, including the current state of immersive teaching in contemporary museums. Interactive references will provide you with the opportunity to view more information at your leisure.

Case Studies
Give a "real life" examples and accounts of what contributing partners have achieved in their own countries which will give you inspiration for your own creative practice.

Key Terms of Reference
Outlining specific key words that have been used throughout the interactive handbook with an extended and tailored definition to support.

Didactic Notes
Training tips on how this methodological framework can be used by those working with autistic people.

Practical Guides
Guide on how to involve educators, career advisors and learners in the training process. Guidelines on how to use the digital tool and guidelines to help educators create their flow of work.

Foreword

Autistic people have many strengths that can benefit the world of work. These can include for example the ability to think outside of the box, to focus on details, the ability to excel at logical and repetitive tasks as well as the tendency to be very loyal and reliable.

The right to work and employment is a fundamental right enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). Autistic people have the right to employment in inclusive settings and the right to reasonable accommodation and support to enable them to work effectively pursuant to Article 27 of the UNCRPD. The European Union (EU) Employment Equality Directive 2000/78/EC prohibits discrimination on the ground of disability in the field of employment and occupation, vocational training, membership of employer and employee organizations, and calls for the provision of reasonable accommodation.

Unfortunately, various recent studies indicate close to 80* per cent of autistic people are unemployed. This is in stark contrast with the fact that across the European Union, only around 6 per cent of adults are currently unemployed** and around 50 percent of people with disabilities at large are unemployed, showcasing how disproportionately affected by unemployment autistic people are.*** Lack of inclusive access to all levels of education and vocational training – which autistic people continue to face across the EU – constitutes a barrier to accessing employment. It is compounded by prejudices among employers, discrimination and a lack of accommodations and support to access the world of work and stay employed. This situation is unsustainable and requires urgent action.

When considering the possibilities for autistic people in relation to employment, it is thus essential to ensure that their rights are at the centre of our concerns. Moreover, the solutions developed to provide access in employment for autistic people should always be tailored to each person's individual needs, as there is no one-size-fits all solution.

United Kingdom Office for National Statistics (2021) Outcomes for disabled people in the UK: 2021; https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/disability/articles/outcomesfordisabled peopleintheuk/2021 [accessed 12/06/2023]; Espelöer, J. et al. (2023) Alarmingly large unemployment gap despite of above-average education in adults with ASD without intellectual disability in Germany: a cross-sectional study. European Archives of Psychiatry and Clinical Neuroscience, vol. 273, p. 731–738. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00406-022-01424-6

**Eurostat (2023). Unemployment statistics - Statistics Explained [Accessed 12/06/2023] http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Unemployment_statistics*

***Eurostat (2023) Disability employment gap by level of activity limitation and sex (source EU-SILC) [accessed 12/06/2023] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tepsr_sp200/default/table?lang=en*

United Kingdom Office for National Statistics (2021) Outcomes for disabled people in the UK: 2021; https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/disability/articles/outcomesfordisabled peopleintheuk/2021 [accessed 12/06/2023]; Espelöer, J. et al. (2023) Alarmingly large unemployment gap despite of above-average education in adults with ASD without intellectual disability in Germany: a cross-sectional study. European Archives of Psychiatry and Clinical Neuroscience, vol. 273, p. 731–738. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00406-022-01424-6

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Eurostat (2023) Disability employment gap by level of activity limitation and sex (source EU-SILC) [accessed 12/06/2023] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tepsr_sp200/default/table?lang=en

This publication will provide you with relevant insights into how to welcome autistic colleagues in the workplace to help bridge the employment gap and make your companies more inclusive of neurodiverse talents.

Harald Neerland, President of Autism-Europe

Acknowledgement

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the European Union

Glossary

Disability – is a broad term and refers to physical, psychosocial, intellectual, or sensory conditions that substantially affect one or more major life activities. Specifically, it can affect a person's mobility, sensory perception, communication, intellectual abilities, or other aspects of their daily life. For further understanding of disability also refer also to the _purpose_ of the United Nations Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

Intervention – refers to the wide range of strategies, therapies, and support schemes implemented to address the unique needs and challenges faced by individuals on the autism spectrum. These interventions are designed to promote their development, enhance their communication and social skills, and support their overall well-being. Reasonable accommodation – refers to modifications, adjustments, or changes made in the workplace or educational setting that enable individuals with disabilities to perform their job or participate in activities on an equal basis with others. It is defined by the UNCRPD _here_.

Grounding techniques – are strategies or practices used to help individuals stay connected to the present moment and their immediate surroundings. They are particularly useful for managing anxiety, stress, or feelings of disconnection. Grounding techniques aim to redirect attention away from distressing thoughts, memories, or emotions and bring focus to the present physical experience.

Autism – a complex lifelong invisible developmental **disability** experienced differently by each individual yet characterised by common issues with social interaction, communication, and behaviours.

Mental health of autistic people- Autistic people can have various co-occurring physical, developmental, intellectual, and psychosocial disabilities, conditions, and mental health issues. Anxiety and depression are major co-occurring mental health issues especially for autistic adolescents and adults, which can have very negative impact on their executive functioning (organising, studying, working, etc.). Mental health issues and psychosocial disabilities may result of inappropriate environment or an inadequate intervention plan for a person on the autism spectrum.

Sensory processing sensitivities – a condition where individuals have difficulties processing and responding to sensory information from the environment.
Stimming - self-stimulatory behaviours often exhibited by autistic individuals, such as hand flapping, rocking, or spinning.

Social skills training – a therapeutic approach to help individuals on the autism spectrum to develop and improve their social interaction abilities, including understanding nonverbal cues and maintaining conversations.
Neurodiversity - the concept that neurological differences, including autism, are a natural variation of the human brain.

UNCRPD – United Nations Convention for the rights of Persons with Disabilities, adopted in December 2006, does not propose new rights but clarifies and qualifies how all categories of rights apply to persons with disabilities and identifies areas requiring adaptation.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy – a conversation therapy that can help autistic individuals learn how to identify and change disturbing thought patterns that have a negative influence on their behaviours and emotions.
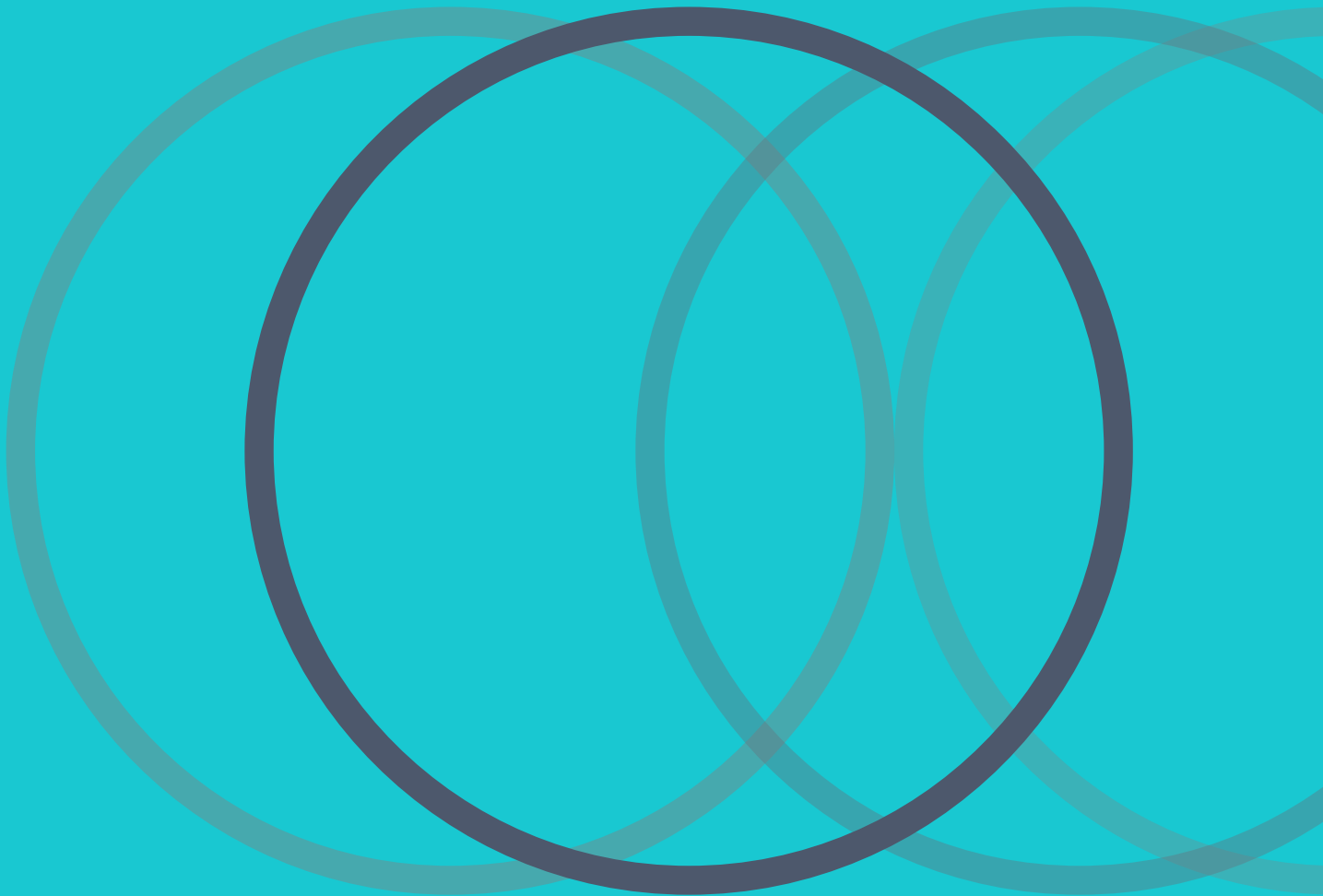
Section A – Educational Essays

Setting the Scene – INTERNATIONAL AND EUROPEAN ATTEMPTS FOR AUTISM INCLUSION

The specific situation and needs of autistic people find more legal recognition within a wider framework of rules and legal documents applied to the rights of persons with disabilities and general principle of equality.

In the wider context, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)*, adopted in December 2006, is the most comprehensive basis to be taken as a reference point. The Convention does not propose new rights but clarifies and qualifies how all categories of rights apply to persons with disabilities and identifies areas requiring adaptation.

It is binding as a "universal" convention but has also a value of a European legal instrument after having been ratified by the European Union (EU) in 2010. As a result, the UNCRPD calls on the European Union and national governments to act in the fields of employment, social affairs and inclusion when implementing the Convention. Amongst the rights, the provisions in relation to work and employment are respectively addressed in Article 27 on the right of persons with disabilities to work.

HighlightsArticle27GuidingStatesparties
UNCRPD Article. 27 is on employment of people with disabilities.

Moving to European level, rights of persons with disabilities are protected by two important human rights instruments: the **European Social Charter**** of the Council of Europe and the **Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union*****.

Both recognize rights of persons with disabilities in the fields of education and employment and oblige European countries to protect and ensure these rights.

European Social Charter of the Council of Europe			Charter of Rights of the European Union
	• a legally binding treaty for the protection of social rights • Article 15 clearly devoted to the right of persons with disabilities to independence, social integration and participation in the life of the community	• The same value as the EU Treaties • Includes a provision concerning specifically the issue of Integration of persons with disabilities	

In addition to hard law instruments mentioned, it is worth mentioning the European Union's Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030* by the European Commission (2021) addressing improvement of the lives of persons with disabilities in the coming decade, in the EU and beyond. In the Strategy, the European Commission calls on actions for EU Member States within the scope of 4.2. Developing new skills for new jobs and 4.3. Fostering access to quality and sustainable jobs. As an

*UNCRPD
** Revised European Social Charter (1996)
*** Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union

initiative, the European Commission presented a package to improve laour market outcomes of persons with disabilities to guide EU Member States and support mutual learning on strengthening capacities of employment and integration services, promoting hiring perspectives, and combating stereotypes, and ensuring reasonable accommodation.

NATIONAL INSTRUMENTS

At national level, the countries of the Erasmus+ project consortium have legal instruments in place to protect rights of persons with disabilities and autistic people in relation to employment. In this document, only some highlights in relation to employment will be pointed out:

1 France

The National Autism Strategy Plan** adopted covering period of 2022-2027 built on four main strands as the Third Autism Plan. The Plan treats "employment" with reference to fulfilment of life paths and social participation. In this context, it is recognized that access to work contributes to the autonomy and to the improvement of life of autistic adults. To this aim, the Plan lists a set of actions to be implemented such as:
- raising awareness and training for staff in the field of employment dealing with autistic adults,
- autism specific training programmes for professionals of 'Cap Emploi' and 'Services d'Appui au Maintien dans l'Emploi des Travailleurs Handicapés (SAMETH)'

2 Belgium

Belgium adopted a new Federal Action Plan on Disability 2021-2024 in July 2021 (Actieplan handicap / Plan d'action handicap)****, including 145 measures covering all aspects of life. The Plan builds on these strands:

- Mainstreaming disability equality in the Semester documents
- Disability and the labour market
- Disability, social policies, and healthcare
- Disability, education, and skills
- Investment priorities in relation to disability

As a measure, it proposes that reforms of the disability assessment system and employment support services should address the disability employment gap. There have been autism-specific action plans on a regional level in the past and there are plans for new ones.

3 Italy

Law proposal no. 2036*** introduces education and capacity building opportunities aimed at training business' tutors and other professionals from the health sectors as "technicians" for the employability of autistic people in the agro business. Besides the qualification of "technicians" for the employability and coaching of autistic people in the agro business, the proposal also includes fiscal incentives for agribusinesses accessing and promoting their support to the initiative.
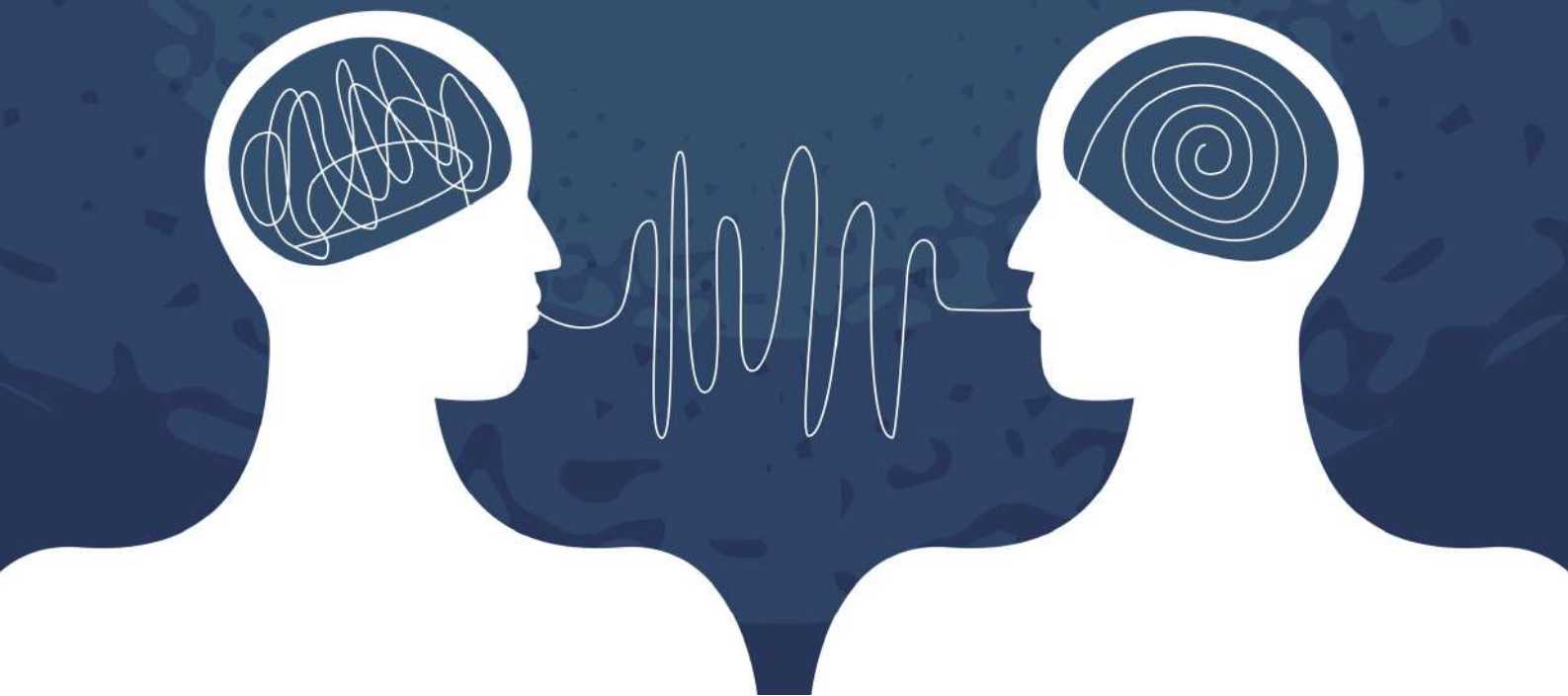
1 What is autism?

Autism is a complex lifelong invisible developmental **disability**. It forms a 'spectrum', which means that each person will experience autism differently. As a result, it is impossible to find a one size fits all solution to accommodate the needs of autistic people. Vital to accommodate all the needs are evidence-based early diagnoses and interventions. However, due to its lack many autistic people remain un- or underdiagnosed, especially girls, women, LGBTIQ people and those of colour or from national or ethnic minorities. In total, an estimated 7 million people in wider Europe are on the autism spectrum given prevalence rates estimate 1 in 100 people are autistic.

People on the autism spectrum usually face:
• Difficulties in social communication/ reciprocal social interaction
• Restricted, repetitive, and inflexible patterns of behaviour and special interests
• Executive functioning issues (incl. time management, etc.)
• Sensory sensitivities
• Preference for routine which "limit and impair everyday functioning" (DSM-5)

The International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) published in 2018 and endorsed by World Health Assembly (WHA) in 2019 and officially coming into effect in 2022 merged all "pervasive developmental disorders (F84)" into one category "autism spectrum disorder (6A02)"

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM 5) published in 2013 by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) also merged "Autism spectrum disorder" into one, while DSM 5 Text Revision (RT) published in 2022 updated the diagnostic criteria.

Language about autism and autistic people matters greatly to not stigmatise and discriminate against anyone involved. That is why acceptable language is paramount.

MyVirtualWorld project partners are all hugely aware of the ever-changing nature of Based on the preferences of the autistic communities and their families, carers, and professionals, the language has evolved to reflect two different approaches to language. The term "person/people on the autism spectrum" follows a person-first approach, in line with the United Nations for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). The term "autistic person/people'' reflects an identity-first approach, which is most often used by the autistic community in different countries. These terms are the most preferred. However, the project partners acknowledge that different languages and cultures have different acceptable languages. This will also be reflected when translating project materials into different partner languages.

However, all partners agree to avoid terms/expressions that are likely to cause offence:

1 - "suffers from" or "is a victim of autism"

Consider instead:
"is autistic"
"is on the autism spectrum"

The term "autism spectrum disorder" is still widely used by many autism professionals although it is best to avoid it because of the negative connotations of "disorder".

2 – High-functioning/ low functioning / severe autism

3 - "Asperger's syndrome is a rare/ mild form of autism".

Consider instead:

Person / people with higher (or complex) support needs
Person / people with fewer support needs

4 - "Autism is a disease/illness".

Consider instead:
Autism is a disability.

5- "Retarded/ mentally handicapped/ backward": these terms are derogatory and offensive.

Consider using the following terms instead (where it is appropriate to do so):
"people with developmental disabilities"
"people with learning disabilities"
"people with intellectual disabilities"

6- "Normally developing children/adults"

Consider instead: "neurotypical", which is widely used by the autistic community itself.
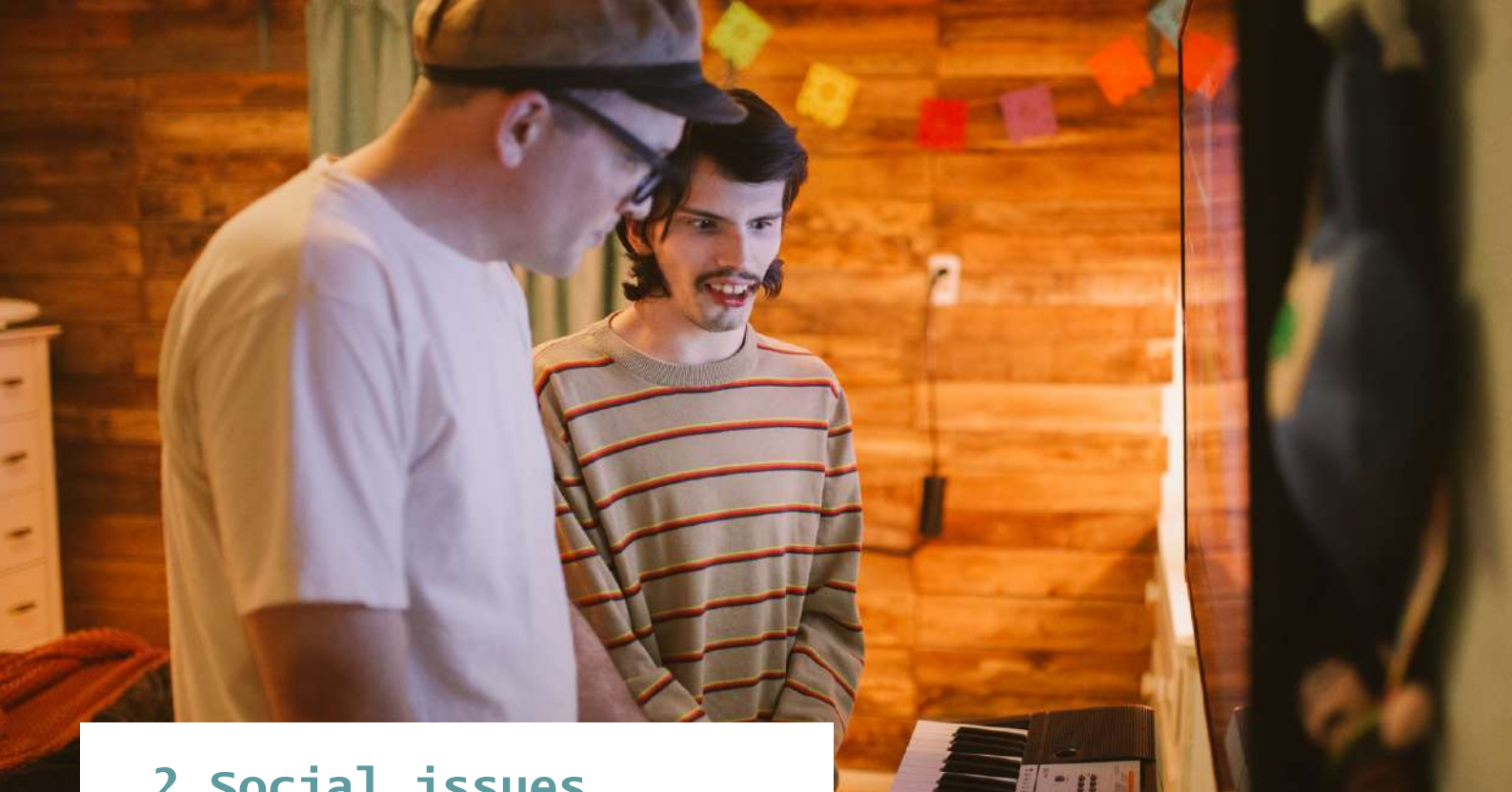
2 Social issues

Exploring the social issues associated with working environments for young people with autism.

Autistic people face several issues in the workplace, notably in relation to effective communication with their colleagues, time-management, prioritisation of their tasks, organisation, stress-management as well as due to their sensory sensitivities.

1. Understanding communication: the double empathy problem

The "Theory of Double Empathy" was developed by Dr Damian Milton, a lecturer in Intellectual and Developmental Disability at University of Kent, United Kingdom. According to this theory, when people with different experiences of the world interact with one another, they will struggle to empathise with each other. Misunderstandings will never arise only due to the perceived comprehension by autistic people alone.
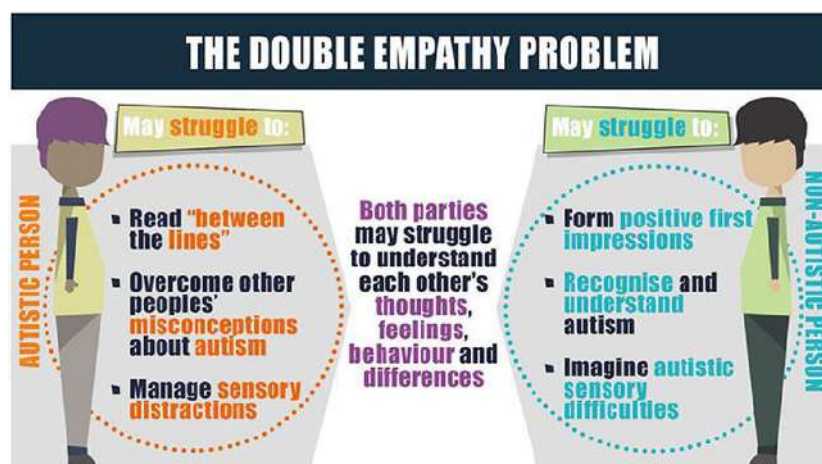
Yet, issues in communication will arise due to a breakdown in reciprocity and mutual understanding between people with different ways of experiencing the world.

The scope of this theory has broad ramifications in practice. Restricting the behaviour of autistic people will not lead to their increased well-being. Not understanding autistic people in social environments and stigmatising them will have an impact on their mental health and employability as well as their access to education and other relevant services.

2. Bridging the gap: barriers for autistic people accessing employment

Effective communication barriers

Autistic people live with a communication disability that can result in several barriers to effective communication at their workplace. If communication is not explicit enough, they might have to fill possibly very wrongly any appearing "gaps". This is because autistic people might not understand every hint, metaphor, innuendo, insinuation, or joke. As a result, they might have to spend a lot of time overthinking, wondering if they have done something wrong or upset someone else. Finally, people on the autism spectrum might possibly even carry on a trauma from past miscommunication.

Barriers to time-management, task prioritising, and organisation of work

Autistic people might face several barriers at their job regarding time-management, prioritising tasks and organising their workload. These barriers stem from people on the autism spectrum possibly experiencing difficulties with organising their workspace and materials. As a result, their work area can appear messy. Autistic people might have difficulties with planning and/or completing work within a specific period as well as predicting timeframes. People on the autism spectrum might be easily distracted by other activities and their environment. They may also have difficulties focusing back on their work after interruptions. Additionally, autistic people could experience difficulties shifting attention among tasks or even multitask. People on the autism spectrum will also face difficulties with relating narrative information or summarising stories, either verbally or in writing. Finally, for some autistic people, there are challenges with memorising and recalling information accurately.

Barriers due to sensory sensitivities

Compared to neurotypical people, autistic people tend to process the input from their senses very differently. As a result, they might often experience sensory sensitivities due to light, sounds, touch, texture, etc. These can cause great discomfort and stress. Sensory sensitivities at work may intensify in situations such as:

- Transition to new work environments or colleagues
- Changes in work schedules or routines
- Unexpected work deadlines
- Illnesses, sleeping issues or other difficulties happening outside the workplace

Sensory sensitivities may result in an autistic person seeking out the input they need or actively avoiding input they do not like. These resulting responses and reactions can be difficult for non-autistic co-workers and peers to understand.

Barriers due to stress

All of the above-mentioned barriers can lead to different forms of stress for autistic people. Individual mental health issues are a major result of stress among autistic people. The most common mental health issues for people on the autism spectrum are depression and anxiety. Some autistic people may feel anxious in their day-to-day lives due to navigating social and sensory environments that might be difficult or challenging. Autistic people are more prone to experiencing anxiety and many of them experience high levels of anxiety on a regular basis.

3. Barriers to autism-friendly workplaces: the differences in office work and home office

Autistic people might face difficulties following workplace rules and office policies when they appear arbitrary and are developed for non-autistic people. People on the autism spectrum might face issues dealing with office (work) changes. They can even experience interpersonal problems with work colleagues due to their difficulties with socialising and struggling with teamwork. Social pressure can even render the office work experience unbearable for them. In addition, autistic people might not know what appropriate conversations with their colleagues are during breaks and outside of work. People on the autism spectrum might be particularly subject to (systematic) workplace bullying by fellow colleagues, which can influence their mental health.

Some autistic people might have also chosen the wrong career path, as they might not be aware what career is fully suited for them. They might lack information as to where they are likely to run into issues. Some autistic people may be even held back from progressing in their careers because of interpersonal workplace issues.

COVID-19 pandemic lessons for home office

There were advantages and disadvantages for working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. Working from home can sometimes be a better option for some autistic people. Working in one's own space can provide quietness and fewer distractions for them. People on the autism spectrum can also experience anxiety due to a lack of social interaction. Working in an office setting may outweigh many of the benefits of working from home, although autistic people who are less social have benefitted from working from home. These people can enjoy the quiet, which can lend itself to more independence, better focus, and higher concentration. For those autistic people who did not get the chance to work from home before the COVID-19 pandemic, there are ways to make the transition a little easier.

Some tips to ensure a smoother transition towards home office would be setting hours for work time while making sure to have enough short breaks, finishing on time and relaxing afterwards by watching TV, going online, going for a walk or meeting up with someone else. It is also important to keep in touch with colleagues and for some going on a walk might be helpful. Of course, every autistic person will have different coping mechanisms when adapting to working from home. In brief, (home) office recommendations must be individualised depending on the respective needs of each autistic person.

3 How to communicate effectively with your autistic employees?

Introduction

'How can I support an autistic colleague or employee?' is a question, which is often asked in the workplace. With the prevalence of autism at around 1% of the population, many workplaces will be employing people on the autism spectrum whether they have declared it or not.

As an employer, you can help make the world a more autism-friendly place. We know that many of you are leading the way and making great progress in adapting your practice and making small adjustments that make a big difference to autistic employees.

Many autistic people have a variety of sometimes exceptional skills, that enable them to thrive in roles ranging from sales assistant to computer programmer, and journalist to statistician, to name just a few. It is important to note that autistic people can work in any profession given their interest and with the right support.

However, autistic people are often disadvantaged when it comes to getting and keeping a job because of other people's lack of understanding and support. Autistic employees may need some, often simple, support within the workplace. As well as their individual strengths and talents, autistic candidates often demonstrate above-average skills in some or all the following areas:

- high levels of concentration
- reliability, conscientiousness, and persistence
- accuracy, close attention to detail and the ability to identify errors.
- technical ability, such as in IT
- detailed factual knowledge and an excellent memory.

This means an autistic person may well be better at a particular job than someone who is not autistic. By gaining an understanding of autism, you can open new possibilities for your organisation.

Employing an autistic person demonstrates your organisation's commitment to equality and diversity and shows a positive attitude to people with disabilities. Having a diverse workforce brings benefits to staff and business alike, and managers and colleagues often describe working with an autistic colleague as an enriching experience that encourages them to think more carefully about how they communicate, organise, and prioritise their work.

Each autistic person will bring their own unique skill set and experience to work placements. Here is a list of some additional skills and abilities that you may benefit from when hiring a more diverse workforce:

- Different perspective
- Excellent attention to detail
- Strong technical skills
- Methodological and logical approach
- Identifying things that might be missed by others.
- Creative thinking
- Problem solving
- New skills and insights
- Enormous quantities of determination and tenacity

Self-awareness

No one is born with self-awareness. It is a skill that needs to be learned, refined, and strengthened over time. To be successful in their role and to advance their skill set and careers professionally, employees need to actively work to improve their self-awareness. Doing so benefits both the employer and the employees, as your workforce will be more in-tune with their needs, more empathetic towards others, and more prepared in the case of future disruption. To create a culture that truly embraces and encourages self-awareness, you will need to have a clear understanding of the varying levels, types, and approaches to becoming self-aware.

Some autistic people will be aware they are having difficulties; however, will not know how or why they are having these difficulties. In a coaching or mentoring role, as a colleague or as a manager, you can support them in exploring how some of their behaviours are impacting on others and you can help them to understand why that is. The following questions can be asked in both informal and formal settings and can be asked in one sitting or over a period. Remember that you must not anticipate the answers. The answers will be as varied as for neurotypical people. Also, remember that some autistic people need time to process information or to process questions before answering. Therefore, do not feel tempted to immediately fill a short silence. The questions you can consider asking are:

- Do you have any special interests and, if so, what are they?
- What strengths do you display through your special interests?
- What other strengths are you aware of?

- What thing distresses you most?
- What situations do you find most challenging?
- What physical environment do you find most challenging?
- Which strategies help you when you are anxious?

The answers you receive to the above questions will provide you with some insight into why you are observing certain behaviours and will also provide you with some ideas as to reasonable adjustments that might help your autistic employee or colleague.

There are some strengths and challenges which are more prevalent in the general autistic population, and these are offered below as a loose guide.

Communication

When considering how to improve the way you communicate, it can be helpful to first appreciate how communication might be more difficult for autistic people. Historically, wider society has perpetuated assumptions that people on the autism spectrum struggle with social skills, are shy or unfriendly, or cannot feel or express emotions.

These assumed traits are unfair, untrue and should be dismissed as ignorance. Instead, someone autistic may be unable to find the right words to start a conversation, they may not understand body language and social cues, and they may deal with emotion internally rather than expressing it outwards.

Some people on the autism spectrum cannot always quickly adapt to conversations or respond to words in the same way neurotypical people might. This is not because they cannot communicate 'correctly'; they may simply communicate in their own way. Because the autism spectrum is vastly different for each person, there is always variety in the way autistic people will behave and talk. People on the autism spectrum are not deliberately being "strange" or unsociable but are seeking the best ways to express themselves.

Learning how to best converse with people who may not communicate in a way you are familiar with can help you appreciate how people experience the world differently. When improving your communication skills, you will also learn how to better express yourself and your own ideas in various ways.

You will also, of course, be able to connect with more people, build relationships and help cultivate a more understanding environment, making discussions an enjoyable and productive experience for everyone.

How Do Autistic People Communicate?

As mentioned, there is no one size fits all – people on the autism spectrum are not a homogeneous group. Many individuals might use some of the following communication techniques:

- Non-verbal communication – pointing, gesturing, physically moving someone to the thing they need, writing words.
- Sounds and crying – due to not understanding, feeling frustrated or being unable to use the right words.
- Echolalia – the term given to repeating phrases and words they have heard in the past, hoping these phrases 'fit' the current situation.
- Picking out keywords or phrases – then focusing on the literal meanings and responding accordingly to those words only.

For an autistic person, focusing on the literal meaning of specific words creates a reply that makes sense to them, but it may seem out of place in the conversation to a neurotypical person. Analysing words and not tones is why a person on the autism spectrum might have trouble understanding sarcasm, metaphors, and humorous language.

Communication Behaviour

While talking to someone, an autistic individual might also:

- Change topics quickly – it can be difficult for some people to stay on topic as they deal with incoming stimuli. It may seem like they are avoiding something or are unfocused, yet it is usually the other way around, as the mind moves quickly to deal with each input.
- Make little eye contact – people on the autism spectrum can talk with you but may struggle to talk to you, often making little eye contact. Again, this is not an unfriendly action.

Eye Contact and Communication for Autistic People

- Avoiding eye contact may help someone on the autism spectrum talk clearly as it takes away all the stimuli that come with looking into someone's eyes, which can often cause an overload of information. Some people may prefer to speak with their eyes shut, to focus purely on the words of the conversation.
- You should never force autistic people to make eye contact with you during a conversation as, for many individuals, this might cause undue stress and discomfort.

How to Talk to a Person on the Autism Spectrum

By looking at how autistic people may communicate, we can see that their understanding of conversations relies heavily on language and words (or lack of words) and not the use of other people's facial expressions, body language or subtle infections.

Below, we provide some common tips to use when speaking to someone who may have difficulty communicating.

Speak With Clarity

One of the best things you can do is speak with clear and concise words, saying simple and plain sentences that cannot have more than one meaning.
Be direct and avoid using figures of speech as non-literal language can be confusing. Slang, nuance, or sarcasm can cause confusion and double meaning.

Avoid Terms of Endearment

Like sarcasm or slang, terms of endearment, including things like 'honey', 'love' or 'mate', can cause confusion and could be avoided. The speaker may mean nothing by these terms or use them offhandedly, but an autistic person may take them literally or find them uncomfortable.

Address the Individual by Name

Say the person's name at the beginning of a conversation, question, or important statement. This ensures they are paying attention instead of blocking out background noise. If you don't know their name, take a moment to ask and find out (which is also just polite and helps make a connection).

Make Gentle Eye Contact If Possible

This encourages non-verbal communication and helps autistic people develop their skills in understanding facial expressions and emotion. Again, do not try to force this, as it can make talking even more difficult for some.

Avoid Open-Ended Questions

Something like 'did you have a good day?' is an open-ended question that many neurotypical people will answer without hesitation. However, questions with so many possible answers and interpretations can be challenging for people on the autism spectrum to answer.
Questions that are necessary and require a specific answer are much better. It can also help to offer options or choices to help guide but not control the conversation.

Talk About What They Want to Discuss

Trying to force the conversation in a certain direction is not a successful approach. Instead, talk about what they are doing and let them lead the subject.
Autistic people's special interest might lead to them focusing their communication only around one topic. Sticking to the topic they want to discuss keeps the conversation going and helps them develop their communication skills.

Avoid Overloading Information

People on the autism spectrum can struggle to filter out less important information, which can lead to them being overloaded, meaning they struggle to process new information.
If it seems like they are being overloaded, or are anxious, begin to slow your pace or halt the conversation. If something must be said, use minimal words and avoid questions. This break allows the individual to catch up and deal with stimuli.
If it seems like a conversation is becoming distressing, it can also be helpful to remove visual communications. While eye contact and movements are usually a good thing, during an overload, they can become unwanted stimuli.
You should also be aware of the surrounding environment – could background noise be causing overload? Are too many people talking at once? Finding a quiet place reduces sensory input and will help avoid overload.

Be Patient

If it is necessary to wait for a response to a question, then give autistic people time. If someone on the autism spectrum does not respond straight away, it could be that they need more time to absorb and process the information.

Expect the Unexpected

We know that autistic people may use gestures, sounds and echolalia to process and respond to specific words. Someone may use all or a few of these communication methods.

If an individual on the autism spectrum does or says something unexpected or changes the subject, do not be alarmed or try to fight it. Itis important to listen and work out what they're trying to say. Keep being patient, go with the flow of the conversation and allow the autistic individual to communicate in their way.

Try Written or Visual Communication

If verbal communication is less effective, try writing or getting visual. Someone who struggles to talk may be happy to restart the conversation on paper, using written words or pictures.

In Summary

Most of the tips above will apply to conversing with people on the autism spectrum of all ages. However, one of the most important things to do when talking with an autistic adult is to address and converse with them as you would any other adult, and not as if they are a child.
A person on the autism spectrum may understand every word said but then may have difficulty responding verbally. It is therefore important not to assume the person has limited skills or abilities.
You should also never speak as if the autistic person is not in the room when in a group setting. By modelling appropriate behaviour, you also help show others in the group how they can best communicate with others.

Learning Agility

Many autistic individuals display repetitive and idiosyncratic behaviour (this is known as stereotyped behaviour). The lives of people on the autism spectrum need to be predictable and the autistic individual may become very anxious or even aggressive if change is introduced without warning.

Routines are very important. Many people on the autism spectrum use lists to prompt them about what comes next and the need for the list continues even when those around them think the autistic individual knows the task well. It is common for people on the autism spectrum to have a keen interest in a particular subject in which case they will research the subject thoroughly.

They might experience the following difficulties:
- Difficulty in predicting what will happen next, e.g. coming back home after going shopping.
- Difficulty in understanding the concept of danger and consequences, e.g.: crossing the road.
- Difficulty in using imagination and trying out something new.
- Difficulty in planning for the future
- Difficulty in coping with unfamiliar situations

These individuals may be more likely to be adept at:
- Sticking to structured programmes
- Working on projects with a clear beginning, middle and end
- Mathematical and technical abilities

Conclusion

Each autistic person will experience different levels of the above challenges and strengths. Some will experience certain challenges; others might experience a different set of difficulties altogether. Therefore, any support intervention or approach at the

workplace must put the individual's specific challenges, strengths, needs and wishes at the centre of any support programme.

Some strengths and qualities you might observe are:
- excellent memory
- precision and attention to detail
- focus
- creativity
- a preference for following instructions and abiding by rules
- working on structured programmes
- being direct, open, and honest
- copying and reproducing behaviour (masking)
- dealing with projects which have a clear beginning, middle and end
- offering different perspectives
- strong sense of fairness and justice

Strengths and qualities should be encouraged and promoted in the workplace. Praise and encouragement can be motivating and empowering. Some people on the autism spectrum find it hard to know what someone else is thinking. Therefore, praise needs to be clearly articulated.

Challenges

You might observe your autistic colleague or employee displaying difficulties in:
- picking up on unwritten social rules
- engaging in small talk
- taking things literally and misunderstanding jokes and sarcasm
- imagining what someone else is thinking.

- understanding the complexities of interpersonal relationships
- becoming obsessed with a person, place, or interest
- managing unexpected change
- remembering things in sequence
- making decisions
- making plans
- experiencing either hyper- or hypo- sensitivity (differences in the way they experience sensory input, either too much or too little)
-
- Finding strategies and tools, which can help to reduce the challenges means the strengths and qualities can be used more effectively in the workplace.
- Strategies and tools to support an autistic employee or colleague will be specific to everyone; however, some strategies for support, which are helpful to autistic employees and would also benefit the other employees in an organisation are:
- clear and unambiguous communication, e.g., "you will find it next door" – does this mean the room next door, the building next door or another next door?
- agendas prior to meetings
- diaries, schedules, and reminders
- clear rules, policies and procedures followed by all.
- prior notice of change where possible
- a calm environment where possible – lower lighting, reduced sound, fewer people
- provision of a quiet space to which a person can retreat.

It is important to talk to your autistic employee to find out what would most help them. Asking the questions at the beginning of this chapter will give you a good start to build upon.
Improving communication skills and creating an inclusive working environment for autistic individuals can be beneficial for both the employee and the organisation.

Top Tips:

Educate yourself and others, learn more about autism and how it affects communication and social skills. Share this information with your colleagues, managers, and other stakeholders. Raising awareness and understanding of autism can help create a more inclusive workplace.

Provide training to trainers, managers, and other staff members on how to communicate effectively with autistic individuals. This training could cover things like the importance of clear and concise language, the use of visual aids, and the need for clear instructions.
Take the time to listen to the needs and concerns of autistic individuals and be flexible in finding solutions to support them. Being open to feedback and suggestions can help create a more supportive and inclusive work environment.

Finally, to effectively communicate with autistic employees, it is important to be clear, concise, and direct, use visual aids, avoid sensory overload, be patient, provide positive reinforcement, be flexible, and seek input from the individual. It is key to recognise their specific needs, and preferences and work collaboratively to find the best and suitable communication strategies – remember one size does not fit all!

4 Value—based training and employment

a. Job -training and coaching methods for autistic people.

b. Information for employers on some job-training intervention for individuals on the autism spectrum from the international scientific literature.

c. Autistic people are characterised by social and communicative disabilities that can cause difficulties in adapting to the work environment. Most manifest difficulties in interpreting non-verbal signals and engaging in social exchanges, in the absence, often, of intellectual and/or language disabilities. In addition, as autistic people are characterised, generally, by specific interests, lack of soft skills and flexibility, resistance to change and difficulties in time and stress management, many may manifest non-functional behaviour patterns that could interfere with the job accomplishment. However, vocational rehabilitation, job interview preparation and workplace support programmes have been developed to deal with these issues to ensure the adaptation of the person on the autism spectrum to the potential demands of the workplace and to guarantee the development of the necessary skills.
Evidence shows that the work performance of autistic individuals tends to increase if those involved in their training are specialised on the topic. To achieve competitive integrated employment, it is necessary to provide quality programs and permanent support to provide intensive job services and career counselling. The support needed by individuals on the autism spectrum, aimed at obtaining a satisfactory job and maintaining their job position over time, should be as follows:

- start by making a profile of the jobseeker by making an assessment and identifying personal work goals.
- train the autistic person on how to apply for a job position and how to attend the respective job interview.
- once the job is obtained, proceed with training to enable the person on the autism spectrum to learn both job skills and all other skills necessary to do the job.

- support the autistic person until they can perform their work task as independent as possible
- ensure the presence of a permanent training support that guarantees the employee on the autism spectrum support and assistance when needed, or establish a peer mediated intervention (PMI), where the autistic person can be supported by a trained colleague who can act as a mediator and role model.

To achieve the expected results, traditional job training and coaching methods (e.g., lengthy verbal instruction) are often counterproductive to helping individuals on the autism spectrum find and keep a job, so to correctly train an autistic person, the most useful solutions are:

- Behavioural skills training (BST) is a behavioural technique through which the trainer shows and reinforces positive behaviours that should be maintained and discourages negative ones.
- prompting and cueing procedures: prompting is a strategy used to assist someone step-by-step through a task to learn new skills; cueing is a hint or serves as a signal
- or suggestion and does not lead to a direct answer. Cues tend to be things that naturally occur in our environment that remind a person to do certain things and can be picture, text, or verbal or also video.
- Modelling: is a technique used for demonstrating behaviour to a learner who is expected to adopt that behaviour under specific circumstances.

It is also possible to make use of digital tools to increase the expected results and streamline the training and support process. Among those, the most effective digital tools are:

- Simulated interview training: it's a software solution that creates a safe and simulated learning environment by watching videos of job interviews. One key issue for autistic individuals securing employment is the job interview. Autistic individuals often experience anxiety in interview situations, particularly with open-ended questions and unexpected interruptions.

- Video Modelling: is one intervention technique that has been used to teach a variety of skills to autistic individuals, using visual and auditory signals to help a
- person on the autism spectrum develop specific behaviour patterns, it involves creating short video clips that show the autistic person how to do specific skills or tasks to find and maintain a job with effective and promising results.
- Virtual Reality Technologies: unlike the first two categories of tools, which are non-immersive tools as the autistic person is merely an external spectator of a scene that can replicate to practise and improve, this tool allows the person on the autism spectrum to simulate an interview or practise a required behaviour in the first person, through a head-mounted device that provide the experience of actual presence in the virtual environment.

In addition, other recommendations found are:
- provide specific training on autism to companies that hire an autistic individual,
- encourage the establishment of low-stimulus workspaces,
- present individuals on the autism spectrum with clear and unambiguous instructions on how to do the job,
- ensure flexible working hours.

Ethics and ethical technological deployment

The extensive literature on the subject considers IT and digital technologies as an ally in the inclusion, socialisation, learning and training processes of autistic individuals. This is because technology makes it possible to use the visual-spatial channel as the prevalent communication channel, which proves particularly effective with individuals on the autism spectrum.

However, it should not be forgotten that IT is a tool to assist broader intervention and treatment pathways, which require a rigorous design tailored to the specific needs of the population they are aimed at and cannot be regarded as a one-size-fits-all key to solving all problems. Several ethical and practical dimensions of risk must therefore beconsidered, which may incur, especially because of too extensive use of technology without a well-designed and clear intervention strategy:

a. One part that is closely linked to the ethical dimension concerns privacy and the protection of sensitive data of individuals using digital tools, especially those in a vulnerable condition as autistic individuals could be. It is useful to consider that vulnerable individuals are more prone to various forms of harassment and abuse. Itis not just a matter of common sense but is linked to laws and regulations also local and country specific. It is therefore necessary, before developing any product, to consider the relevant laws of the countries where it is to be distributed. Moreover, it is vital to consider European Union General Data Protection Rules (GDPR).

b. Provide clear and visual time-monitoring functions by setting an hourly limit per session, daily and weekly beyond which it is not possible to proceed with the use of the digital tool. should also be remembered that respecting and protecting privacy and sensitive data

c. Evidence shows that the relationship of autistic individuals with technology can be controversial and take the form of a true addiction. This is the case, above all, with those digital products that involve the reward system by generating high levels of gratification, such as, for example, learning games that provide entertaining content and rewards for the correct execution of tasks. In fact, certain characteristics of autistic individuals, such as issues with reward systems, symbolisation processes and executive functions, make them more prone to developing addictions to video games and rewarding digital tools. Furthermore, excessive gratification can aggravate behavioural issues, aggressive and out-of-control behaviour in the case of frustration.

For this reason, it is necessary to:

- Clearly state the content of the product developed, who it is aimed at, assigning an age range and the level of intellectual development required for its use.
- Imagine an accompanying figure to monitor and assist during use.
- Provide not only reward systems but also feedback to justify the reward and enable insight process.
- Clearly state the rules and purpose of the device.
- Provide clear and visual time-monitoring functions by setting an hourly limit per session, daily and weekly beyond which it is not possible to proceed with the use of the digital tool.

d. Autistic individuals can have major issues in social and communication skills. Therefore, digital tools are often used as facilitators in inclusion processes, especially if they include sections dedicated to online interactions, with colleagues, peers, trainers, etc., and virtual communication. However, a massive use of digital technologies can cause an opposite effect, especially if the tool becomes the only mode of communication and social interaction available to individuals on the autism spectrum.

Therefore:

- Structure clear rules for the use of online communication tools.
- Restrict the sending of messages and chats to specific time slots.
- Set a maximum limit of messages that can be sent per day.
- Establish a maximum hourly limit of continuous chat use per day.
- Set up chat and messaging services with visual tools such as emoticons, gifs, etc. that support the individuals in conveying the desired messages.
- Suggest vis-a-vis moments of aggregation.
- Provide autistic individuals with trained people to interface with, who act as social mediators and can guide them in interacting and, if necessary, also in deciphering text messages and chats

e. Discourage the use of digital and technological tools independently, without the support of someone to monitor and assist, outside the training programmes for which the tools are created and intended. This is because, regardless of the tools that provide high levels of gratification, the continued use of digital tools can lead, more ingeneral, to new issues with patterns and behaviours. In this sense it would be useful to:
- Training, through educational material, individuals who can support an autistic

person when using technological and digital tools. This training should cover general content: risks and resources of digital tools, and specific content: how to use and educational objectives for which the specific tool is intended.

- Provide clear and visual time-monitoring functions by setting an hourly limit per session, daily and weekly beyond which it is not possible to proceed with the use of the digital tool.

f. The tool must contain clear, unambiguous, non-enigmatic messages using, if necessary, images and videos to support the contents. Creating Inclusive Workplaces: Tips for Supporting Employees on the Autism Spectrum

5 Workplaces: Tips for Supporting Employees on the Autism Spectrum

The workplace environment can be a challenge for autistic employees. It can be conflicting and alienating, causing only further distress and a sense of exclusion. Therefore, employers should be proactive in supporting individuals on the autism spectrum to create a more inclusive workspace and culture. There are a variety of tips and strategies that employers can use to foster a supportive and inclusive workplace and work culture where autistic employees can thrive, yet it is important to keep in mind that the support depends on individual needs of the person, but the following measures and tips can be beneficial:

SUPPORT AT WORK

- **Job Design:** Adjusting job description and responsibilities tailored to strengths and abilities of the employees on the autism spectrum can help reach their potential. Accurately defined job roles and corresponding expectations can ensure that they are comfortable with their role and accomplish their position.
- **Flexibility & Stability:** Accommodations allowing flexibility, but also providing a sense of stability can create an atmosphere of balance for an autistic employee. Establishing a predictable routine, providing advance notice of changes, and offering flexible start times and working patterns can yield more control and secure feeling.
- **Work Environment:** Adjusting work environments is another way to create an inclusive work environment for an employee on the autism spectrum. This could mean sensory-friendly options such as noise-cancelling headphones or earplugs, lighting, a secluded area away from distractions, and degree of crowding, ease of navigation in the workspace, as well as the number of interruptions during work time. In addition, a calm, consistent, welcoming, respectful, predictable, supportive, and reliable environment should be fostered.

- **Workplace Communication:** Due to difficulties in communication and social interaction, an important step is to identify and explain workplace normative behaviour and communication practices to autistic employees. Giving them enough time to respond to verbal communication and allowing multiple channels of communication, both verbal and written, can also assist them to communicate more effectively.

INCLUSIVE WORK CULTURE

- **Support system:** Building a natural support system involving co-workers, supervisors, employment specialists, family members, or friends to assist employees on the autism spectrum in various ways, such as transportation from and to work, explaining, guiding, and reminding them about their tasks. A co-worker as a mentor with improved skills working with the autistic person can assist in any potential problem, advocate for them if needed, and translate communications in simpler terms. This can be a very cost-effective strategy, as well as foster inclusion in the workplace. Nevertheless, any potential conflicts between the person on the autism spectrum and their natural supports should also be acknowledged and avoided.

Besides, external support organisations and community resources can be useful for job mentoring, coaching, and specialised counselling to help them to succeed in the workplace.

- Education and Training: Businesses should prioritise continuous training for managers and colleagues about autism. Organising an autism awareness training, being undertaken with the consent of the autistic person, will help the staff members recognize and respond to the unique communication and working styles of the colleague on the autism spectrum and be informed about awareness campaigns and other initiatives to reduce stigma.
- Utilising Technology: Tools such as Personal Digital Assistants, e-mail programs and automated scheduling programs can assist an autistic person to manage their time and meet the deadlines at work. Alternative forms of communication such as instant messaging, text to speech, voice recognition, and pictograms can also help communicate their ideas more easily.

6 Digital Literacies for young people with Autism

What digital needs are specific to Autism?

Digital tools have been designed to support the learning process of autistic people. Existing solutions range from enabling more effective communication of information between educators and students on the autism spectrum, providing robot companions for autistic people to help them feel more comfortable in education settings as well as facilitating assistive learning with augmented reality. Digital tools also help autistic people manage their anxiety or to relax, while enhancing their ability to communicate and develop their social skills.

https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/blog/digital-technologies-supporting-persons-on-the-autism-spectrum/

Safety issues

With technology, the tendency to perform obsessive, repetitive behaviours may mean repeatedly playing the same game, loading the same image or page or performing a computerised task over and over. People who need repetitive sensory inputs as a means of dealing with stress can benefit from the rapid serve-up of responses the internet can provide. However, a rapid supply of imagery or actions can also feed repetitive behaviours, which could encourage addiction to certain games, images or visiting the same website over and over.

https://autismspectrumnews.org/technology-safety-guide-for-parents-of-children-with-autism/

Young people on the autism spectrum are at higher risk for compulsive internet use, exposure to inappropriate materials online, victimisation by online predators,

cyberbullying and sleep disturbances. Young autistic people use the internet more than neurotypical people, and their parents report noticing more negative impacts of internet use.

Autism and anxiety often coexist. Although the use of technology can often reduce anxiety for people on the autism spectrum, too much screen time is known to be problematic for all people. For example, there's a heightened risk of both anxiety and depression for everyone when there are high levels of screen time, but autistic people may be more at risk than others because they are more prone to anxiety and more likely to have obsessive-compulsive issues. In fact, people on the autism spectrum have a greater risk of developing a social media addiction, and internet dependency may be more prevalent, because they can be more attracted to the comfort and stimulation of using a computerised device.

https://autismspectrumnews.org/technology-safety-guide-for-parents-of-children-with-autism/

7 Integrated technology innovation

Helping employers understand that technologies such as Virtual Reality (VR) can aid in helping their autistic workforce.

When you have difficulty expressing yourself, CV-writing can be very difficult. Job interviews can be near impossible. As a result, many on the autism spectrum are often written off as poor communicators at interviews. When employment is gained, autistic adults are also more prone to change jobs or work in positions they are overqualified for.

Employers are more and more realising there are significant benefits in recruiting staff on the autism spectrum for certain roles. Indeed, in the increasingly digital world characteristics such as an ability to recognise patterns, attention to detail, perseverance and extreme levels of concentration can be a positive advantage in roles such as data analytics and testing.

Software development and testing involve a combination of tasks that require intense focus. This was recently recognised by the Irish Department for Employment and Learning, which sought out four young people on the autistic spectrum to take part in their Software Testers Academy, an intensive 10- week training course. All four autistic participants ended up with full time roles in software testing.
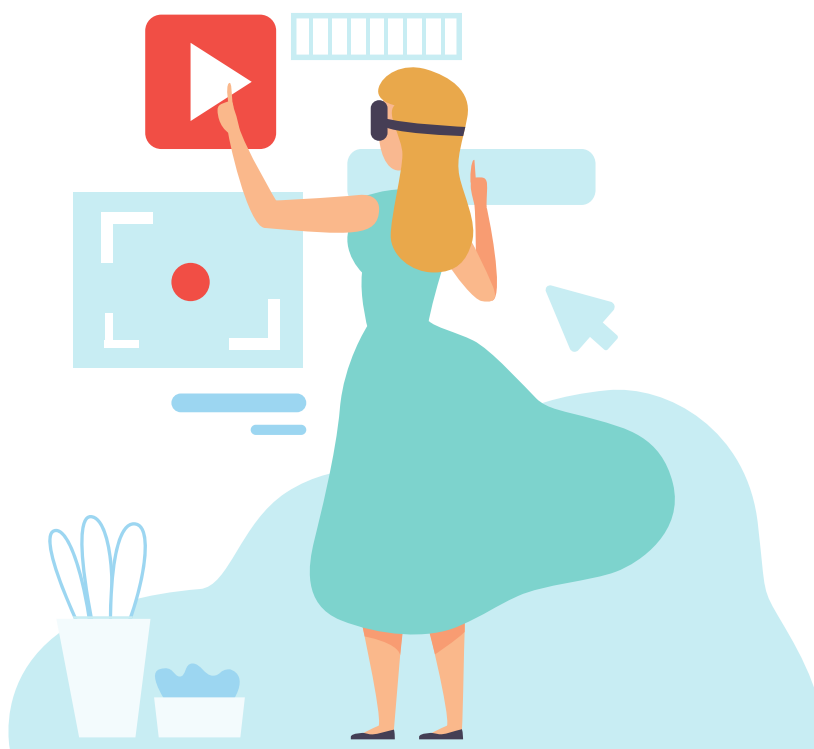
https://www.irishnews.com/business/2016/05/10/news/autism-works-for-digital-companies-510116/

VR has also been used to help prepare autistic people for public speaking. Using an audience of avatars which faded away if eye contact was not made by the autistic speakers, they were encouraged to look around the room, rather than just ahead. The game of keeping the avatars on screen was met with a good response from the participants on the autism spectrum. This is a good tool which can also be used for older people to prepare them for different situations in the workplace.

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Phobias that often impact autistic people have also been tackled with VR. These phobias can include but are not limited to a fear of public transport, classrooms, balloons, and animals. Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) can be used to combat the effects of these phobias but to fully benefit from CBT, visualisation and imagination should be used: these activities can be a struggle for those on the autism spectrum. To tackle this problem, a <u>recent study</u> examined the effect of using immersive therapy to treat phobias in autistic people. The research was conducted in the <u>Blue Room</u>, an experience which was developed by specialists at Newcastle University, United Kingdom, working alongside innovative technology firm Third Eye Neurotech.

<u>https://www.forbes.com/sites/solrogers/2019/04/03/how-virtual-reality-can-help-those-with-autism/?sh=5632e493198e</u>

Top Tips!

- Provide clear and structured training with continued monitoring
- Ask about sensory distractions and make relevant adjustments
- Provide visual support e.g., Timetable, diaries and apps
- Communicate any changes to a schedule or work task as early as possible, to give your employee time to adjust.

8 Improving productivity for employers

Many online articles provide for interesting insights and recommendations on what autistic people can do to successfully access the job market. In the following paragraphs, readers will find concrete recommendations for: 1) job scouting; 2) productivity and well-being in professional and work environments.

Recommendations for job scouting
In this section we provide for few tips on which you can investigate to approach the labour market and go through the recruitment process with confidence.

The following recommendations are not industry-specific and can be applied regardless of the occupation / role associated to it.

Be aware of your strengths and weaknesses
The very first recommendation to approach the job market is to be very much aware of what might be your strengths & weaknesses. Here some sample guiding questions that might facilitate the process:
   1. Am I comfortable with lots of information?
   2. Am I a person that can easily manage more than one task at the same time?
   3. Am I at ease in a noisy environment?
   4. Am I good an social communication?

By being aware of your weaknesses and strengths, you can filter more easily the job opportunities available that might work for you.

It is also very much beneficial having an in-depth understanding of all the contextual factors that might trigger further opportunities and your capacity to really leverage on your strengths.

Typical contextual factors of this nature relate to:

1. Level of specialisation required by the given job opportunity (i.e., "do I have the skills, knowledge and competences needed to carry out the tasks and activities associates to this role?")
2. Work settings, including the schedule and rhythm of working hours, and predictability of the work routine.
3. Pre-existing on-boarding programme for autistic people, and general level of awareness of the organisation on the topics of Diversity & Inclusion (i.e., it is common for many organisations to disclose on their corporate web page / social media profiles targets and achievements as a friendly and open environment for all. This might certainly represent an element that you want to take into consideration while job scouting for your ideal occupation)
4. Etc...

Making yourself comfortable during the interview

Your objective is to facilitate the interviewer in understanding what might be your specific needs, and the things that would help you in the execution and achievement of your daily tasks. Typical request that you can make to your potential future employer are:

- Concise and comprehensive checklist of guidelines and instructions (i.e., general references) associated to your role within the organisation.
- Clustering of your activities in further sub-tasks, each of which with a precise deadline and expected result.
- Regular calendar of activities on a weekly and / or monthly basis, depending on your preference.

In general, there are few simple things that you can do to make a good impression and understand if this is really the place you wish to work in:
- Prepare in advance a short introduction of yourself, and make sure to highlight skills, competences and knowledge
- Take the opportunity to ask your interviewer as many questions as you can so as to know more about the place, your future colleagues, and your possible role
- Share open and fairly the things that might put you in discomfort, and work with your interviewer on suitable solutions / beneficial alternatives

Recommendations for productivity and well-being in the work place

In this section we investigate few tips on which you can rely on to make your onboarding process smoother and more comfortable.

About social and communication skills

If you find yourself struggling with social interactions, or more in general with interpersonal communication, you can most definitely activate those triggers that

helps you in better managing the factors causing stress and discomfort:

1. If you have difficulties in retaining and process information when exposed to too many environmental stimuli, kindly ask you interlocutors to entertain the discussion somewhere else, potentially in a place of the office much quieter and suitable for you
2. If you have difficulties in getting the sense from metaphoric and / or verbal communication, kindly ask your colleagues to reframe their sentences in a different way.
3. If you have difficulties in face-to-face interaction in general, kindly ask your colleagues to move the communication on different settings (i.e., via email)

Managing your time and agenda

Any new assignment that you will be responsible for comes with:
- Content, detailing the scale and scope of the given
- Task and actions, detailing the set of sub-activities leading to its accomplishment.
- Deliverables, detailing the concrete expected result
- Deadlines, detailing the moment in which the deliverable should be ready

You might consider planning together with your employers (or the person that you respond to for your work) a commonly agreed calendar of activities that suits both yours and your colleagues' needs. If you manage to strategise your agenda with few, predictable and ease-to-process tasks, it will be much easier for you to manage your workload and deliver the results that are expected from you.

Dealing with sensory stimuli

This is quite self-explanatory: if you have any specific accommodation request that is instrumental in easing a comfortable working environment for you, make sure to share it to your employer / Human Resource (HR) team / whoever can come in your support.

You can set up for yourself a working space that contributes to reduce distraction and make yourself more comfortable in progressing through your daily routine.

Managing stressful scenarios

Despite their best efforts, some organisations might not be (yet) fully trained and acquainted on topic and programmes of Diversity & Inclusion. Your onboarding process might represent a learning experience for them as well.

You might be too naïve in thinking that you will not experience any set-back. In this last paragraph you will be introduced to typical scenario of distress and simple means to manage them effectively:

- Perception of isolation: try to gradually involve and engage yourself in small-talk during those short breaks so typical of the office's daily-life. Take gradual steps, starting for instance to grab coffee with your colleagues in the cafeteria, or invite at lunch together some of your colleagues you feel you have a connection with
- Anxiety: be open about and share your feeling with somebody you trust and / or that can help you in overcoming this bad moment
- Discrimination of any sort: if you feel like you are the target of malicious comments and actions, address the situation immediately with your employer / the HR of the organisation and explain the events that lead you to this discussion.

9 Responsible working practices

Towards an autism–friendly work environment: brief guide for employers

Throughout our assessment, we stumbled across numerous publications addressing the topic of how to nurture autism-friendly environments. Besides the obvious nuances between each publication, we soon realised there is a common structure in the outline of these resources:

Benefits of employing autistic people

Apart from the obvious social and moral motivations that exist behind the hiring of an autistic person, scientific and business literature provides for many evidence on the benefits that come with the nurture and valorisation of a diverse workforce: autistic employees excel in problem solving, focus, logic, high reliability, memory and great perception of details.

Not by chance, most of times people on the autism spectrum are employed in IT and in the STEAM field (science, technology, engineering, arts, mathematics), and more in general, in non-IT sectors that are still very much data-driven – in professions and occupations that allow them to strongly capitalise on their quantitative skills.

Setting things in motion: how to attract autistic talents.

For organisation that are approaching for the first time their path towards a friendly working environment for autistic people, it is crucially important to recognize the challenges and the issues that come with it: firstly, and foremost, the set-up of the recruitment process. People on the autism spectrum have difficulties in:
1. understanding social norms, attitudes and behaviours naturally taken from granted by neuro-typical people.

2. interacting with people and decoding non-verbal communication and abstract ideas.
3. coping with environmental (sensory) stimuli.

These are all elements that employers should take into consideration to redesign their recruitment process accordingly. Based on our assessment, the key takeaways for employers can be summarised as follows:

Provide for inclusive job advertising, and refrain from traditional business-jargon. Consider very carefully the words that you choose to mainstream your offer, be as specific and straightforward as possible, and precisely highlight the specific skills, competences, and knowledge that you are interested in.

Disclose your intention. If you are interested in autistic talents, be explicit about it. This is an open attitude from your side to help your potential candidates in filtering and recognising what opportunities are available for them.

Be proactive within the right network. If you are interested in recruiting autistic people, please consider consulting with local organisations / associations helping people on the autism spectrum. In many cases, such kinds of facilities, to different scales depending on their dimension, operate also as "employment" centres and facilitate the employability services for their representatives. They can also consult your organisation's autism-friendly practices for recruitment as a whole and take care of the initial selection on your behalf, facilitating your introduction to the most suitable candidate for that job offer.
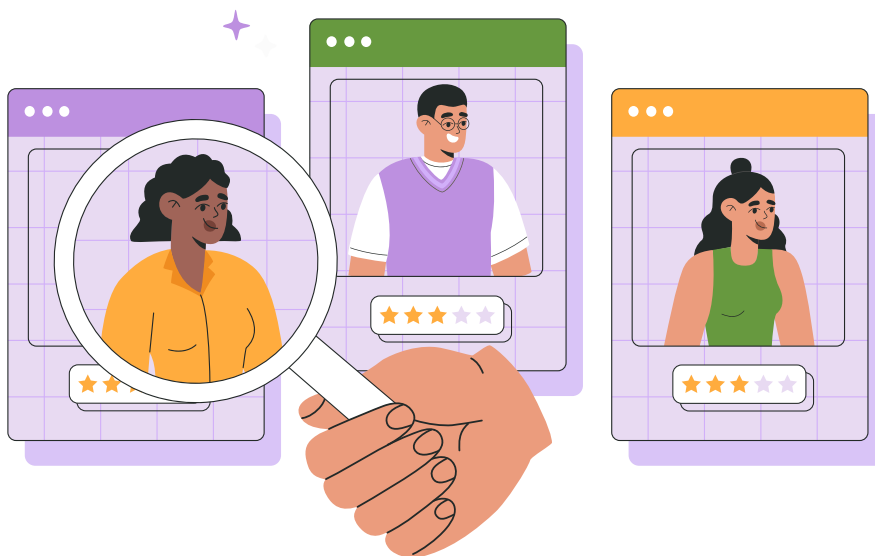
In the case your organisation relies on automated systems of recruiting, be very considerate about it. Especially in the case of organisations that are approaching for the first time this kind of process, these systems might not be tailored yet to meet the new necessities that come with these non-traditional recruiting. More in general, please make sure that any step leading to the formal interview (i.e., pre-compilation of an application form) should be autism-friendly by design and confidential enough to allow the applicant in disclosing his / her diagnosis – for instance, you might consider preparing a separate form for autistic candidates only.

The interview represents the main obstacle for neuro-diverse people due the very nature of their diagnosis. The practice consolidated some key guiding principles to which all recruiters can rely on to put candidates at their ease:

- Communicate in advance the timing and place of the interview
- Share with the candidates what they can expect during the meeting
- Ask the candidate if they have any specific requirement for the setting of the room in which the interview will take place
- If requested by the candidates, allow for the presence of a person that the candidate can recognize as support
- Remain very concise and direct in your questions – remember to avoid abstract languages and metaphors, better also to avoid open-ended questions and hypothetical scenarios
- Opt for a skill-driven interview, even better if complemented by practical tests and exercises
- Avoid group-interviews and any other potential scenario that might trigger one or more among A., B. or C.
- Introduce candidates in great detail to the roles, responsibilities and tasks that they will be responsible for
- Be ready for a non-conventional interaction – the candidate is not the only person that should challenge his / her comfort zone...
- More in general, and if relevant, provide for candidates all the information that they need to understand the working environment that they will join
- ...at the same time, remember that candidates should not be overloaded with inputs. Check with candidates if they wish to / they are ok with receiving new loads of information.
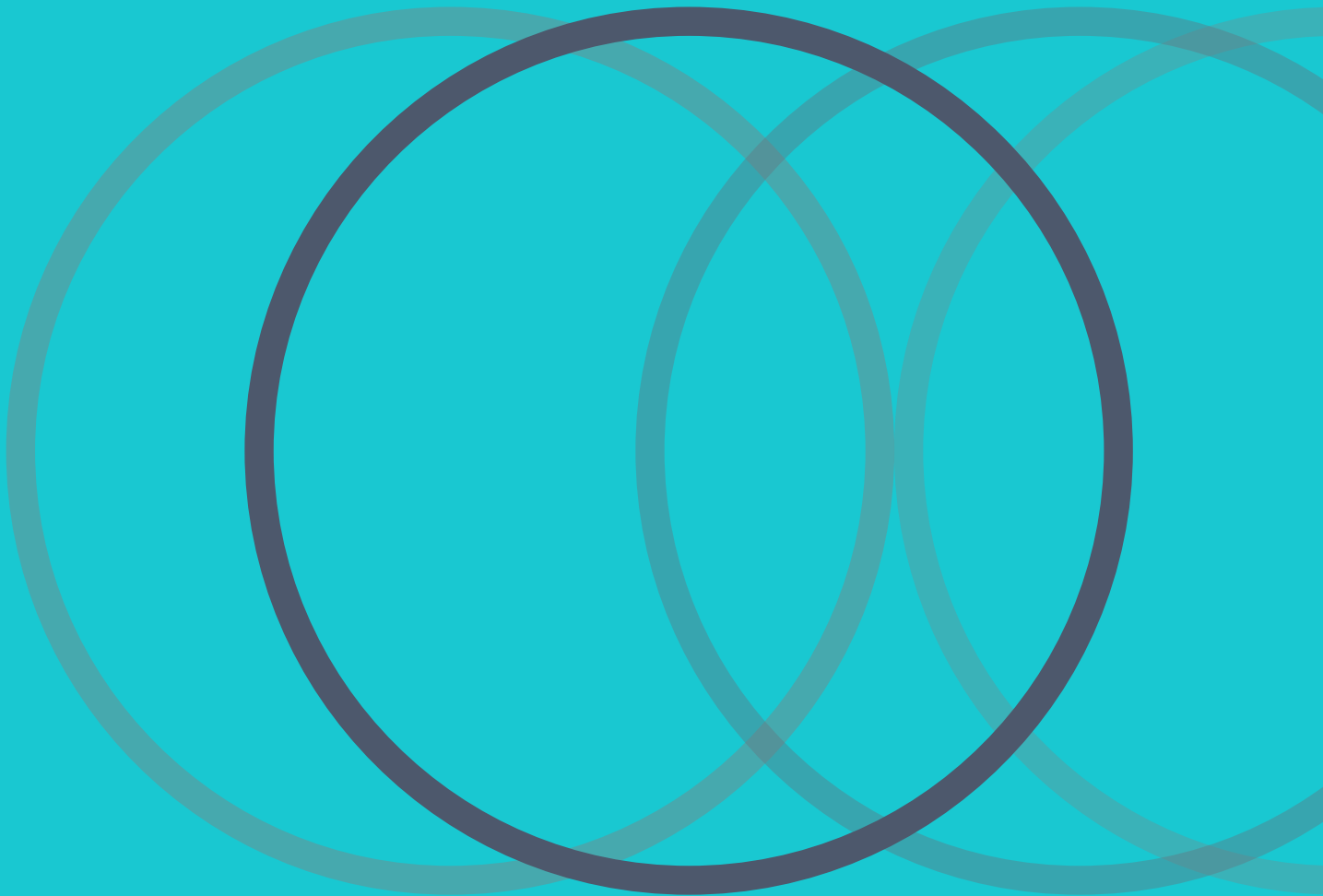
Section B – Good Practices

Good practices in Sweden

Toys such as fidget spinners can be essential concentration aids for autistic workers.

Context

Full participation in society is the top goal in Sweden's disability policy

Sweden's national objective of disability is based on the <u>UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities</u>. Sweden's policy is to 'achieve equitable living conditions and full participation in a diverse society for people with disabilities'.

<u>Sweden's disability policy</u>

Introduction

Twenty years ago, Article 15 of the Council of Europe's European Social Charter of 1996 already stated that for 'ensuring to persons with disabilities, irrespective of age and the nature and origin of their disabilities, the effective exercise of the right to independence, social integration and participation in the life of the community', the Council of Europe Member States undertake, 'to take the necessary measures' to provide people with disabilities with 'guidance, education and vocational training in the framework of general schemes wherever possible or, where this is not possible, through specialised bodies, public or private', and 'to promote their access to employment through all measures tending to

encourage employers to hire and keep in employment persons with disabilities in the ordinary working environment and to adjust the working conditions to the needs of the disabled or, where this is not possible by reason of the disability, by arranging for or creating sheltered employment according to the level of disability.

Stakeholders

The Swedish government and parliament establish guidelines for policies, mainly through legislation. Government agencies have a national responsibility for specific sectors, including education, healthcare, and employment.
The regional councils are responsible for health and medical care.
The 290 Swedish municipalities are responsible for education and social services, among other things.

Methodological Approach

The Public Employment Service (Arbetsförmedlingen) has been tasked by the government to help more people with a disbaility find employment.

Employers who hire people whose work capacity is limited are sometimes entitled to wage subsidies. The state-owned services and goods provider Samhall offers people with disabilities meaningful employment that furthers their personal development.

Recommendations/Top Tips

While recruitment and reasonable accommodations are important steps in locating, hiring, and retaining autistic staff, it is important that these measures are backed up by culture of autism acceptance in the workplace. Whilst many organisations might assume that they may not need to make changes to their practices unless an employee decides to disclose as autistic and makes a request for accommodations, there's also several things an employer can do to make their workplace practices more supportive of autistic staff before they even need to request it.

Good practices in Italy

Type

Ministerial Decree – law no. 146/2021

Title & Year & Institutions involved

In force since Dec 2021, article 12 quinquies. Ministry of Justice

Summary

The inter-ministerial decree authorizes tributary and fiscal incentives to any Innovative Social Impact Start up that employ's workers on the autism spectrum as employees or collaborators for a period of at least one year, in a proportion equal to or greater than two thirds of the total workforce.

Addressed groups

Autistic people and Innovative Social Impact Start Ups

Highlighted issues and action areas

Urgent measures in economic and fiscal matters, to protect work and for non-deferrable needs.

Measures proposed for inclusive employment (if any)

The reason lies behind the opportunity to incentives, thanks to ad-hoc financial incentives, the employability of autistic people in any of the fields in which Innovative Social Impact Start Ups operates:

- Social assistance and healthcare

The inter-ministerial decree authorizes tributary and fiscal incentives to any Innovative Social Impact Start up that employ's workers on the autism spectrum as employees or collaborators for a period of at least one year, in a proportion equal to or greater than two thirds of the total workforce.

Resource link

Type

Law Proposal no.2306

Title & Year & Institutions involved

First introduced to the Deputies Chamber in April 2018, currently under the assessment and examination of six different commissions

Summary

The law proposal introduces education and capacity building opportunities aimed at training business' tutors and other professional from the health sectors as "technicians" for the employability of autistic people in the agro business

Addressed groups

Autistic people and agro businesses

Highlighted issues and action areas

Worth of mentioning the focus on agro-business sector, which represents for a large and consistent part the economic and employment engine of Italy.

Measures proposed for inclusive employment (if any)

Besides the qualification of "technicians" for the employability and coaching of autistic people in the agro business, the proposal includes also fiscal incentives for agribusinesses accessing and promoting their support to the initiative

Resource link

Good practices in Belgium

www.diversicom.be

Context

DiversiCom pursues the mission of supporting diversity in the labour market by facilitating the job application process for people with disabilities, including autistic people, enabling them to be hired based on their skills and competencies.

Introduction

DiversiCom's mission revolves around three core points:
1. to increase the rate of employees with disabilities in Belgium
2. to support a diverse work team through an open recruitment process for candidates with disabilities
3. to encourage companies and employees with disabilities to showcase their success and inspire other organisations

Stakeholders

DiversiCom cooperates directly with Brussels-based secondary special education school 'École des 4 Vents' by offering autistic teenagers – while still at school – work experience in companies to prepare them for their future integration into the workplace. They also ensure this continuity of support by facilitating the students' access to the open labour market after they have completed their training.

Methodological Approach

DiversiCom, which started in 2014, offers the following activities:
- support for jobseekers with disabilities
- issuing of advice to the companies involved throughout the various phases of the recruitment process
- creation of links between jobseekers and companies
- communicating/sharing best practices as well as potential changes

Recommendations/Top Tips

- take into account the disability of the autistic job candidate
- focus on the skills of the autistic job candidate
- capitalise on the strong assets autistic job candidates can offer

Innovative Vocational Education for Autism https://ivea-project.eu/

Context

IVEA was an award-winning Erasmus+ project which involved Autism-Europe and its partners based in Portugal, Spain, Hungary and Greece.

Introduction

The Innovative Vocational Education for Autism (IVEA) project, running from 2018 until 2021, aimed at fostering social inclusion for autistic people through employment by developing a holistic European guide.

Stakeholders

The project brought together universities, autism associations, professionals as well as VET and IT providers to create a new European Guide for the effective vocational training of autistic people to contribute to their successful employment. More information can be found <u>here</u>.

Methodological Approach

A training course (pilot study) for autistic youngsters was implemented after an analysis of the needs and expectations of employers was carried out. Ten face-to-face sessions with the participation of autistic people gave many ideas on how to best prepare future employees.
A training course (pilot study) for employers was carried out with three face-to-face sessions focused on an intensive practical preparation for an interested team of participants, extending to other departments of the companies.
Internships for the autistic youngsters were also put in place giving trainers and trainees the opportunity to exchange knowledge and experiences

Recommendations/Top Tips

- Developing soft skills (communication / social interaction)
- Managing transitions from education to work or from one job to another
- Taking the perspective of others into account
- Reacting appropriately to criticism and praise
- Tackling problem-solving in the workplace

Good practices in France

Context

Autism and Employment: Supporting people with autism in finding employment

Introduction

Established in 2016, Avencod is a company whose business model relies on the inclusion of people with disabilities and specifically people with autism within the digital industry. The company also offers its clients an experience with social dimension in digital outsourcing.

Avencod employs persons with disabilities, mostly autistic individuals, and trains them between 18 months and 2 years to help them integrate into professional life and have better employability.

Avencod ensures they assign its employees to tasks considering of individual needs and capabilities.

Stakeholders

- Direction Régionale des Entreprises, de la Concurrence, de la Consommation, du Travail et de l'Emploi
- MAISON DÉPARTEMENTALE DES PERSONNES HANDICAPÉES
- FONDATION ORANGE
- ATYPIQ - Association Asperger & Autiste de haut niveau
- AMADEUS
- CAPGEMINI ENGINEERING
- CGI
- SOPRA STERIA

Methodological Approach

Avencod's approach to the proper integration of its employees relies on two points. Firstly, technique with improved access to training for skills improvement, and employees supported by long term Avencoders.
 Secondly: understanding in interpersonal exchanges within a large company or IT department in particular to create trust and improve empathy between manager and employee.

Recommendations/Top Tips

- Technical skills are not enough, focus on interpersonal skills, too.
- Create a sustainable mentor/mentee system involving more experienced autistic employees (if any)
- Make sure training design is authentic as possible.

Context

Employment and Training of Autistic People

Introduction

In 2017, the first solidarity restaurant Café Joyeux was created, employing and training people with intellectual disabilities. In addition to providing an innovative solution for the inclusion of the people recruited, Café Joyeux intends to repair the wide gap and inequality in employment of people with intellectual disabilities.

Stakeholders

15 Coffee shops in France and abroad
45 Managers and Catering Professionals

Methodological Approach

1. Recruitment as an intern
2. Skills assessment specialists in HR, management, cooking and specialist educators.
3. Assign to function adapted to their abilities.
4. Training

Recommendations/Top Tips

- Explore abilities and skills of autistic person in relation to job requirements.
- Design training tailored to skills and talents
- Bring different experts from field of work on board
- Create a welcoming and inclusive environment to reveal their talents
- Establish a sustainable employment system in all phases to boost retaining of jobs.
- Use social media's power to build an awareness of employment of autistic persons.

Good practices in Ireland

Context

Aspire Ireland and Aspire Productions

Introduction

Aspire Ireland is a social enterprise media company for talented creatives on the Autism spectrum.
Aspire Ireland "envisions a world where autistic people have the same opportunities to work, socialise and participate as everyone else."

Context

My Access Hub works by using eLearning and Virtual Reality to immerse employees in scenarios that educate them on how small things within their workplace can have a huge impact on employees.

Introduction

"It's about using technology to enable companies to build autism inclusive workplaces. This means educating employees within the companies to understand what it's like for an individual with autism in your workplace, and how you can make it better for them. That means reducing the physical barriers, like lighting and office layouts and sounds, but also basic communication and understanding the things that make it difficult for them in the workplace."
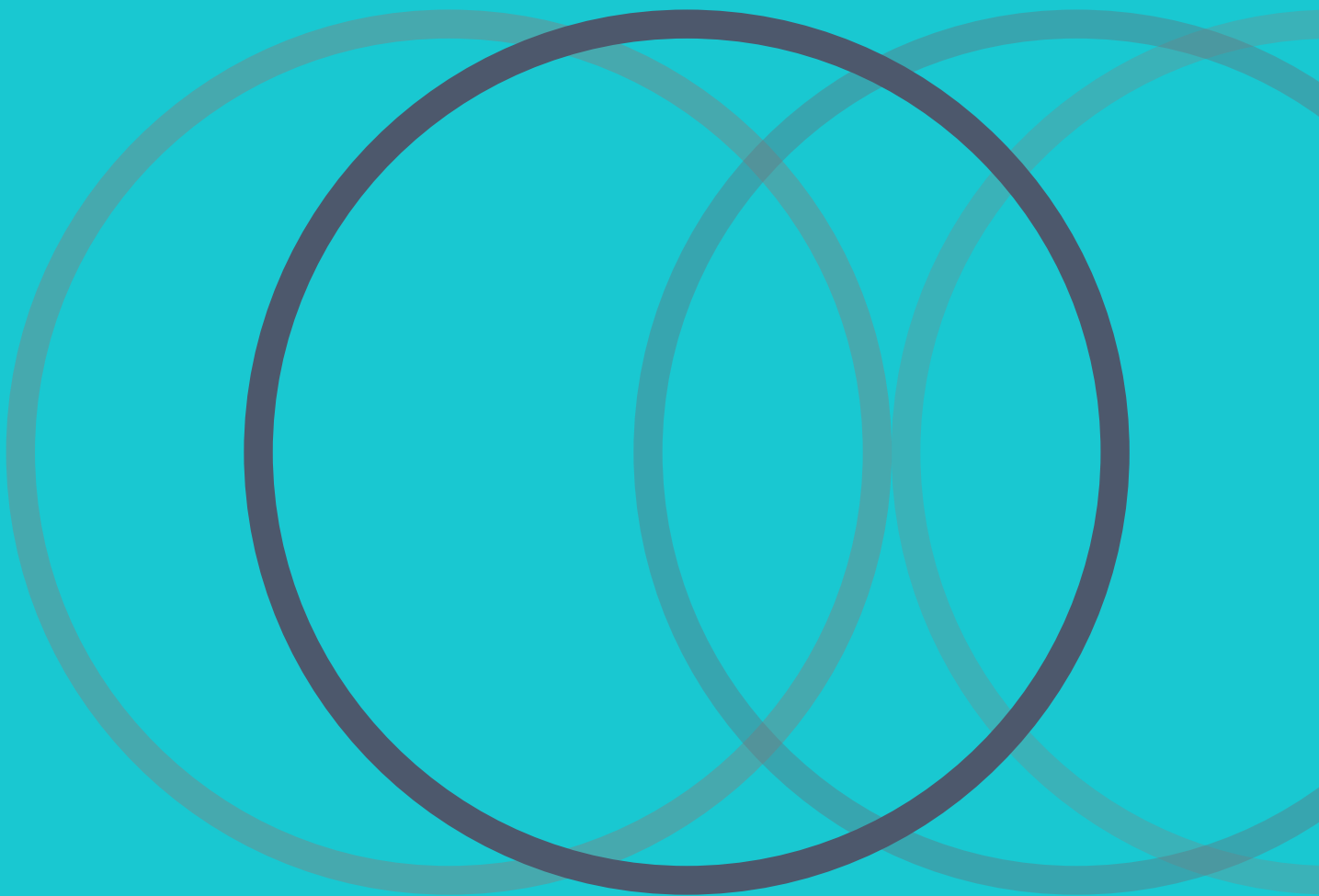
SECTION C – Training Curriculum and Guidelines