TALENTED

SUPPORTING AUTISTIC EMPLOYEES AT WORK

Manual

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Project Information

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Project title:	**TalentED**
Project number:	2023-1-DE02-KA220-ADU-000154578
Funding Programme:	Erasmus+ Key Action 2: Co-operation Partnerships in Adult Education
Project website:	www.talent-asd.com
Project result:	WP5.5 TalentED Awareness pack
Project coordinator:	Pro Arbeit (Germany)
Authoring partner:	CATRO Bulgaria
Date of preparation:	16.09.2026

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Introduction

Supporting autistic employees is an important part of creating an inclusive, respectful, and effective workplace. For HR specialists, understanding autism helps ensure that recruitment, onboarding, communication, and career development processes are accessible and fair to everyone.

Autistic employees bring valuable strengths with them, which contribute significantly toward the realisation of the organisation's goals. At the same time, they may benefit from reasonable adjustments such as clear communication, predictable processes, flexible working arrangements, or a more supportive sensory environment.

When organisations recognise and respond to these needs, they not only support employee wellbeing but also strengthen engagement, retention, and team performance. Inclusive HR practices help create a workplace where autistic employees can contribute their skills, develop professionally, and succeed.

The TalentED Project believes in the "Nothing about us without us „principle. That is why 7 Co-design workshops were held in 7 European countries where adults with autism, as well as professionals working in labour market inclusion such as trainers, social workers, mental health specialists, HR experts and career consultants, discussed

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together what the most pressing needs and the most suitable adaptations are. The results of those deliberations have been presented below.

1. Understanding Autism

It is impossible to prepare any sort of adaptation without knowing who you are dealing with. Autism has been surrounded by many myths – not necessarily ill-intentioned – but always harmful to a proper understanding of the needs and potential of employees with autism. We have gathered some of the most common ones and tried to reveal the facts behind them. The myths are also available on the TalentED website as flip cards.

Myth	Truth
Autism is caused by **vaccination.**	The claim comes from a flawed study from 1998, which has been subsequently retracted. Many high-quality research studies involving hundreds of thousands of people have excluded the possibility of a link between vaccines and autism.
Autism is a **disease** and can be cured.	Autism is a variation in human brain wiring; it can neither be removed nor treated away. Miracle cures not only fail to work, but they are often dangerous.
Doesn't autism affect only **children**?	Autism affects adults in the same way it does children and people do not "grow out" of it. However, because of different diagnostic criteria and a generally lower awareness, many adults were not diagnosed in time.
Autistic employees cannot work independently and need **constant support**.	Many autistic people perform very effectively, especially when tasks, expectations and priorities are clear.
All autistic people are super **smart**.	While some autistic people develop impressive skills in specific areas of expertise by devoting a lot of time and effort to them, expecting this as a general rule is unrealistic.
All autistic people have essentially **the same** characteristics.	There are many different kinds of people with autism with different needs, interests and talents. Grouping them together does not provide any useful information.
Autistic people are **loners** and don't like being around	People with autism are different. Many of them enjoy

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Myth	Truth
other people.	socialising as much as anyone else and are highly empathetic.
Autistic people **cannot communicate** with others.	Many autistic people have a rational, direct communication style that makes them very effective communicators.
Autistic people **don't like** being **touched**.	Preferences regarding physical contact vary from person to person and should not be generalised.
Autistic people eat only **their own food**.	Eating preferences and sensory sensitivities vary greatly between individuals. Food-related preferences should not be generalised to all autistic people.
Autistic employees **cannot adapt** to changes. They are afraid of everything unknown and unfamiliar.	While unclear information and significant stress indeed affect their performance, autistic people can adapt to changes when sufficient time is provided and are often curious to discover new ways of doing things.
Autistic employees **cannot lead** other people.	Different communication styles also do not prevent leadership. With appropriate opportunities and support, autistic people can successfully perform managerial and leadership roles.
Autistic people work only as a **hobby** or **privilege.**	Autistic people work because they have the same right to employment as anyone else and seek meaningful participation, independence and professional development.
Autistic people are **aggressive** or	Many challenges arise from a lack of understanding rather

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Myth	Truth
unpredictable.	than from autism itself. Disrespecting personal boundaries and stress can produce an adverse reaction in anyone.

2. Strengths of the Autistic Employees

Employers risk losing valuable talent when decisions are influenced by stereotypes. Autistic employees possess valuable skills and strengths that are often under-recognised. Inclusive workplaces benefit from diversity of perspectives, skills and ways of thinking. The effort is worth it, as employers benefit directly from neurodiversity. Below you can see some of the most common strengths of employees with autism. Of course, skills and abilities are always individually developed and should never be assumed and preferably tested during the hiring and onboarding process.

Focus • Strong ability to maintain focus and concentration • Peaceful and focused work style	
Commitment • High levels of commitment • Systematic and methodical working style • Perseverance • Persistence • Reliability	

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Quality Assurance • Consistency in methods • High attention to detail • Ensuring consistent quality output over time • Very good literacy	
Critical Thinking Ability • Logical thinking • Investigative and analytical approaches • Advanced problem-solving skills • Good pattern recognition	
A Solid Knowledge Base • Specialist knowledge in areas of interest • Strong memory and information retention	
Innovation and creativity • Curiosity • Original and creative thinking • Willingness to try out new things • Willingness to act	
Communication • Openness • Honesty • Rational communication • Willingness to help others • Empathy • Sensitivity and awareness of nuances	

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3. Workplace Challenges

The realisation of the full potential of employees with autism may be hindered by a variety of factors. The ones presented below are not exclusive to people with autism, nor do they apply to all of them, but are a useful baseline for considering the most likely factors you should watch out for. Be on the watch for any of the following factors occurring in your company:

Stereotypes

- Stereotypes, assumptions, and prejudice have a negative impact in general.
- One of their manifestations is the **low expectations** managers and teams have towards colleagues with autism
- The over-reliance on **first impressions** during standard job interviews may lead to valuable skills being missed.
- A **diagnostic bias** also exists: e.g., diagnostic criteria were historically tailored predominantly towards men, creating barriers for women/non-binary individuals.
- Taboos exist that prevent the open discussion of workplace challenges of employees with autism. This is linked to the fact that a diagnosis may cause the actual human being to be disregarded in favour of stereotypes.

Work Structure

- **Unclear** or poorly defined **expectations** are one of the primary barriers to effective performance by employees with autism.
- **Frequent interruptions** are a sure way to drastically impair their ability to deliver quality outputs.
- **Unexpected changes**, especially when not communicated properly, are a huge source of stress.

Physical environment

- **Sensory overstimulation** may create additional stress for some employees.
- Open-plan spaces make employees with autism especially vulnerable to overstimulation.
- The same can be expected of overcrowded spaces.
- High levels of noise have a detrimental effect.
- Strong lighting is to be avoided.

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Workload

- **Overworking** and overly strict demands can cause employees with autism to fail at tasks, procrastinate or be seen as lazy.
- Intense stress is known to disrupt sleep patterns.
- **Masking** – mimicking neurotypical employees, can lead employees with autism to believe that they face no actual challenges but causes great psychological strain.

Validation

- **Lack of validation** when sharing challenges is especially damaging.
- The worst thing a manager could do is to resort to **threats of punishment** in a situation where performance is lacking.

4. Inclusive Communication at the Workplace

An issue of key importance is the possibility of misunderstandings between autistic employees and colleagues or managers. Differences in communication style may sometimes be interpreted incorrectly as lack of interest, poor motivation or unwillingness to cooperate. Therefore, it is of utmost importance not to make assumptions and instead to communicate openly about expectations and support needs. The best way to understand the employees' needs is to ask them directly and to respect their answers.

Establishing transparent, direct, and clear communication channels is a great way to prevent misunderstandings. You can go a long way towards improving the communication in your organisation if you respect the following recommendations:

Don't:	Instead:

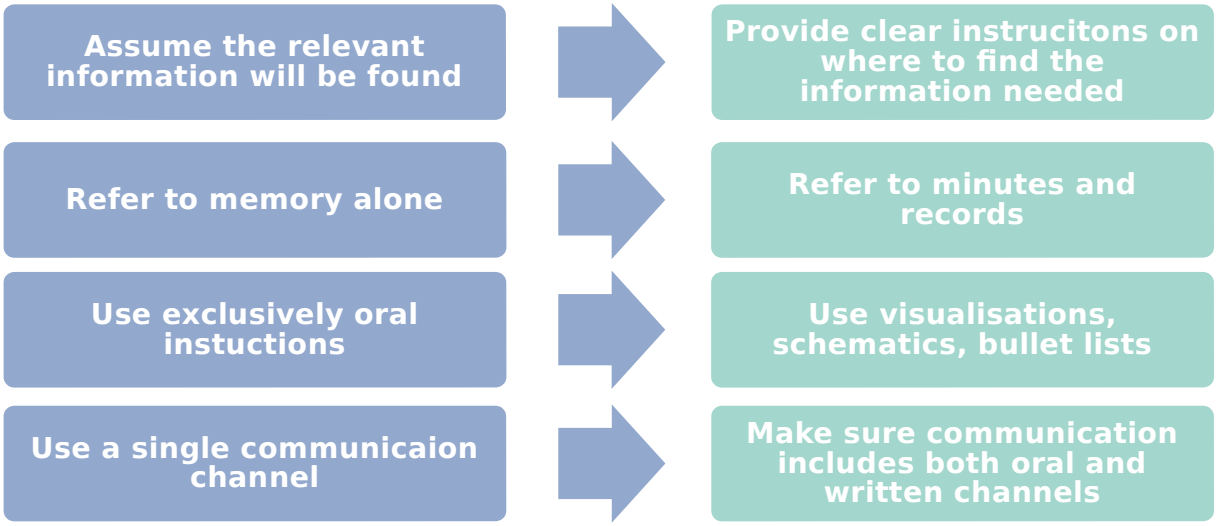
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Assume you know what the other person needs	Ask directy about needs and preferences
Ironise, ridicule or blame	Take statements of autistic indivuduals seriourly
Assume tasks and reposnibilities are always clear	State your expectations explicitly & confirm the undersanding
Abuse irony	Be clear about what you mean
Jump over subjects	Focus clearly on the task at hand
Discuss all aspects of a topic whenever they come to mind	Use a clear structure, do not skip or jump between points
Introduce last-minute changes	Announce changes in advance with sufficient time to prepare
Rush	Take the time needed
Overfocus on explaining	Engage in a dialogue
Assume you will be contacted if needed	Give room for feedback and actively seek it

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5. Workplace Adjustments and Support

Understanding and reasonable adjustments can significantly improve workplace participation and success. As in all other cases, there is no magical bullet and no solution fits all employees in the same way. Nevertheless, here is a good check-list to start with towards creating a more inclusive work environment in your company:

Improve understanding

- Consider the needs of neurodiverse employees **seriously**.
- Always try to **understand**.
- Provide autism and neurodiversity **awareness training** for managers and teams.
- When in doubt, **ask, don't assume**. Not everyone has the same needs.
- Pay strict attention to **verbal statements** and take them at face value.

Provide proper onboarding

- Reframe **job descriptions** to be direct, transparent, and focused on the most relevant skills.
- Develop **personalised onboarding** and support processes (buddies/mentors).
- Define **expectations** and requirements clearly and confirm understanding
- Provide **structured instructions** and step-by-step guidance.

Establish a suitable work environment

- Offer quiet/**low-stimulation spaces** that help reduce sensory overload.
- **Short breaks** can help address individual sensory needs.
- Open office spaces and bright lighting are not for everyone.
- Remote work/Working from home offers excellent opportunities to adapt to

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Lack of awareness remains one of the main barriers to inclusion. Many teams prefer to stick to familiar grounds and do not tolerate any differences. Managers often assume they know what their employees need instead of asking them.

Sometimes inclusion is perceived as a mere "facade" without real commitment. Yet, workplace adaptations often benefit all employees, not only autistic workers, contributing to a more inclusive and productive organisational culture. Fostering a workplace culture based on understanding, respect, and inclusion is good for the whole business.

As a manager or an HR professional who wants to set the pace for the company becoming truly inclusive, you could start with the following steps:



7. Useful Resources

The TalentED project has developed additional resources to support autistic employees at work. Here is a quick overview:

- '14 myths and truths about autism' **flip cards**
- **Video** series 'Autistic Strengths Make Outstanding Employees'
- A **toolbox** for the activation of autistic adults including good practices, inspirational quotes, inspiring role models, benefit cards, Q&A cards, and a job-fitting map
- A **board game** for sensitizing people and organisations on why inclusion is necessary

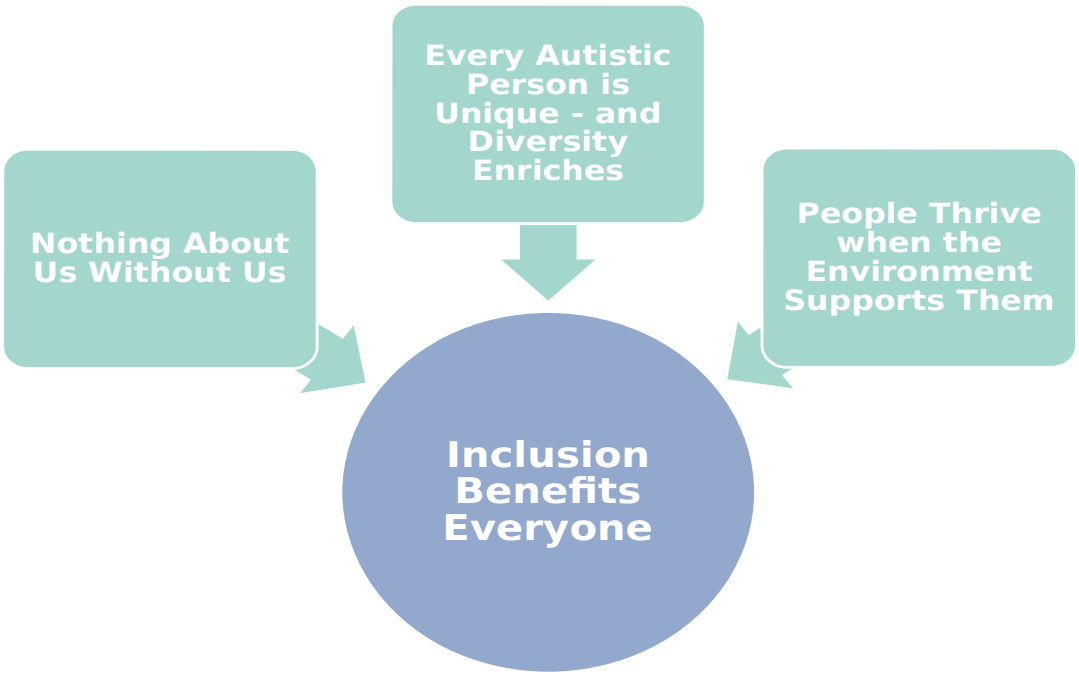
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- A **handbook** for employers, educators, and policymakers to help them create inclusive workplaces for autistic individuals
- A **training pack** for autistic adults and trainers.

8. Key Messages

In the end, inclusion is a unique journey for each company and team. By engaging in an open and frank exchange with your colleagues, you might discover the best way to make their time in your company as pleasant and productive as possible.



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