Hiring on the Spectrum

Employer Guide to Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)

Many employers are interested in hiring a group of capable yet under-utilized individuals: those on the Autism Spectrum. With prevalence rates of about 1 out of 250 people in the United States, it is likely that you already know someone on the Spectrum, and may already be working with someone on the Autism Spectrum.

At Rochester Institute of Technology, we enjoy a diverse student population including many students with disabilities and a percentage of students who identify as being on the Autism Spectrum. The Disability Services Office, Office of Career Services and Cooperative Education, and the Spectrum Support Program at RIT work together to support these students in attaining their career goals.

You may encounter students on the Spectrum when recruiting and hiring RIT students for your organization. This guide will help you work effectively with these students as candidates and employees.

Objectives include:

1) Understanding the characteristics of ASD
2) Understanding the benefits of hiring individuals with ASD
4) Employer best practices
   a. Recruiting
   b. Interviewing
   c. On-boarding and training
   d. Managing
5) Suggested accommodations
6) Case studies

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Characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorders

ASD is a “spectrum” disorder, which means that it affects each individual differently. No one descriptor is accurate for all people with ASD. Similarly, effective strategies for working with individuals with ASD can vary greatly. If you are working with (or think you are working with) someone on the autism spectrum, you may notice the following:

**COMMUNICATION**

- Awkward eye contact, postures, or gestures
- Delayed verbal responses
- Difficulty understanding tone, facial expressions, or other subtle messages

**SKILLS**

- Attention to detail, accuracy
- Encyclopedic memory
- Strong logic and analytic skills

**INTERESTS**

- Intense interest in narrowly defined topics
- “How things work”
- May translate to career interests

**ORGANIZATION**

- Skilled at uni-tasking
- Appear not to take initiative, may take longer to complete a task
- Overwhelmed by too many interruptions or multi-tasking

**SENSORY & MOTOR**

- Use of calming strategies such as pacing or tapping
- Sensitivity to lighting, room temperature, noises, smells, or textures
- Take longer to process spoken words and formulate a reply

Notes:
**How do I know if someone is on the Spectrum?**

They may tell you. We encourage job seekers to be open with their employers about any accommodations they might need and share any information that would be helpful for their manager to know. The information that they do or do not share is up to them. Any and all of the strategies included in this guide may be equally helpful whether or not the student has disclosed.

**Benefits of employing individuals on the Autism Spectrum**

Many managers are seeking individuals on the Autism Spectrum as job candidates. In addition to strong academic performance, individuals on the spectrum often contribute to their workplaces in unique ways.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Growing and varied population</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• ASD prevalence in the United States continues to grow. Advances in understanding and supporting individuals with ASD mean that more are completing college than ever before</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Individuals with ASD work successfully in many fields, and are often drawn to computing, scientific research, software testing, and media design and development</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Characteristics</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>• Focus, reliability, honesty, and a preference for work over office politics</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Tolerance of repetition and routine which is valuable many types of jobs</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Efficiency</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>• Supports that help individuals with ASD in their adjustment to the workplace often provide clarity to all employees (such as establishing long-term and short-term goals for employees)</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Enhanced supervisory and co-working skills</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>• Coworkers and supervisors can learn to communicate more effectively and better understand social dynamics</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Skills</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Attention to detail, accuracy, and memory for details</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Strong logic and analytic skills</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Problem-solving</strong></th>
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<td>• Ability to think outside of the box and discover original solutions</td>
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**Common areas of challenge for individuals on the Autism Spectrum** are organization, reading social cues and understanding someone else’s point of view, and sensory and motor integration.

| Difficulty with organization means that a person with ASD may… | • Have trouble getting started with projects and appear not to take initiative  
• Not know how long an assignment should take  
• Focus too much on details  
• Become locked in black and white thinking  
• Have trouble with short-term memory  
• Need direction about what the finished product should look like  
• Require written instructions and notes  
• Need help prioritizing tasks and organizing information  
• Get overwhelmed with too many interruptions or requirements to multi-task  
• Ask many questions in an attempt to clarify assignment  
• Act impulsively, based on too little information  
• Resist change |
| --- | --- |
| Difficulty reading social cues and understanding someone else’s point of view mean that a person with ASD may… | • Take language literally and miss nuances like implied meanings or sarcasm  
• Speak to a supervisor in the same way that they would talk to a peer  
• Talk at length about areas of interest  
• Not know how to make “small talk” and therefore may appear friendly and interested  
• Make statements that are too honest, unintentionally offending others  
• Neglect to make eye contact or to smile  
• Have difficulty controlling anger or frustration  
• Interrupt; talk too slowly/quickly; too loudly/softly  
• End a conversation simply by walking away |
| Difficulties with sensory and motor abilities means that a person with ASD may… | • Have sensitivity to lighting, room temperature, noises, smells, or textures  
• Require written instructions  
• Take longer to process spoken words and formulate a reply  
• Need breaks to avoid sensory overload |
Autism Spectrum Disorders and Employment

Securing employment can be challenging for college graduates, but people on the Autism Spectrum often face additional barriers. Unemployment and underemployment are higher in the ASD population when compared to their “neurotypical” peers, and their job search process may take several months. Skills and abilities unique to the ASD population, however, have garnered the attention of many employers. Specialisterne, SAP, and Microsoft have all specifically sought out candidates on the Autism Spectrum for software development and testing positions.

Some employers feel ill-prepared to accommodate job candidates on the Autism Spectrum. A few small adjustments to the recruiting, training, and managing of individuals on the spectrum can help candidates and employers work effectively together.

**Recruiting**

Occasionally the way a job description is written may deter a candidate on the Autism Spectrum from applying. The following suggestions will allow candidates on the Autism Spectrum select the positions appropriate for their interpersonal skills, technical abilities, and preferred work environments.

1. Write out job descriptions clearly and concisely. Avoid jargon, colloquialisms, and vague language.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job description is subject to interpretation</th>
<th>Job description is clear and direct</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Job title: “Social Media Ninja” “Technical Sherpa”</td>
<td>“Social Media Account Manager” or “Technical Support Specialist”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics: “Serial innovator”</td>
<td>“Demonstrate enthusiasm for new technologies”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Good team player”</td>
<td>“Works effectively with diverse groups. Demonstrates reliability, active listening, expresses thoughts clearly”</td>
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2. Help candidates “decode” your job descriptions by detailing how different skills sets will be used.

- To indicate a *non-negotiable* qualification:
  - Must-have
  - Extensive, verifiable experience
  - Do not apply unless you meet these requirements
- To indicate a *negotiable* qualification:
  - …Is a plus
  - The ideal candidate will have
  - Preferred
  - Desired
- To indicate *basic skill* level requested:
  - Working knowledge of
  - Some experience with
Familiarity with

- To indicate advanced skill level requested:
  - Expert ability
  - Strong knowledge of
  - Proven track record

3. Provide a place to request accommodations during the interview process

Notes:

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**Interviewing**

Interviewing is always challenging for students, but for students with social difficulties it can be paralyzing. Candidates with ASD may freeze up and not be able to communicate their skills and abilities effectively. When compared against their peers, candidates on the Autism Spectrum may come across as awkward, nervous, or even unenthusiastic, even though their skills and personal characteristics may be a great fit for the job. Employers usually have brief time with a candidate, and the following suggestions will help candidates with ASD best demonstrate their skills.
1. Be careful of language choice- questions will likely be taken literally. Use a combination of open and closed questions to solicit skill sets and abilities. Asking questions about past experience, rather than how the candidate would handle hypothetical situations, for example:
   - Tell me about a time when you…
   - Do you have experience with x? Describe your experience
   - Describe how you handle tight deadlines

2. Remember “Show and tell.” Candidates on the Autism Spectrum may not always be adept at marketing their skills. Giving candidates opportunities to demonstrate their skills, rather than simply describe them, allows interviewers to confirm candidates’ abilities.
   - Assessment or test of skills prior to interview
   - Request work samples or portfolio to be discussed during the interview
   - Create work trials
   - Give an assignment based on work performed at the company to be discussed during the interview

3. Use accommodations when needed. The following accommodations are likely to improve a candidates’ comfort with the interview process and do not provide an unfair advantage.
   - Provide a copy of the questions prior to the interview
   - Interviewee requests a specific time of day
   - Phone or online interviews
   - Give a tour of facility during interview to help candidates assess work environment and identify accommodations

Notes:
On-boarding and Training

New employees on the Autism Spectrum often exceed their managers’ expectations in terms of their technical abilities, but require extra support in navigating communicative and organizational tasks related to their work.

Use the concept of corporate culture as an example:

Describe your company’s corporate culture:

How might you describe the company’s corporate culture to someone on the Autism Spectrum?

Employers can help their employees succeed by providing extra training and support in prioritizing, knowing who to ask for help, and giving clear directions. Assigning a mentor, providing instructions in writing, and making social events optional are all steps that can ease the employee’s transition. Other suggestions include:

1. Provide details such as deadlines (time frames, schedules) and outcomes (what it looks like, formatting)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unclear expectation</th>
<th>Clear expectation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Please complete the data-processing project”</td>
<td>“I expect to have the first draft of the data-processing project by completed 1pm tomorrow. It has to be in electronic format so that I can check it and get back to you.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Describe your company’s corporate culture:
2. Don’t make assumptions about what your employees does or does not understand. Ensure that directions are understood.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assumed confirmation</th>
<th>Confirmation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Do you understand how to accomplish this?”</td>
<td>“Now that I’ve given you the assignment, what task will you complete first? Second?”</td>
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3. Given your employee instructions on how you want them to communicate with you (email, face-to-face), and how often. Encourage alternative forms of communication, such as texting.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Supervisory role is unclear</th>
<th>Clear opportunity for supervision</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“We can talk about the project later”</td>
<td>“The next time we will talk about the project is during our team meeting, tomorrow at 1:00pm.”</td>
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**Managing**

Individuals on the Autism Spectrum benefit from a clear, direct supervisory style.

1. Be direct. Say exactly what you mean and identify exactly what you want. The more detail you can provide, the better your employee will understand.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement with implied meaning</th>
<th>Clear, direct statement</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Are you going to work on the database assignment?”</td>
<td>“Please begin your work on the database assignment.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Let’s get lunch later.”</td>
<td>“Please meet us in the cafeteria at 12:00pm if you would like to each lunch with us.”</td>
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</table>

2. Avoid any indirect pattern of speech, including clichés, implied meanings, and idioms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement with idiomatic meaning</th>
<th>Statement with literal meaning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“This assignment is going to give you a run for your money!”</td>
<td>“This assignment is very challenging”</td>
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3. Use primarily your words to communicate. Don’t rely on non-verbal communication to get your message across.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Message sent with non-verbal communication</th>
<th>Message sent with clear, verbal directions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manager notices that a meeting with an</td>
<td>“Now that our meeting is over, I need you to</td>
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employee has gone five minutes beyond scheduled time, and glances at her watch several times.

return to you work station now because we have work to complete.”

4. Provide details such as deadlines (time frames, schedules) and outcomes (what it looks like, formatting)

5. Provide detailed guidance and feedback; focus on behaviors that can be measured.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Undetailed feedback</th>
<th>Detailed feedback</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“This report is sloppy.”</td>
<td>“The proposal you presented as ready for delivery has numerous spelling and math errors.”</td>
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</table>

6. Assist employees in assigning priority to assignments. For example, divide large assignments into several small tasks, provide a checklist of assignments, or use a wall calendar to emphasize due dates. Consider developing a cheat sheet for high priority activities, people, and projects. You might also try assigning new tasks only after the current tasks have been completed and establish long-term and short-term goals for employee. Assign projects in a systematic and predictable manner.

Notes:
Suggested workplace accommodations and self-accommodations for employees on the Autism Spectrum

Employees often have questions about how to accommodate employees on the Autism Spectrum. There is no pre-established set of accommodations to use; others may only need a few accommodations to complete their jobs and others need none at all. The following is only a sample of the possibilities available. Work directly with your employee to discuss which, if any, accommodations may be helpful.

The following arrangements might be self-accommodations used by the employee, or accommodations that an employer may provide:

**Sensory stimulation:** People on the Spectrum often can exhibit strong focus on one task at a time. They may experience intolerance to distractions such as office traffic, employee chatter, and common office noises such as fax tones and photocopying.

- To reduce auditory distractions:
  - Wear a noise canceling headset
  - Hang sound absorption panels
  - Use a white noise machine
  - Office space that minimizes or eliminates audible distractions
- To reduce visual distractions:
  - Use space enclosures (cubicle walls)
  - Reduce clutter in the employee's work environment
- To reduce tactile distractions
  - Ask co-workers to approach an individual in a way that is not startling (avoid approaching from behind or unexpectedly touching the employee)

**Atypical Body Movements:** Individuals on the Spectrum may exhibit atypical body movements such as pacing or fidgeting. These body movements often help calm the person or assist them in concentrating on tasks, but can also disturb co-workers at times.

- Use hand-held squeeze balls and similar objects to provide sensory input or calming effect
- Work from home if appropriate
- Private workspace allows individual room to move about and also not disturb others by movements such as fidgeting

**Stress Management:** Situations that create stress can vary from person to person, but could likely involve heavy workloads, unrealistic timeframes, shortened deadlines, or conflict among coworkers.

- Provide positive reinforcement
- Modify work schedule
- Provide sensitivity training for workforce
- Flexible work schedule
In your role, what kinds of interactions might you have with an individual on the Autism Spectrum (e.g., interviewer, co-worker, or manager)?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What strengths might an individual with ASD bring?</th>
<th>What areas do you anticipate might be challenging?</th>
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<tr>
<th>How can you help to ensure success?</th>
<th>What would you need from that individual?</th>
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Notes: