

## Social Inclusion of People With Autism Spectrum Syndrome Through Virtual Reality



**IO3: Manual for Employment of People with Autism Spectrum Disorder and related good practices**



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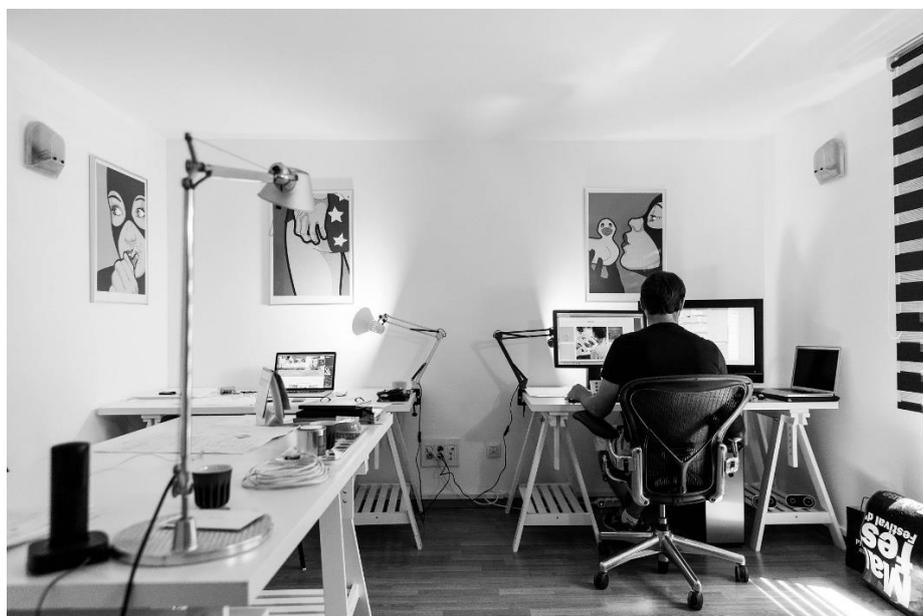
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## Introduction

Welcome to the Manual for the Employment of People with Autism Spectrum disorder and the Related Good Practices, that has been created under the project “Social Inclusion of People With Autism Spectrum Syndrome Through Virtual Reality”, which is co-funded by the European Union under the Erasmus+ program.

“Social Inclusion of People with Autism Spectrum Disorder Through Virtual Reality” is a project that deals with the social inclusion and employment of people with ASD. People with ASD face persistent challenges in social communication and social interaction. These challenges in social skills, as well social prejudice, bias, and misconceptions, can make it difficult for them to navigate standard everyday situations while pursuing and maintaining employment.

Thus, they often experience social exclusion, marginalization, and difficulties in being active citizens contributing to society to the maximum of their abilities. The project has developed VR tools that through simulated everyday situations, train and enhance the social skills of adults with ASD and improve their ability to navigate situations related to everyday life and/or employment. The innovative part of the project is that the VR toolkit is developed in collaboration with people with ASD, which means that the tools are created together with those who will also use them for training. The present manual is aimed to support potential employers in their efforts for a more inclusive and diverse work environment and it was created using a collaborative, co-creating methodology that included desk research, field research, frequent revisions, and contextualization for each partner country through the inclusion of local and/or national best practices.



## Who are we?

Ποιοι είμαστε:

### VIFIN

The coordinator of the project is Videnscenter for Integration (VIFIN) which is a knowledge and research center established in 2002 by the Municipality of Vejle, Denmark to collect and process knowledge on integration, and to develop and implement integration projects and activities. It creates, disseminates and mainstreams good practice on integration and social development on a local, regional, national and international levels with the vision to be the leader in knowledge building, dialogue and innovation on integration and development.

VIFIN's project portfolio demonstrates a diverse involvement in this field, ranging from online platforms for teaching Danish as a second language, promoting entrepreneurship among migrants, developing strategies to include ICT in integration and venues for cultural exchange among migrants through networking activities.

VIFIN has established its leadership in Denmark in using digital-based technologies in language learning and integration, as seen in project such as e- and mobile-learning of Danish as a second language to migrants including trade-focused mini-dictionaries, creating 3D computer games with voice recognition technology. What is more, it also conducts training courses for teachers in e-learning and pedagogy, conducts surveys and development of integration methodologies, in partnership with institutions involved in migrant integration both in Denmark and Europe.

Vifin has a network of more than 500 municipalities, learning institutions and non-government organizations in Denmark and in Europe.

You can find more information here: [www.vifin.dk](http://www.vifin.dk)

The partner leading the creation of the manual is SYNTHESIS Center for Research & Education which is based in Nicosia, Cyprus. SYNTHESIS is a pioneering organization which initiates and implements projects of positive social impact -particularly in the fields of employment, entrepreneurship, migrant integration and social inclusion-.

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SYNTHESIS is working primarily with those who are at risk of early school leaving and social exclusion, whether at school or society at large (such as those from migrant background, students with hearing impairments, autism, or mild intellectual disabilities). It is working closely with schools for promoting life skills and entrepreneurial education as well as

implementing programs for the prevention of violence, bullying and discrimination. Some of the support services offered include the following: Assessment of learning difficulties; mentoring support on developing life skills (such as self-esteem, creativity, emotional intelligence); and mentoring support for developing learning strategies in order to improve lifelong learning performance and thus preventing social and professional marginalization. SYNTHESIS is one of the leading institutions in the country in the fields of social entrepreneurship, sustainable development and global education. It founded and manages “Hub Nicosia,” an educational center and a community of organizations with cultural, environmental and social aims. Furthermore, it offers training on social entrepreneurship, global and peace education, as well as sustainable development. It has experience in developing educational material and facilitating youth trainings relevant to sustainable development, including human rights, peace and conflict resolution, responsible production and consumption, and sustainable cities and communities.

As an accredited VET educational institution and provider of adult education, SYNTHESIS focuses on the development of training programs that can enhance the employment of people who experience or at risk of social inclusion, including NEET youth, migrant, people with disabilities, or those who lesser opportunities. SYNTHESIS is currently delivering an action programs for refugees and asylum seekers, consisting of Greek and English language courses, professional training, as well as entrepreneurial and soft skills development.

You can find more information here: [www.synthesis-center.org](http://www.synthesis-center.org)

### WISAMAR

Wisamar, Germany is another one of our partners, Wisamar is a non-profit education provider in Leipzig, Germany, acting in vocational, cultural and adult education. Wisamar is accredited by TÜV as education provider according to AZAV principles (employment activities for the Federal Employment Office) and also by the Office for Migration and Refugees as Integration Course Provider. In the AZAV accreditation process the quality management system is audited on an annual basis.

Wisamar works in three areas:

- (Further) Education: We have several further training offers related to working life but also more informal areas. Current regular offers are Computer literacy/IT/Web programming, internationalisation and EU Mobility, Innovative teaching methods and Storytelling in education.

As an accredited integration course provider WISAMAR offers language courses and other offers for people with migrant background. The organization offers different approaches to support the labour market integration of drop-outs and unemployed in general as well as for people that are seeking for orientation. We give competence analysis, job application training, further education and also start-up consultancy as well as courses aiming at empowerment and activation of unemployed.

- Project Office: WISAMAR is an experienced partner and coordinator of different EU funded projects in thematic areas such as social and labour market integration, innovations in education and culture & creativity.

- EU Mobility & Mobility Consultancy: WISAMAR welcomes annually around 400 persons in EU mobility projects and are sending for different regional schools and companies.

The aim of the organisation is the promotion of education, tolerance and international attitude in all spheres of understanding between different people and cultures.

You can find more information here: [www.wisamar.de](http://www.wisamar.de)

### **Pistes-Solidaires**

Pistes-Solidaires, our partner from France, is an association that develops its projects and actions according to UNESCO's 4 pillars of education: learn to know, learn to be, learn to do, learn to live together and with the others.

GOAL: That each young person may benefit from the unique experience of international educational mobility. Education goes hand in hand with openness to the world and an understanding of local / global interdependencies.

#### **OUR WORK:**

- Promoting European and international openness in education
- Facilitating the educational mobility of young people in Europe and throughout the world
- Make each experience abroad a unique experience with high human and educational added value

#### **OUR APPROACH:**

Pistes-Solidaires bases its work on non-formal education methods, particularly those based on experiential learning and innovation.

#### **OUR METHOD:**

We create educational situations to develop social skills, to facilitate living together and to encourage a more diverse and inclusive society for all.

#### **AREAS OF WORK:**

Youth and educational mobility. The core of our work is to facilitate the access to the international mobility. We create and bring together internship and volunteering opportunities so that each year more than a hundred young people can live a European and/or international experience.

Social and educational innovation, Research and innovation are at the heart of this work area. European cooperation Centre is characterized by the creation of educational, social or socio-cultural resources resulting from projects carried out with European consortia.

Europe Direct Information Center

Our commitment: to inform, to advise, to understand, to know about the European Union, the countries that make it up, its functioning, its importance and its impact on our daily lives.

The principle of Pistes-Solidaires is to be a link with a strong local network for the implementation of this type of projects. Indeed, in these projects, we develop approaches and methods at a European level. The aim is to put them into practice in our network, which in fact constitutes a network of partners associated with our projects. As a consequence, this partner network will be indirect beneficiaries, a guarantee of the multiplication and sustainability of our actions, and the sustainability of our productions as close as possible to the public, ensuring that our work contributes to a more inclusive society, with equal opportunities for all.

You can find more information here: [www.pistes-solidaires.fr](http://www.pistes-solidaires.fr)

### **London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham**

London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham, is our partner from the UK. The London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham is a local authority in West London that provides services and information for residents, local businesses, and the local community. Children's Services is a department within this authority and works with schools, colleges and training providers to support students in identifying their options and opportunities. This includes meeting the Special Educational Need Development (SEND) agenda for all special needs young people, providing support through education and the curriculum along with projects specifically designed to aid young people with complex needs, such as Autism, Aspergers, ADHD. There are 4 specialist SEND schools in LBHF, and Queensmill school provides targeted support for young people with Autism and related conditions. Additionally specialist support is provided for this group within two secondary schools and each has a specialist SENCO. There is also a named advisory teacher situated within LBHF whose specific role is to explore and monitor support for young people with Autism and related conditions.

LBHF works across sectors, helping to provide synergies across all fields of actions concerning young people, including working with local businesses (BBC Studios, The Arts + Entertainment Network, Imperial College, Royal College of Art and others) to find, train and support volunteers to work with young people at risk. Their work ties in with Government priorities to make sure that all young people have the opportunity and guides to make their way into an adult life and the workplace.

You can find more information here: [www.lbhf.gov.uk](http://www.lbhf.gov.uk)

For a detailed account of the project and its deliverables you can visit: <https://autism-vr.eu/>

For a chance to connect through professional networks, you can visit: <https://www.linkedin.com/showcase/virtual-reality-for-autism>

## **Autism Spectrum Disorder in the Workplace Working Definitions and Key Concepts**

Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) are a group of conditions related to brain development and a diagnostic label given to a broad category of neurodevelopmental disorders. Its characteristic markers are impacts on social development, communication and behaviour resulting in difficulty with social interaction. It is defined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) as, “Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across contexts not accounted for by general developmental delays...”. (DSM).



The abilities, needs and level of functioning for people with autism can vary greatly and change over their lifetime. Autism can impact some individuals more mildly and they can live and function independently while others have significant disability and require lifelong care and support. Regardless of the extent of the impact that autism can have in individuals, it is widely recognized that autism can manifest significant obstacles in the employment process, challenges in maintaining employment, and potential strain on family and social relations. It is therefore important to continue to educate families, employers, carers and the general public about the issues and characteristics of the range of conditions that fall under Autism Spectrum Disorders.

### **Discovery of the condition and current diagnostic terms**

The term autism was coined in 1908 (1911) by German psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler who used it to describe symptoms of severe cases of people suffering from schizophrenia who were withdrawn and self-absorbed. Later in the 20th century, a German scientist named Hans Asperger described a milder form of autism, now known as Asperger's Syndrome. In 1987, the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) included a new definition of autism disorder with a diagnostic criteria checklist. Asperger's Syndrome was added to the DSM in 1984 to accommodate milder cases that referred to high functioning individuals. In 2013, the DSM-5 revised classifications and all types of autism were then merged into a single diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Asperger's Syndrome, childhood disintegrative disorder and pervasive developmental disorder are no longer considered separate diagnoses

but a part of the autism spectrum. Despite the different diagnostic processes in each country, and the different social contexts, most countries have officially endorsed the above and incorporated it into their national frameworks.

### **Journey to Diagnosis**

ASD begins in early childhood and affects social development and functioning into the later years. Its social impacts are widespread and can be significant depending on the severity of the condition. It affects a person's development in school, work and relationally throughout their life; impacting their personal, social, and family relationships.

It is typically developed within the first year of life and often children will experience a regression after 16 to 24 months of age which is when symptoms begin. They manifest in problems with social, emotional and communication skills and have unique ways of learning and responding to the world. They can be described as low functioning or high functioning although there is some argument that using these terms may prevent some high functioning individuals from seeking the support they need. It is also not uncommon for diagnosis to be delayed with children receiving a diagnosis late, even some people being diagnosed well into adulthood which results in not receiving critically important early intervention help. The availability of diagnostic and support resources can vary greatly from country to country while social, political, historical or even religious factors can affect how the conditions are diagnosed, treated and managed throughout a person's life.

### **Symptoms & Suspected Risk Factors and Causes**

The expression of autism can vary with each person however it results in a common neurological profile. Key characteristics include atypical language and communication, challenges in social interaction, sensory processing and motor coordination and executive functioning. This results in different ways of learning, paying attention, responding, and interacting in the world. Some signs and symptoms of ASD include:

- Effects on social communication and interaction:
- Aversion to maintaining eye contact and touch
- Delayed verbal responses or scripted speech
- Difficulty in establishing and maintaining friendships
- Difficulty understanding their own emotions and recognizing the emotions of others, understanding their tone, and reading facial expressions
- Lacking in non-verbal communication
- Effects on patterns of behaviour:
- Inflexibility of behaviour, rigidity in beliefs, habits, attitudes
- Difficulty coping with change and tolerating new routines and experiences
- Sensory hypersensitivity e.g., aversion to loud noises, unusual reactions to sensations
- Arranging things in a particular manner
- Repetitive movements such as rocking, spinning and hand flapping



### **Suspected Risk Factors**

Sex – boys are four times more likely than girls to develop autism spectrum disorder.

Comorbidities – Medical conditions such as Fragile X syndrome, Tuberous Sclerosis, and Rett Syndrome may increase risk. While some mental health disorders such as Depression, Anxiety and ADHD may co-occur.

Family history – Families with more than one child increase the risk of having another child with the disorder. Parental or relative history with social or communication problems themselves.

Pre-Term Birth – Born before 26 weeks gestation.

Parental Age – Possible link between children born to older parents and ASD, more research is needed to establish.

Link to Suspected Causes

Genetics

Environmental Factors – viral infections, air pollution, medications or complications during pregnancy have all been considered possibly play a role in triggering ASD.

### **Impacts & Current Status**

The effects of ASD on individual lives can be significant. The behavioural, social and communication challenges can lead to issues in school and learning. As well as employment

and workplace problems, challenges in independent living, experiences of social isolation, bullying and familial stress.

Rates of ASD are rising and the World Health Organization estimates 1 in 160 children has an ASD while prevalence may be substantially higher. (WHO) It is suggested that the increase in numbers can be explained due to improvements in screening and diagnosis and the wide availability of those diagnostic resources around the world.

There is no known cure for autism however early intervention and evidence-based psychosocial interventions are essential. They can improve the quality of the lives of children and their caregivers and create positive outcomes and independence into adulthood. Early interventions include applied behaviour analysis, social skills training, speech & language therapy, occupational therapy, parent management training, special education services, treating co-occurring conditions and medication. Complementary and alternative interventions are also considered by parents and caregivers involving special diets and supplements however there has been no research to recommend these interventions.

## **Language & Autism Spectrum Disorder**

The terminology around the autism spectrum disorders has changed over time and can vary across communities, organizations and professionals. Although ASD is now considered a group of conditions under one label, this may contribute to the discrepancy of the varied language and descriptions surrounding the conditions.

Current common terminology includes referring to individuals with ASD as person/people on the autism spectrum or person/people with autism.

Additionally, another term used within the autism community to refer to persons with autism is neurodiverse. Neurodiversity refers to the variation and differences in neurological structure and function that exist among humans. Neurodiverse differences in brain development and behaviour, that are not a result of mental disorders, are instead considered a result of normal variations. This paradigm suggests that there are infinite variations to human diversity and that there is no one “right” or “healthy” type of brain, mind, or neurocognitive functioning.

## **Autism Spectrum Disorder in the Workplace**

Persons on the autism spectrum and neurodiverse individuals may have trouble finding meaningful long-term employment. They may lack the soft skills employers seek such as people skills, social skills and communication skills which in turn affects employability and retention. Recent statistics from the UK’s Office for National Statistics showed that people with ASD had the lowest employment rate of any condition among individuals with disabilities with 21.5% employment as shown in the chart below.

These statistics demonstrate much work is needed to improve employment accessibility for people with ASD. Workplaces can improve accessibility in various ways including recruiting people with ASD and considering them in the recruitment process, assisting an employee

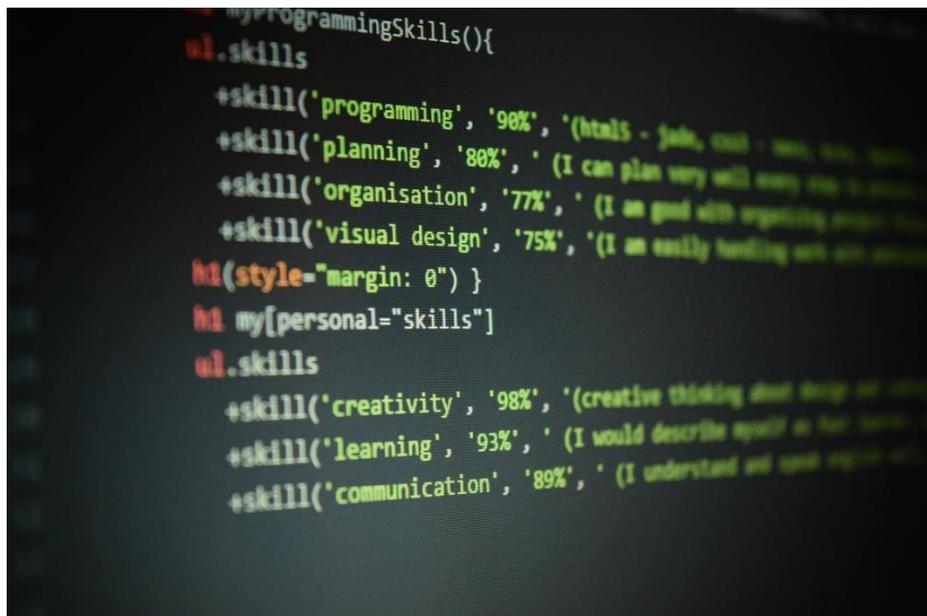
with accessing treatment, workplace flexibility with environment and communication, as well as supporting their workplace performance with accommodations e.g. headphones to assist with auditory overstimulation.

With the proper tools and strategies employers can support people with ASD to excel in their roles. There are many skills, gifts and talents people can bring to workplaces such as a high level of concentration, persistence, accuracy, technical ability and detailed factual knowledge and memory. Though there are significant challenges for people with autism, particularly in the workplace, attracting neurodiverse talent will enrich work environments with a varied workforce while working to create positive outcomes for people with ASD to fully integrate into society.

### The Hiring Process

It is important that employers become aware of the vast possibilities that neurodiversity can bring into the workplace and overcome their hesitations, bias, or prejudice when it comes to non-typical candidates. The first step in this process is to carefully consider and map the requirements for each vacancy and work position in a tailored manner, that reflects the actual characteristics that the position requires, rather than the commonalities and trivial elements habitually included in vacancy overviews. For example, is multitasking a true requirement or the employer would benefit more through a person able to focus on details and work uninterrupted on task after task?

Does the role actually require a “pleasant and congenial” personality or is this just a typical catch phrase included in all vacancies? Being descriptive, exact, concise, and accurate is key in order to attract the right candidates and also allow people to determine whether the role is a good fit to their personality and skills, even before the application process begins.



```
myProgrammingSkills(){
  ul.skills
  +skill('programming', '98%', '(html5 - java, rust - ... ..)')
  +skill('planning', '80%', '(I can plan very well every day)')
  +skill('organisation', '77%', '(I am good with organising things)')
  +skill('visual design', '75%', '(I am easily looking with eye)')
  h1(style="margin: 0") }
  h1 my[personal="skills"]
  ul.skills
  +skill('creativity', '98%', '(creative thinking that help us)')
  +skill('learning', '93%', '(I would describe myself as fast)')
  +skill('communication', '89%', '(I understand all work)')
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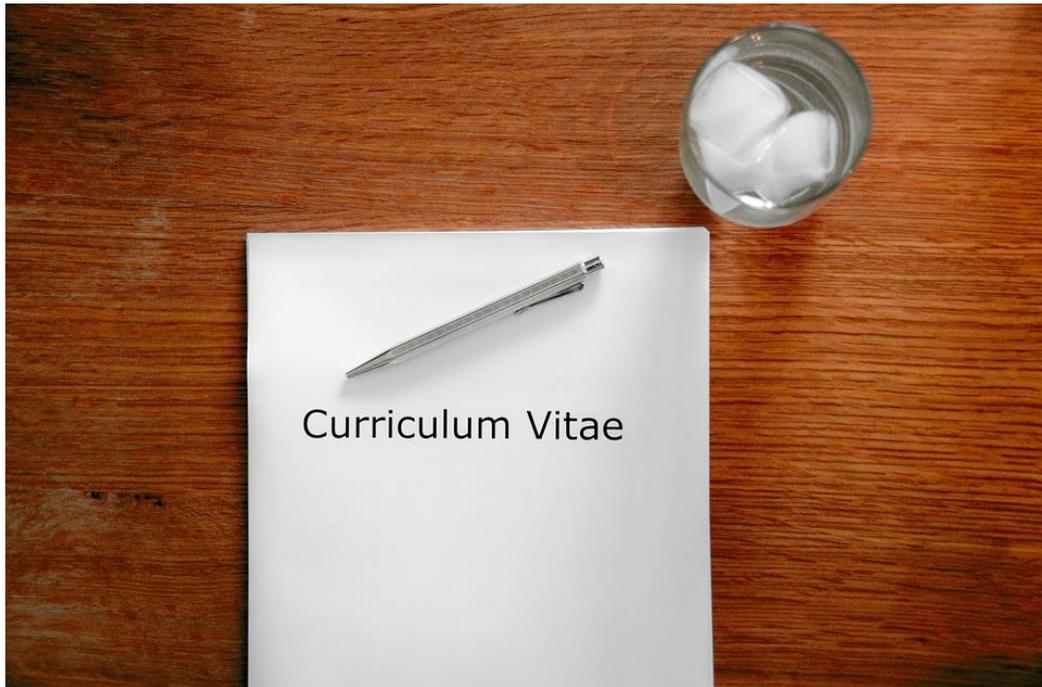
Some key points for advertising positions in an appealing manner to neurodiverse candidates include:

- Provide an accurate description of the role and the tasks and duties assigned to the role
- Provide some information on the reporting structure (to whom will the employee will be reporting to, and if other employees will be reporting to them)
- Provide detailed information on the schedule requirements and place of work (what hours is the employee expected to work and from which location)
- Indicate details such as annual leave, overtime pay, flexible working arrangements, be specific and open.
- Include additional requirements such as frequent travel, expectations to work on weekends and holidays
- Include information on benefits or other incentives offered
- Make a mention of the fact that the position is open to neurodiverse candidates
- If the position is sponsored or subsidized through some government or other scheme to offer opportunities to neurodiverse candidates, make a mention of that.
- Give accurate information on the range of the salary for the position and any opportunities for advancement and/or professional growth.
- If special licenses or permits are required, make a mention of them.

In addition to the usual places and outlets employers use to advertise their vacant positions such as: company websites, recruitment agencies, employment services, social media, dedicated websites, newspapers, or other; consider advertising suitable positions in associations of neurodiverse people, agencies that facilitate employment for people with disabilities, organizations/agencies/groups that work closely with neurodiverse people. In case the company/organization is using a recruitment agency or headhunters, make them aware that the position is open to neurodiverse candidates as well.

### **Screening CVs and Applications**

Once a job vacancy has been adequately and successfully advertised to the right audience, it is to be expected that quite a number of applications may come in, with the HR department or other suitable employees needing to sift through them to identify suitable candidates to call for interviews and the next steps in the hiring process. Depending on the type of vacancy and the internal process of the organization, candidates may be asked to send CVs, references, cover letters, filled out applications or a combination of those. If the position is open to neurodiverse candidates, there need to be some considerations regarding the standards applied to the selection process.



Neurodiverse candidates may have some difficulty in presenting or describing themselves in a manner that is expected in a cover letter or a CV and may also have reluctance or difficulty in asking and getting references in the event that they had been previously employed. Should you be using an application form, make sure that it has included the content necessary to highlight if the person has the necessary skills, knowledge, and attitudes needed in order to perform the job tasks, and avoid general questions or questions not directly relevant to the vacancy.

A short email may be a good option in order to figure out whether the candidate may have had difficulties in following the requirements of the hiring process, although they may meet the criteria set out in the job description; particularly if the candidate has indicated that they are neurodiverse or their application has come through some organization / association / agency supporting people with disabilities.

### **The Interview**

A job interview may be a daunting process even for neurotypical people, and it can be accompanied by heightened levels of stress and anxiety. These feelings of anxiety or stress may be even stronger and more prominent when neurodiverse people are asked to go through the process usually in an unfamiliar setting with unfamiliar people.



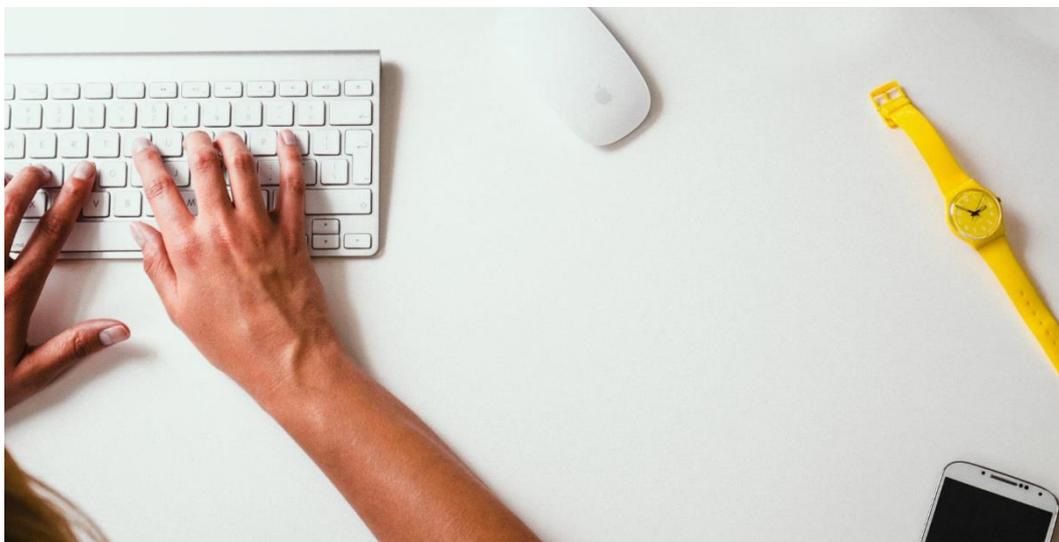
Below you may find some helpful tips to make the experience a positive and fruitful one:

- Give clear and precise instruction for the time and place of the meeting (include information about access, dress code, or other expectations).
- Specify the documentation -if any- that the candidate should have with them
- Describe the content and process of the interview in detail
- Provide content information for any questions, issues, or last minute changes
- Provide the name, position, contact info of the person(s) conducting the interview
- Avoid holding interviews in crowded, loud, noisy or busy places
- Avoid having too many interviewers at once
- Have the questions and other relevant documents ready and follow a clear structure and path for the interview.
- State your questions in a manner that is easy to answer and clear to follow
- Avoid too generalized or irrelevant questions
- Avoid using psychometric tools or other hiring tools that have not been customized for a neurodiverse audience
- Be direct, yet polite, and avoid misleading or confusing statements
- Give clear answers to questions and a clear timeline for next steps
- Be patient and allow a sufficient amount to conduct the interview without rush
- Give the floor to the candidate to voice their concerns and ask questions
- Be mindful of physical contact such as a handshake or similar, especially if the candidate doesn't see to comfortable with it.
- Do not be afraid to ask questions about how the candidate would like to be treated and what would enable them to have a good performance in their job interview.
- Even if the candidate was not successful, provide them with accurate and constructive feedback so that they can improve.
- Make sure to follow up as promised with updates regarding the process and its outcome.
- If the candidate is successful, make sure to let them know in a clear manner, also outlining the next steps and any other legal process that he/she will have to go through. Getting a new job can be a very happy occasion, but also a very stressful

period in one's life, the next chapter can provide some insights for a smooth transition into employment.

### **Employee Induction – Considerations for Neurodiverse People Starting in the Workplace**

The induction process for a new employee is an important time of integration to introduce them to the new workplace, to help them learn about the workplace culture and to inform them in depth about the policies and responsibilities of the workplace. For neurodiverse people, understanding their needs in this process, is essential to orienting them successfully. Preparing an induction toolkit and communicating in advance to identify needs and to set up accommodations will help neurodiverse people feel welcome, safe and supported in the new environment. No two neurodiverse people are the same so with an effective process, employers can ensure their first days are off to a great start. For companies looking to diversify their employee base, organization-wide seminars or awareness activities can help the existing employees become more familiar with neurodiversity and also get to voice their questions, comments or concerns. It can also be used as a preparatory tool to ensure that the organization / company has a basic level of awareness and understanding in order to receive and accommodate neurodiverse newcomers.



#### **First day considerations for a neurodiverse individual can look like this:**

Meeting colleagues – This may be overwhelming for some individuals, consider only introducing new employees to essential teammates. Start with key people and slowly introduce more as the days go by.



Tour of workplace – Consider any sensory impacts during the tour and adjust accordingly. Avoid areas of high traffic, loud noises, machinery etc. You can always introduce these areas in paper first and then tour them at a later stage when the employee is more familiar with the ongoing operations.

Organization and Role Introduction - Plan ahead! - Consider creating a toolkit that helps to identify needs that also includes the necessary induction information. Ensure that any material such as corporate information, policies & procedure and necessary documents like employment papers are sent out prior to their first day. This will clarify details and they can be aware of what to expect.

Introducing a Mentor – Have a mentor (manager or teammate) in the office to inform on workplace culture and resources, as well as be a safe point of contact if they are anxious, confused or stressed or require assistance during emergencies.



Welcome Lunch – Ask employee what their preference is for their welcome. E.g., One on one lunch in the office with a manager may be preferable to some vs. group social lunch at a loud restaurant.

### **Reasonable Accommodations for Neurodiverse Individuals**

In the day to day working environment, neurodiverse people may require unique assistance due to the nature of their condition. Addressing their needs sets them up to be successful and thrive in their new role. Accommodations can be made for any areas of concern from communication, physical aspects, sensory & environment aspects, behavioural, organizational, and physical challenges. Reasonable assistance can include, but is not limited to:

- Providing noise-reducing headphones if noise sensitivity is a concern.
- Turning off or dimming lights if light sensitivity is a concern.
- Corner desks or screens around the desk to limit sensory impact, e.g. quiet areas, fixed desks.
- Avoiding eye contact if this makes a person with autism uncomfortable.
- Meetings held one to one rather in group settings.
- Give an employee flexibility to create their own schedule and way of organizing their workspace and tasks.
- Informing employee about changes surrounding tasks or environment well in advance, as well as offering the opportunity to practice new routines. Don't spring up last minute meetings or tasks, and attempt to inform them at the earliest possible time.
- Respecting personal space, avoiding touch as a form of praise. Use words instead.
- Defining work tasks clearly, e.g. complex tasks simplified/illustrated.
- Ensuring that directions are clearly communicated and understood.

- Identifying communication requirements – discover what is best suited for the individual and apply it consistently. Some prefer written instruction or cannot communicate effectively by phone while others do not have the same challenge.
- Maintain a structured environment. Some neurodiverse people value a consistent environment with routines and patterns, working with them on establishing routines can be very effective in boosting productivity and work satisfaction.



### **Resourcing Colleagues of Neurodiverse Individuals**

All employees can be a part of fostering a supportive workplace environment and raising awareness on neurodiversity. Assist and encourage colleagues to be a part of a healthy workplace culture to create a workplace that is welcoming and inclusive to all individuals including neurodiverse individuals.

Steps can include:

- Educating employees – Disability, Neurodiversity and Autism Spectrum Disorder awareness training to learn and create understanding about neurodiverse individuals and their unique needs.
- Diversity & Inclusion Training - To increase education and awareness about the diversity of the workforce and bring cohesiveness in teams in order to work harmoniously.

- Support Document – A neurodiverse person might find it helpful to create a document to be given to colleagues that captures important information on how they could best be supported.

### **Ongoing Support & Assistance**

As neurodiverse individuals settle into the work environment, additional supportive measures can continue to be of value. Further actions may include:

Performance management - Hold regular meetings to discuss performance and provide specific feedback as well as evaluating effectiveness of current supports or to establish new accommodation as needed.

Developing an Employee Support Program – In addition to a workplace mentorship, EAP (Employee Assistance Programs) offer added support as well as training and resources on employee wellbeing.

Trauma-informed Workplace – Creating a trauma-informed environment can support all employees and consists of safety, transparency, peer support, education, collaboration, empowerment and understanding. It creates a space where employees are resourced, empowered and supported and considers the impact of employee life experiences of stress and trauma, within the workplace and also in connection with conditions such as neurodiversity. For neurodiverse individuals, a trauma-informed workplace will foster an environment of understanding and resource individuals should any issues arise.

There are many ways in which employers can support their neurodiverse employees. Effective and supportive orientation to a new workplace that understands and accommodates their needs will help them maximize their strengths, be assets to the workplace and will not only provide the opportunity to excel in their new role, but progress in their careers.

During the employment, it is possible that issues might arise that can pose further challenges for neurodiverse employees, below some key issues are identified and addressed:

### **Managing Conflict in the Workplace - Considerations for Neurodiverse Individuals**

Workplace conflict is a common occurrence within organizations and can occur for a variety of reasons when people from different backgrounds and personalities work together. Personal working styles, preferences and priorities can also influence the potential for conflict. Challenging situations naturally arise under these circumstances and can be very stressful causing high levels of anxiety. Events such as miscommunication and organizational changes can cause emotional stress, as well as personal issues impacting working relationships can create friction among employees.



**Categories of conflict include:**

Task - differing ideas about how to perform a work-related task or make a work-related decisions

Leadership/status conflicts - incompatible leaderships styles and how they interact with the work styles and personalities of people on their team

Work Style - different preferences on how to accomplish tasks

Personality - incompatible personalities, personal backgrounds, conflicting approaches to work or a contrasting outlook on life

Discrimination - personal prejudices or mistreatment of employees based on race, gender, sex, religion, cultural background

Value Based/Cultural - differences in lifestyles, values and identities

Conflict can be expressed in a number of ways such as bullying, discrimination, verbal insults and non cooperation. Workplace conflict can significantly affect an organization leading to decreased productivity, work disruptions, absenteeism, high turnover and terminations. The approach to dealing with conflict in the workplace can make all the difference to the outcome and an accommodating and collaborative approach will assist both parties to come to a satisfactory resolution. It requires parties to assert their needs while respecting others and gives an opportunity to negotiate to solve problems and find solutions. Conflict does not always have to be perceived as negative, it can be seen as an opportunity for growth. If conflict is managed effectively, it can resolve long standing issues, increase productivity and pave the way for greater communication and the building of stronger relationships.

For neurodiverse individuals in the workplace, steps can be taken to prevent conflict and to manage it if it ever arises. Unresolved conflict and the uncertainty of it can increase anxiety for neurodiverse individuals. Conflict resolution may be a challenge for them because their condition may make it difficult to identify issues of conflict. They may be unsure what steps to take to find a solution. Communicating their needs may be difficult and they can be

overly concerned about how they will be perceived by those they are engaging with. An added difficulty is that their colleagues may not understand that their differences influence their ability to address these conflicts and may misinterpret their traits and behaviour which potentially can compound the conflict.

**Circumstances that may generate conflict for neurodiverse employees include:**

- Lack of understanding among colleagues surrounding their condition - Their behaviour may be considered rude or irritating
- Unmet needs in the workplace - A workplace that has not prepared or addressed appropriate accommodations
- Social Overload - Colleagues and managers not understanding that neurodiverse individuals may need their own space at times
- Receiving a negative performance review
- Impact of their condition - Difficulty understanding nuance in the meaning of colleagues' words, difficulty interpreting colleagues emotions, difficulty with navigating office politics
- Personality differences
- Perceived inequities of resources
- Poor communication and unclarified roles and duties
- Sudden and unexpected changes or mismanagement of organizational changes and transition - such as a workforce slowdown, a merger or acquisition, or a reduction in force
- Differences over work methods or goals - Neurodiverse employees may have alternative ways of completing tasks
- Creating an organizational culture that prevents conflict and addresses it equitably and effectively and with empathy is necessary particularly in instances where employees cannot manage to find resolution themselves. Setting systems in place to cultivate and manage conflict and resolution should be a priority. Employers can consider the following actions:
  - Ensure all employees and not just managers are a part of conflict resolution
  - Maintain clear and consistent policies and communication and be transparent about all decision making
  - Make steps to prevent conflict and be ready to address it immediately, do not ignore if it arises
  - Work to listen well and understand the circumstances surrounding any conflict and the impact it is having on the employees
  - Consider that there may be multiple approaches to resolving conflict and may not be a one size fits all solution

**Preventing & Managing Workplace Conflict**

Part of managing workplace conflict is preventing issues before they begin. Providing clear communication and a structured well organized work environment can help to provide a solid base in which neurodiverse employees can engage in the workplace and limit the occurrence of conflicts. Ensuring appropriate accommodations are in place for the neurodiverse individuals is also essential to provide a positive and supportive working

environment for these employees. Effective communication, professional development and awareness education are the core components of a preventative approach towards workplace conflict by providing learning opportunities for all employees while also addressing the needs of neurodiverse colleagues.

Suggested forms of training, education and support:

- Conflict Resolution Skills
- Conflict Management for Managers and Directors
- Problem Solving Skills
- Stress Management Education
- Communication Skills
- Active Listening Skills
- Negotiation & Teamwork Skills
- Psychological support - Access to health care benefits that include mental health services
- Quiet space access for employees to go to after a conflict

Effective communication is the primary action employers can take to limit causes of workplace conflict and must be at the forefront of all engagement between all employees, particularly with neurodiverse employees. Some communication tips for managers and colleagues when engaging with a neurodiverse employee are:

- Be clear and direct with communication. Keep instructions simple and use concrete sentences. Try to avoid figures of speech and sarcasm.
- If a neurodiverse colleague does not understand, change your wording instead of repeating and do not raise your voice.
- Limit relying on body language and facial expressions to communicate as they may not be well understood.
- Allow time for the colleague to process what is said and to respond.
- Explain clearly the emotions you are feeling to help them understand.
- Hold weekly check-ins to discuss job demands and any concerns about their workload, needs or personal issues.

### **Resourcing & Empowering Neurodiverse Employees**

Offering education and tools for neurodiverse staff can support them to identify and handle any areas of potential conflict in the workplace. This can also empower them so they are able to express their needs and be a part of the solution and prevent smaller conflicts from becoming larger ones. A resource of some practical tips on how to handle conflict can be given to neurodiverse employees as a part of their induction package. These suggestions are key components of conflict resolution and could include:

Remain calm and don't try to resolve the conflict while you are emotional or angry. Pay attention to the tone of your voice and your body language.

Listen & seek understanding - Try repeating what the other person has said and put it into your own words. Consider all sides of the situation.

Identify needs and common interests - Express your needs and make your voice heard. You may need to explain in depth how autism affects you and your responses to difficult situations.

When responding, use “I statements”. Avoid accusatory “You statements”.

Identify solutions - Seek compromise, come up with as many ideas to solve the problem.

End the conversation with a plan - Take a break if the issue is not resolved and agree on a date and time to discuss more.

Get perspective - Talk with someone who is outside of the situation. If helpful, write it down at a later time. It may be helpful to get your thoughts and feelings out on paper and you may also come up with possible solutions.

### **Managing Escalation**

Employers can put all of the right tools in place with their conflict management processes, however conflict still occurs and emotions can run high in workplaces. With neurodiverse employees, it is possible that workplace conflict triggers their condition and can result in a meltdown or shutdown. High levels of stress triggered by any situation, a neurodiverse individual may become severely over-stimulated and results in their brain receiving more sensory input than it can process.

Protocols can be put into place in the event of activation to de-escalate and support the employee before the source of conflict is addressed. Ensuring prior training and education of employees will help staff to understand the warning signs of a neurodiverse colleague becoming upset. In order to address the reason for conflict effectively, it is also important to distinguish if the trigger is behavioural or a sensory challenge. However both may trigger similar meltdown/shutdown responses such as acting out, yelling, sensory triggers, fidgety behaviour, sudden changes in routine and a lack of focus.

If a neurodiverse individual’s working environment has been set up with appropriate accommodations, the likelihood of an outburst is very limited. If it does occur, it suggests that the individual's accommodations and environment need to be reassessed. Often a trigger is related to sensory issues that have not been properly accommodated but sometimes an outburst or shutdown can be a sign of workplace bullying. Once a conflict is appropriately assessed the cause can be addressed. Redirection steps that can be applied to support a neurodiverse colleague after a conflict may include the following:

- Speak to the staff member in a calm voice, unless safety is a risk.
- Engage and redirect privately and not in front of other employees.
- Make sure the environment is calm and quiet.
- Start with something positive - Tell the employee that they are valued and that you appreciate their work and the contributions they have made. This can help set the stage for them to be receptive to the rest of the conversation and identify solutions to the source of outburst/meltdown or conflict.

- Consider bringing in their workplace mentor if they have been assigned one as this may assist in making the employee more comfortable. Once they are more settled, find an opportunity to help the neurodiverse colleague to identify the cause of their distress.
- Acknowledge and listen to their thoughts and frustrations. If the conversation escalates, continue to remain calm and find common ground about the conflict. Point out something that is agreed upon and ask what the employees thoughts are on what needs to change.

### **Referring to Outside Support**

While exploring sources and resolution of the conflict, an employee may share information that is beyond your scope and responsibilities as a colleague or a manager. For instance, sharing about an abusive situation or a significant personal problem. In this case, while expressing concern, remind the employee that you are not in a position to fix or treat the situation so you may suggest they connect with their healthcare team or refer the employee to any support services the organization has for staff and bring in HR for support.

If the employee is extremely upset, keep the employee calm as possible and maybe call in their office mentor or a colleague familiar with the individuals. Ask them how they would like to be supported. Depending on the level of activation, some neurodiverse individuals would prefer time to withdraw and recover, while others may appreciate a hand on their shoulder or a quiet word. The key is to ask and find out what support they need at that moment.

In the rare event where their meltdown or shutdown has potential to escalate further and they may be at risk of harming themselves or others, the priority should be the safety of all of the employees to reduce the risk of a workplace violence incident. Contacting emergency mental health support services or local authorities may be required. Keep the employee calm as possible, ask them if speaking with their office mentor would help and give them space until assistance arrives.

### **Final Thoughts**

By providing a supportive, productive and engaging work environment, organizations can work towards reducing workplace stress and help to support the physical and mental wellbeing of their employees. This can build stronger teams and assist all employees to be successful in their roles. On neurodiversity, creating an educated and informed workplace on neurodiverse conditions, applying considerations through all parts of the employment process from recruitment to job departure to handling workplace conflict, cultivates a working environment for neurodiverse individuals to thrive.

Organizations that listen, understand and validate their employees as a part of their conflict management process shows employees that issues that arise are treated professionally and with integrity and respect. A solid conflict management approach includes facilitating healthy conflict with an open and empathic approach and reduces the incidence and impact of workplace conflict. This creates more trust which in turn results in building better relationships, inspires innovation and increases productivity. Most importantly, supporting

neurodiverse staff with clear and consistent policies surrounding workplace conflict, safety and respect will foster a better working environment for workers with neurodiverse conditions.



### **Resignations of Neurodiverse Individuals**

When a neurodiverse person resigns from a position, it is important that the employer make this a simplified and easy process for them. Change can be difficult for neurodiverse individuals and you should be supportive during this process. An employee's resignation is an opportunity to gain important insights about how their experience in the workplace was and what were their perceptions of the experience. Also, identifying the reasons for their resignation may help with improvements in the workplace environment and how the organization supports those with neurodiverse conditions in the future.

Initial steps would be to communicate clearly and specifically what is needed for their resignation and what each part of the process will entail. These steps and considerations for neurodiverse people could look like:

Request for their resignation in writing and request them to express in the letter the reasons for which they are resigning. Make them aware of any resources available to them during the end of employment, as well as inform them about their rights and benefits (if any).

Identify and acknowledge their notice period.

Agree when the last day of work is.

Create a transition plan and make arrangement for the transfer of tasks

Confirm if they will work all or part of the notice period and what amount of work will be required during their end of employment time period (notice)

### **Retention & Alternatives to Resignation**

If it is identified that an individual does not want to leave the job but personal circumstances have changed limiting their ability to commit to their full time employment, career breaks or unpaid extended leave may be offered if the company policies allow.

In the event the resignation is due to difficulties with their condition which are affecting their ability to do their work, the employer may make further reasonable accommodations to retain the employee. There may be a way to resolve any problems in order to keep them on staff. In some countries, there are legal requirements that employers must meet ensuring that reasonable adjustments are made for the condition during their tenure with the employee. Employers should consider how the condition is affecting the employees day-to-day life and work with the employee and HR, workplace wellbeing staff or advocacy organizations that support neurodiverse people or people with ASD, to allow for additional flexibility and adjustments for the employee. There are several benefits of retention both for employees and for employers, like saving on recruitment time, cost and effort; preventing organizations from losing valuable and talented staff, and offer long term career advancement options for employees.

In the event that, a neurodiverse employee's condition worsens requiring them to take short or long term leave, offering a career break or unpaid extended leave may be the best option until they can resume working.

### **Return to Work**

If an employee returns to the role, an employer can assist to make this transition as easy as possible for neurodiverse staff. As an employee is making a return to work after an absence, communicate clearly that you are willing to have a discussion on how to make accommodations that will help them adjust back to work. These accommodations can include:

- Working with the employee to establish new accommodations if required that may be different to the ones existing prior to their absence. Best course of action is to work with recommendations from the employee themselves, their doctor and with the assistance of occupational health as well.
- Ensure HR is working with the employee to structure a phased return to work program i.e. shorter days or alternate days per week.
- Establishing new goals with the employee that will assist them to stay on top of their workload.
- Identifying or modifying tasks or duties that may have been stressful, challenging or overwhelming such as any that are affected by their condition, such as face to face contact, sensory overstimulation, public speaking.
- Providing access to vocational and employment support services for neurodiverse people, EAP services, as well as further peer support or as well as professional mentoring and coaching

- Additional considerations to assist their return may be to redesign their role or moving the employee to a different role

### **Reasons contributing to Resignation**

Employers may ask a resigning employee their reasons for resignation to gather more information on how to support them as they leave the organization. Common reasons for resignation could be that they were offered another job, starting a new course or program, not enjoying the job, can no longer do the job, found a role better suited for them, personal circumstances have changed or they might be making a complete career change.

While these are all typical motivations, other reasons may include that they have had discriminatory or other negative experiences in the workplace. If this is the case, these are serious circumstances that require investigation. Initially it would be important to discover the nature of the situation, find out how you can help the employee and use this information to identify what needs to change in the future within the organization, how to support the employee making the claim in order to assist them and make the workplace a welcoming place for neurodiverse people.

Inequitable reasons a neurodiverse person may decide to resign from a workplace include:

Discrimination (direct or indirect) - when someone is treated less favourably because of a protected characteristic, e.g. conditions such as Autism Spectrum Disorder or disability

Harassment – bullying or unwanted behaviour related to a protected characteristic

Victimization - when someone is treated differently or less favourably because they made or supported a complaint to do with a protected characteristic, such as someone with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

### **Exit Interview**

An exit interview should be offered to employees who resign. They are typically done on the last day or after a resignation or termination is over. They provide important insights on how the employee's experience was with an organization. Also, they give an opportunity to learn about any wrongdoing that may have occurred during an employee's tenure.

#### **Exit Interview Recommendations & Considerations for Neurodiverse Individuals**

They can be conducted in person or in writing - give the person an option to choose which method they prefer and options for time and date to choose from.

If they have selected an in person interview, it may be helpful to carefully select an interviewer that is familiar to the individual, sensitive to the needs of neurodiverse people and who will ensure confidentiality. In addition, provide sufficient details in advance of what the interview will entail.

Ensure confidentiality of all information shared during the exit interview however ensure that if any significant or serious issues have been identified that a prompt and thorough investigation will be taking place.

Create a space of safety. Listen carefully and openly and diligently document, do not give personal opinions but remain objective, impartial and empathetic.



### **Employee Last Days**

After a resignation has been received - ensure the last weeks are positive and contributing. There are many ways to honour an employee's departure while considering their neurodiversity in the process.

Most workplaces have goodbye events when someone resigns from a role. For neurodiverse individuals, any celebrations or events are best to be chosen by the person or arranged along with them.

Give the departing employee a send off gift if appropriate, this may be an alternative way of thanking the employee for their work that might be more applicable for a neurodiverse employee who does not desire a social send off.

Have their manager or teammates write a note of appreciation in a best wishes card.

It can be difficult to say goodbye to an employee and even more difficult for a neurodiverse person to adjust to their farewell but ending their employment in the organization in a professional, helpful and respectful way can make their exit process end on a positive note.

### **Termination of Neurodiverse Employees**

Handling a termination is a difficult and sensitive issue when it involves neurodiverse or disabled individuals. It must be handled in a delicate matter and with the consideration that terminations have significant impact on individuals both personally and professionally, and may potentially impact their condition and their emotional well being. Being respectful and

professional should be front of mind in order to truly make every process in the organization a supportive one for neurodiverse employees, particularly with a difficult matter such as a job termination.

### Reasons for Termination of a Neurodiverse Employee

Reasons for termination of a neurodiverse employee are the same as any other employee. Common grounds for dismissal are related to the following and they may or may not be related to their neurodiversity:

- Conduct/Misconduct
- Capability/Performance
- Redundancy
- Frustration of Contract
- Other substantial reasons

e.g. failure to cooperate in the accommodation process

There are laws and regulations protecting the rights of workers with disabilities including neurodiversity and conditions such as ASD. Employment rights vary by country and jurisdiction and it is important to know and understand all relevant employment laws to help guide the process when terminating neurodiverse individuals. Assisting employees through this process by informing them of their rights and laws relating to terminations according to the jurisdiction may be considered.

Terminating for reasons related to a disability should be avoided and can be considered discrimination. However, employers can still maintain performance expectations for neurodiverse individuals. They may have job related performance and conduct standards and make the decision to terminate an employee for failing to meet these standards, even if certain shortcomings may be related to their condition. The key to handling a situation such as this successfully, is to be consistent with the enforcement of such standards and ensure that an employer has made appropriate and needed accommodations for the employee. Employers should learn as much as they can about the circumstances surrounding a potential termination before a decision is made to dismiss an employee. If proper due diligence is performed, an employer will feel more comfortable that there was no viable solution.

### **Final Considerations Prior to Termination**

Terminations should not occur unless employers have made all of the reasonable and legally required accommodations to assist a neurodiverse employee perform their work. Further options employers can explore while handling potential termination are:

Alternative Role or Position - Before firing a neurodiverse employee, the manager might want to consider whether the employee could do well in another position at the company.

Discrimination Prevention - Maintain education practices on Disability and Autism Awareness and Inclusion & Diversity for staff. Be prepared to investigate and equitably handle any complaints or issues related to discrimination, bullying or victimization.

Regular Performance Evaluations - If a dismissal is required, it should make sense from the standpoint of job performance. One of the fairest ways to gauge that performance is through regular evaluations and taking into account the outcomes of prior evaluations.

Consistent Application of Policies - Employer policies used for other employees must also be followed prior to dismissing a neurodiverse employee e.g. Having solid policies that explain that warnings must be given before a termination.

Maintaining Good Faith - In the interest of ensuring a termination process is an equitable process, employers must make certain that the decision for employee dismissal is made in fairness, honesty and good faith.

### **Communicating the Termination**

Communication is key when conveying the news to a neurodiverse employee that they will be dismissed. When informing them of the termination it is important to be empathetic and deliver the information firmly but with care. The steps of a termination may be the same you follow for any employee with some extra considerations:

- Be clear and direct with the termination and inform from the start of the meeting that they are being fired.
- Meet in person and be prepared. Provide a clear explanation why they are being terminated. Some neurodiverse people have verbal communication challenges, consider having a detailed termination letter ready, briefly explain what the letter contains and allow the employee time to read.
- Listen to what the employee has to say and be understanding and supportive of their reaction. If appropriate for the termination, supportive resources can be made available to the departing employee.
- Consider how to help them find their next role
- Offer positive references for their future role
- Connect them to vocational, coaching or employment support services
- Finalize the decision respectfully

### **Final Reflections**

Employee offboarding can be a challenging process for neurodiverse individuals. These resignations and terminations can be a source of invaluable information for employers about workplace culture and how employers are supporting and engaging with neurodiverse employees. Employers can do their best to create accommodations to retain staff and prevent dismissal however terminating staff is naturally expected to occur in a workplace. However, if solid processes and procedures are in place and enforced respectfully and consistently for all employees, it will ensure a professional method to handle terminations. This will assist in maintaining an ongoing relationship with exiting staff and keep connections with these professionals in the company's network. Despite the difficult situation of terminating an employee, maintaining a professional standard of ending the working relationship with respect and gratitude will benefit both parties in their futures.