

Issue Brief

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Principles and Promising Practices for Hiring and Retaining Young Autistic Workers

This brief describes benefits, practical tips, and effective strategies for employers to attract and retain the growing share of the workforce that is on the autism spectrum. It highlights small adjustments to business practices that can improve employment experiences for autistic workers. The information below draws on interviews with employers and service providers, as well as published literature and resources on employing autistic young adults.

To apply the insights in this brief, readers should approach them with the following principles in mind:



There is no one-size-fits-all approach to employing autistic workers. A strategy that helps one autistic person succeed may not work for another.



Workers on the autism spectrum, as with other workers, can thrive in any industry if they find the right position to fit their individual strengths.



Unexpected changes in the workplace or unmet accommodation needs may be more disruptive for someone on the autism spectrum than for a neurotypical worker.



People on the autism spectrum place particular value on clear and direct communication from managers, colleagues, and job coaches.

Autistic youth represent a growing talent pool that employers might not have fully tapped

Approximately 3.2 percent of 8-year-olds in the United States are autistic according to recent estimates from the CDC's Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network¹, which classifies children as autistic based on three criteria.² This share represents approximately 128,000 people turning 18 in 2032. In comparison, estimates from the same source suggest autism prevalence was 1.7 percent of 8-year-olds in 2014, representing approximately 72,000 people turning 18 in 2024.³ This increase suggests that employers







who want to tap into this growing talent pool will need to understand how best to hire and retain young autistic workers. Yet many people on the autism spectrum are underemployed or unemployed. Research from 2015, the most recent year for which data are available, suggests that only 58 percent of autistic young adults ever worked for pay outside the home in their early twenties—compared to 74 percent of young adults with intellectual disabilities and more than 90 percent of young adults with speech or language impairments or learning disabilities.⁴ Further, approximately 37 percent of all working young adults on the autism spectrum have been employed for 12 or more months, 1 to 4 years after leaving high school.^{5,6}




Potential benefits to employers from hiring autistic workers

Employers may benefit from hiring workers on the autism spectrum. Businesses that hire workers with disabilities often report improved profits, innovation, and productivity, as well as a greater sense of reliability, where workers are loyal, dependable, and consistent in their roles.⁷ Similarly, businesses that hire autistic workers and others with similar diagnoses often report benefits associated with their employment programs, such as improved employee morale, positive public relations and marketing opportunities, process improvements, and increased innovation.^{8,9}

Tips for hiring and retaining autistic employees

To overcome perceived barriers in hiring young adults on the autism spectrum, employers may need to examine their application or accommodation processes and make adjustments. Common barriers may include specific academic degrees requirements, enforcement of standardized work hours, lack of clear procedures for requesting accommodations, and lengthy hiring and onboarding processes that can be challenging for individuals on the autism spectrum to navigate. The table below offers tips and examples of how businesses can hire and retain autistic workers.

Tip		Examples
Hiring employees		
	Focus on key skills and outcomes rather than specific academic degrees, past experiences, or modes of work.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Evaluate team needs and recurring issues to develop job descriptions that align with desired outcomes, such as minimizing errors or customer wait times.• Be open to changes in processes that achieve the desired outcomes.• Focus less on how, when, or where employees work if these factors are not critical to work outcomes.
	Evaluate work requirements and consider which are necessary for key outcomes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Consider offering flexible work hours, if possible, or regularly scheduled hours (if routine is helpful for transportation or benefits planning).• Consider offering remote and in-person work options when the specific disabilities of the autistic person warrant it.
	Use plain language to describe job requirements and the application process.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Clearly describe the steps candidates should take throughout the application process and how they can request accommodations.
	Offer alternative methods to assess candidates for job competency, rather than relying on behavioral interviews.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Consider a technical test, writing exercise, or hands-on assessment to let job candidates demonstrate their abilities, or allow applicants to share nontraditional resumes or portfolios of their work.¹⁰
Retaining employees		
	Ask each employee what they need to be successful in the job.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Check in with employees at regular intervals, such as when they are onboarded, about three months into work, and then annually.• If needed, partner with a job coaching agency to work one on one with employees, designate work schedules, and address behavioral issues.
	Consider workplace norms and whether they could be modified or communicated differently.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Clarify expectations for social engagement at work, such as defining which work events are required and which are optional.• Provide flexibility about how information is requested from or presented to employees (e.g., offer a visual schedule or written instructions).

Tip	Examples
 Streamline processes for requesting and providing relevant accommodations without requiring documentation of a medical need.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Approve common accommodation requests such as adjustments to work schedules, reduction of sensory overload, or provision of larger monitors.• Offer noise-canceling headphones, adjustable lighting, quiet break rooms, or allowing work-from-home to address sensory needs.^{11,12}
 Provide regular and specific feedback .	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide feedback to workers in a mutually agreed-upon format, such as a discussion or follow-up email.• Provide employees with specific examples of what they are doing correctly or how they can improve their work.
 Provide resources on autism to all employees.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Train managers on disability laws and regulations, communication styles, and reasonable accommodations.• Consider creating mentoring opportunities or a disability resource group where autistic people and their non-disabled colleagues can share information.¹³

Strategies for action

Employers and service providers suggested additional strategies that businesses, advocates, or policymakers can take to encourage the hiring of workers on the autism spectrum:

- / Establishing paid internships to provide autistic young adults with more work experience.
- / Offering training and webinars to employers and human resources professionals on how to attract and support autistic workers.
- / Utilizing existing tax credits such as the Disabled Access Tax Credit (for reasonable accommodations) and the Work Opportunity Tax Credit.¹⁴

Practices that benefit all workers

Many of the employment practices described in this brief benefit neurotypical workers and job candidates, as well as those on the autism spectrum. For example, allowing remote work and flexible

working hours helps employees who function best in a quiet work environment that allows them to focus for long periods. Such work flexibilities also help employees who may have caregiving duties or attend classes for part of the day and work in the evening. Using straightforward job descriptions that focus on key skills and outlining a clear application process may alleviate anxiety for all job candidates regardless of their neurological profile including job seekers who are new to the workforce or returning to work. Employers can consider implementing the tips described here to expand their talent pool and hire workers who might otherwise opt out or be screened out of the application process.

Further resources

More information on job accommodations is available through the [Job Accommodation Network](#). More tools are available through the [Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability](#).

Research Support Services for Employment of Young Adults on the Autism Spectrum Project

This brief is part of the Research Support Services for Employment of Young Adults on the Autism Spectrum (REYAAS) Project. REYAAS identifies promising practices and policies to support employment of young adults (ages 16 to 28) on the autism spectrum. The project is funded by the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) within the U.S. Department of Labor. Mathematica leads the project in partnership with ODEP. More information is available on the [project's web page](#).

Endnotes

¹ Shaw, Kelly A., Susan Williams, Mary E. Patrick, et al. "Prevalence and Early Identification of Autism Spectrum Disorder Among Children Aged 4 and 8 Years — Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network, 16 Sites, United States, 2022." *MMWR. Surveillance Summaries*, vol. 74, no. SS-2, 2025, pp. 1–22. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/74/ss/ss7402a1.htm>

² Children were classified as having autism spectrum disorder (ASD) if they ever received 1) an ASD diagnostic statement in a comprehensive developmental evaluation, 2) autism special education eligibility, or 3) an ASD *International Classification of Diseases, Ninth Revision (ICD-9)* code in the 299 range or *International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision (ICD-10)* code of F84.0, F84.3, F84.5, F84.8, or F84.9.

³ Baio, Jon, Lisa Wiggins, Deborah L. Christensen, et al. Prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder Among Children Aged 8 Years - Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network, 11 Sites, United States, 2014." *MMWR Surveillance Summaries*, vol. 67, no. 6, 2018, pp. 1-23. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/67/ss/ss6706a1.htm>

⁴ Roux, Anne M., Paul T. Shattuck, Jessica E. Rast, Julianna A. Rava, and Kristy A. Anderson. "National Autism Indicators Report: Transition into Young Adulthood." Philadelphia, PA: Life Course Outcomes Research Program, A.J. Drexel Autism Institute, Drexel University, 2015.

⁵ Newman, Lynn, Mary Wagner, Renee Cameto, and Anne-Marie Knokey. "The Post-High School Outcomes of Youth With Disabilities up to 4 Years After High School: A Report From the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2). NCSE 2009-3017." *National Center for Special Education Research*, 2009.

⁶ There is limited research on employment among autistic youth and young adults. Existing data are limited by small sample sizes and minimal employment information (see [Sources of Data on Employment Outcomes for Young Adults on the Autism Spectrum](#)).

⁷ Lindsay, Sally, Elaine Cagliostro, Mikhaela Albarico, Neda Mortaji, and Leora Karon. "A Systematic Review of the Benefits of Hiring People with Disabilities." *Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation*, vol. 28, 2018, pp. 634-655.

⁸ Pisano, Gary P., and Robert D. Austin. "Hewlett Packard Enterprise: The Dandelion Program." Harvard Business School Case Study 9-617-016, September 8, 2016.

⁹ Pisano, Gary P., and Robert D. Austin. "SAP SE: Autism at Work." Harvard Business School Case Study 9-616-042, January 19, 2016.

¹⁰ Wargo, Keith, and Chet Hurwitz. "An Employer's Guide to Supporting Workers with Autism." *Harvard Business Review*, March 5, 2024. <https://hbr.org/2024/03/an-employers-guide-to-supporting-workers-with-autism>.

¹¹ Job Accommodation Network. "Autism Spectrum." n.d. <https://askjan.org/disabilities/Autism-Spectrum.cfm>. Accessed February 25, 2025.

¹² Tomczak, Michal T., and Pawel Ziemiański. "Autistic Employees' Technology-Based Workplace Accommodation Preferences Survey—Preliminary Findings." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, vol. 20, no. 10, 2023, article 5773. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20105773>.

¹³ Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability. "Mentoring." n.d. <https://askearn.org/page/mentoring>. Accessed February 25, 2025.

¹⁴ Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability. "Employer Tax Incentives Available from the Federal Government." n.d. <https://askearn.org/page/federal-government-employer-tax-incentives>.

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