Workplace Communication for Autistic Employees

AccessATE

Employers can have concerns related to hiring students on the autism spectrum, often because the employer is not sure how best to communicate with them. The autism spectrum encompasses a wide range of characteristics, symptoms, and abilities. Autistic individuals make companies more diverse and can contribute to innovation through their ability to think differently and spark creativity. Explain to your industry partner how you effectively communicate with your autistic student. The best advice to give is to not make assumptions about communication needs, but instead just ask. Below are some strategies for communicating with individuals with autism.

One-on-One Conversations

- **Identity.** Ask the person how they identify – whether they prefer person-first language (person who has autism) or identity-first language (autistic person) – and follow their lead.

- **Say what you mean.** Be literal, clear, and concise when interacting with an autistic person. Avoid using slang, nuances, and sarcasm, which may not be understood and/or cause confusion. Jokes and hypothetical comments are often not understood as well.

- **Communicate clearly with details, instructions and expectations**. Communicating with autistic individuals requires an explicit, direct approach. Your message should contain as much detail as possible including deadlines, time frames, and deliverables. For example: "Please complete this data tabulation and bring it to my office at 1:30pm tomorrow in the manila folder labeled 'For Review'."

- **Use their name when giving instructions.** Do not assume that an autistic individual will immediately recognize that the message is directed to them. Make sure to use their name. E.g., "David, Barbara and I now need the conference room for a private discussion. Please return to your desk."

- **Conclude conversations informatively.** Do not rely on non-verbal communication to indicate that a conversation is over. Use words to communicate the end of a conversation. E.g., "It's time for us to end the meeting. Thank you for coming. Goodbye, and you may leave now."

- **Patiently await a response.** If you do not get an immediate response to a question, refrain from assuming that the question was misunderstood. Sometimes it takes time for an autistic individual to absorb and process information before responding.

- **Provide meaningful feedback.** Not all individuals with autism recognize when they have expressed themselves inappropriately. Be prepared to provide specific feedback about anything in the conversation that was inappropriate. Providing feedback that is honest, non-judgmental, and clear can help an autistic person learn to safely navigate complex social interactions.

Group Communication and Meetings

- **Establish communication protocols.** Set rules that clearly state how to participate in the meeting. It can be confusing and difficult for an autistic person to follow the conversation when people are talking at the same time, or having side conversations. Set rules for taking turns speaking, e.g., one person speaks at a time, raise your hand if you wish to speak, wait until you are called on before speaking.
- **Use multiple means of representation for information**. Use images, movements, demonstrations, written information, etc., instead of just talking.
- **Provide explicit meeting information in advance when possible**. Advanced planning can be very helpful to autistic individuals, as well as to all employees.
    - Provide meeting agendas and materials in advance.
    - Avoid surprises such as sudden inquiries or last-minute scheduling changes.

Additional Resources

- Autism @ Work Playbook - **https://disabilityin.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Autism_At_Work_Playbook_Final_02112019.pdf (https://tinyurl.com/aaAutismAtWork)**
- Autism Speaks Workplace Toolkit - **https://www.autismspeaks.org/sites/default/files/2018-08/Employment%20Tool%20Kit.pdf (https://tinyurl.com/aaAutismEmployment)**
- Organization for Autism Research: Understanding Autism - An Employer's Guide - **https://researchautism.org/resources/understanding-autism-an-employers-guide**