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AUTISM @ WORK

Good practices for companies to
create a suitable environment
and a good deal for autistic people



PAGES

Pathways for guiding employment skills for ASC

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Introduction

AUTISM SPECTRUM CONDITIONS

Autism spectrum condition (ASC) is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects social communication and social interaction and those on the autism spectrum might display restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviours, activities or interests.

ASC is a complex lifelong disability, defined by some standardized criteria (APA, 2013). They are:

1. Persistent difficulties in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, as manifested by the following, currently or by history:
 - a. Difficulties in social-emotional reciprocity, ranging, for example, from abnormal social approach and failure of normal back-and-forth conversation; to reduced sharing of interests, emotions, or affect; to failure to initiate or respond to social interactions.
 - b. Challenges in nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction, ranging, for example, from poorly integrated verbal and nonverbal communication; to abnormalities in eye contact and body language or deficits in understanding and use of gestures; to a total lack of facial expressions and nonverbal communication.
 - c. Difficulties in developing, maintaining, and understand relationships, ranging, for example, from difficulties adjusting behavior to suit various social contexts; to difficulties in sharing imaginative play or in making friends; to absence of interest in peers.
2. Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities, as manifested by at least two of the following, currently or by history:
 - a. Repetitive motor movements, use of objects, or speech (e.g., simple motor stereotypes, lining up toys or flipping objects, echolalia, idiosyncratic phrases).
 - b. Insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualized patterns of verbal or nonverbal behavior (e.g., extreme distress at small changes, difficulties with transitions, rigid thinking patterns, greeting rituals, need to take same route or eat same food every day).
 - c. Highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus (e.g., strong attachment to or preoccupation with unusual objects, excessively circumscribed or perseverative interests).
 - d. Hyper- or hypo- activity to sensory input or unusual interest in sensory aspects of the environment (e.g. apparent indifference to pain/temperature, adverse response to specific sounds or textures, excessive smelling or touching of objects, visual fascination with lights or movement).
3. Symptoms must be present in the early developmental period (but may not become fully apparent until social demands exceed limited capacities, or may be masked by learned strategies in later life).

4. Symptoms cause clinically significant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of current functioning.
5. Intellectual disability and autism spectrum condition frequently co-occur; to make a comorbid diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder and intellectual disability, social communication should be below that expected for general developmental level.

ASC affects one person in every 100 births, all over the world, with no differences between countries, races, or cultures.

AUTISM SPECTRUM CONDITION AND THE WORKING ENVIRONMENT

For people on the spectrum, employment can be very hard to achieve because of social and cultural prejudices and false beliefs about their ability and capacity to work.

According to a survey of companies (some of which already employ autistic staff) carried out in the four Partner's countries (Bulgaria, Italy, Spain and United Kingdom), , employees on the spectrum have qualities and skills that are very much appreciated by companies such as meticulousness, honesty and good discipline.

Respondents to the survey, as well as field research conducted at European level, revealed that some of the disadvantages associated with the employment of autistic employees in a company (e.g. low productivity, difficulties in communication, misunderstanding of tasks, training of the work team) can be managed, and in some cases solved through the adaptation and adjustment of the working environment.

Autistic people, in fact, can experience severe difficulties with 'unfriendly' environments because of sensory inputs around them, or unclear communication resulting in a variety of reactions that negatively affect their working performance, as well as the benefits in terms of autonomy deriving from job opportunities.

Considering this gap and the need clearly expressed by several companies involved in the survey to access 'knowledge of how to adapt [our] organisation so we are more inclusive', the PAGES Consortium is disseminating the following guidelines and good practices in order to support companies interested in employing people on the spectrum and in developing/improving a suitable working environment.

The aim of **PAGES Project ('Pathways for guiding employment skills for ASC')** is to support companies to understand the added social and market value that autistic workers can provide. In doing this, it provides practical recommendations and guidelines which can help ensure the suitable placement of autistic individuals in employment.

The following guidelines are structured in a way to provide general principles and suggestions that

can be implemented at company level. These guidelines are also supported by examples of good practice from the Partners' countries.

Moreover, in order to provide even more concrete demonstration of correct or incorrect behaviour which may be adopted in a working environment, some guidelines for working teams will be supported by video material recorded during some training activities of the project using the Cultural Pedagogical Theatre (CPT) methodology.

The essence of CPT is to turn the audience into an active and decisive role in the performance based on the target groups experience, thoughts, questions, own capacity and range of participation. It can be used in every social subject to encourage the target groups to have an opportunity to co-create a solution to a social issue.

In relation to the project, it was used to identify and sensitize the audience to common difficult situations that people on the spectrum usually face in their working environment.

Recruitment

Companies still have a lack of knowledge, false beliefs and misconceptions about autism. In addition, there are some preconceptions about the limited capacities of people on the spectrum to work.

These beliefs and stereotypes have a negative impact on limiting access to the labour market for autistic people. However, in many cases, autistic people are finding employment in companies which are sensitive to this issue because they have had previous experiences of employing autistic people.

In order to create a suitable working environment it is essential that the company has a predisposition for hiring autistic people, not only because of the current legislation.

The intrinsic motivations for hiring, in fact, influences the success of developing labour integration: when the autistic employee is viewed as someone who adds diversity, and diversity is valued as positive for the company then the process is most likely to succeed.

As a result, companies can make reasonable adjustments to the recruitment and selection of autistic people applying for a job to meet their needs and to develop the person's potential and skills. For the selection of the most suitable person for the job position, the company should give priority to the development of the personal skills and competencies of the person. In particular, the company should value the diverse competences of staff to appreciate the contribution of the autistic person in the workplace: a possibility for the company as a selection process is the realization of work practices before signing the contract (no more than 3 months) or a trial placement in the workplace. This, in fact, can help them to learn what the role requires and also to adapt to the work environment.

In order to successfully implement this model, however, a crucial requirement is the company's flexibility as well as the availability to set up necessary adaptations to ensure the creation of an inclusive workplace.

Good practice – contrataTEA

Objective of the good practice

contrataTEA, created in 2017, is the first Spanish program for job inclusion of people with ASD, jointly carried out by the most relevant ASC Associations in Spain: Confederación Autismo España, Confederación Asperger España and Federación Española de Autismo - FESPAU.

Prior to the program, Autismo España made some interesting discoveries in its Employment and Autism Spectrum Disorder "a potential to discover" (Vidriales, Hernández and Plaza, 2018) that suggested companies have little understanding regarding ASC, how good people with ASC can be in many positions and what kinds of adjustments are necessary to achieve success in the incorporation of people with disability in the workplace.

These discoveries led to the creation of this project.

Short Description

The objective of this project is to gain access to employment through two main channels:

- Helping Autism Associations and professionals in the development of job prospecting strategies,

raising awareness about ASC in companies and the creation and sharing of tools and materials that help adults with autism prepare for access to the employment market.

- Working hand-in-hand with business networks to make the selection processes and work environments more accessible for people with ASC. This will be done through the development of guides and initiatives that help Human Resources departments and companies make the selection processes accessible to candidates with ASC.

Prospecting, sensitization and awareness raising of the competences and productive contribution that men and women with ASC can make to the business network is carried out. For this purpose, awareness materials and seminars/meetings are offered to companies.

In coordination with the entities providing services to adults with ASC, a database for those actively seeking employment is generated. Information regarding the candidate, such as regulated and unregulated training, competencies, interests, previous experiences, expectations, information related to their level of autonomy, etc. is registered. Information is also included on those adults with ASC who are not linked to the associative movement and who express interest in accessing employment.

Through agreements with companies and organizations, employment offers are accessed and a job-fit is carried out between the position offered and people with ASC registered in contrataTEA or other entities linked to the group. contrataTEA performs an intermediation role between the entity/person with ASD and the applicant company.

Personalized consultancy is given to companies that wish to incorporate people with ASC into their selection processes, as well as those that hire and/or have an employee with autism spectrum disorder. Advice is aimed at:

- Consultancy on financial aid for hiring and specific grants for supported employment programs.
- To favor the reception of the person with ASC, through sensitization of personnel for successful inclusion and to promote natural supports in the environment.
- Make necessary accommodations and adjustments in the position and physical/social environment not only benefitting the person with ASC in their incorporation into the position but also with regard to their advancement within the company.
- Value the job coach as a professional support to achieve job inclusion.

It is a free service for the user, entities and companies, that makes it easier for group members to access employment, encourage participation in society and to promote equal opportunities.

Barriers detected:

- The viability and sustainability of the employment service are some of the greatest obstacles to guarantee the financing of this type of initiative, resulting in difficulties for its continuity and consolidation over time.
- The absence of specialized resources is one of the causes of the high unemployment rate of people with ASC.
- The tools for the detection of vocational interests are not adapted to people with ASC, which may bias results and invalidate the procedure.
- The social system of benefits for people with disabilities and in situations of dependency implies

certain incompatibilities between benefits and employment, making it difficult for adults with ASC to access the employment market.

- Lack of involvement of the business fabric for the hiring of people with ASCD due to the existence of myths and false beliefs about people's abilities and skills.

Successful aspects

contrataTEA emphasizes the added value that people with ASC can bring to a company.

It helps to unlock the potential, make visible the abilities and talent of the collective through employment, generating a very positive impact on people with ASC, their immediate surroundings and society in general.

It facilitates companies in finding suitable candidates for the position and creating opportunities that benefit both the business sector and the people part of this group.

For more information: <https://www.contratatea.es/>



Watch the [video](#) about Cultural Pedagogical Theatre

Performance

In order to conceptualize and get a better understanding about working with autistic people, the functional diversity frame gives a wider approach to understand the context and meanings of the following recommendations. The functional diversity approach refers to the capacities and functioning that, for example autistic people, perform differently from others.

Moreover, this theoretical approach challenges those design assumptions and practices that neurotypical people accept as normal even when there is a way to improve. So the functional diversity approach is a framework to understand and have horizontal and equal relationships with all people.

A significant number of keys, tips and recommendations not only include and benefit autistic people in the workplace, but also to the rest of the employees as they may change some assumptions in the company culture. An action plan with all the agreed adjustments should be developed with the active participation of the employee. This plan should include a timetable of when an adjustment will be implemented, who is the responsible for the adjustment as well as the settle of a review period (between 3 and 6 months) to assess the effectiveness of the adjustments. It is important, in fact, that adjustments are phased and the employer should carefully consider which adjustments need to be implemented first.

Here below it will be possible to find out tips and recommendations regarding key aspects to be taken into consideration for adjustments: **weekly timetable, meetings, rules, working environment.**

Weekly timetable

A clear weekly timetable should be developed together with the worker. This should stick to a routine as much as reasonably possible and should outline clear and manageable targets for each day. Having realistic targets for each day will help the person on the spectrum to recognise whether the job has been completed against an appropriate standard. All tasks should be outlined in the timetable with a 'plan B' for any issue that may occur.

It is a recommendation that working hours have to be adjusted to allow the person to commute to work at quieter times of the day or in relation to their physiological needs, minimising anxieties and stress. Working from home can also be taken into consideration in case of circulation disruption, bad weather, and stressful periods.

In order to schedule a timetable, a support for planning, goal setting, and task completion would be necessary: any visual support (flow chart, colour-code system for priority tasks, paper and online calendars, project management apps and software) and frequent reminders with the support of assistive technology can facilitate the recognition of urgent task and improve the worker's performance.

Figure 1. An example of how to set-out a whiteboard using "gridding tape" and including a 2 week, rolling calendar view and future dates and deadlines, for work planning and scheduling

MONDAY (insert date)	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
LUNCH	LUNCH	LUNCH	LUNCH	LUNCH
MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
LUNCH	LUNCH	LUNCH	LUNCH	LUNCH

FUTURE DATES & DEADLINES

Meetings

In order to ensure that the person on the spectrum gains full benefit from meetings it is a recommendation that for all meetings it is given advance warning and the proposed agenda in order to allow him/her to add or revise anything prior to the meeting. This approach will help the worker to prepare for these meetings and will reduce any anxiety. In addition, an agenda for team meetings will help the manager to identify what the important issues are for the person on the spectrum and arrange a time to discuss these. Moreover, the meetings should be scheduled for a set time and day each week, to enable the person to plan and prepare for the meetings. Also, the format of meetings should follow a clear and consistent format with the selection of a quiet environment, with low background noise levels and minimal opportunities for interruptions.

At the end of each meeting, a 1:1 meeting of no more than 15 minutes with the manager is required: this should be used to address anything that the employee wanted to discuss in the meeting but was prevented from doing so due to time or other agenda items taking precedence. In particular, key issues to be discussed are: mutual concerns, uncompleted tasks related to work.

Furthermore, the following supporting materials should be provided:

- A summary of any action points from the meetings in a written (e.g. bullet point) format
- Planning of timetable for next week
- Reporting of any upcoming changes or events
- Templates for reporting.

Workplace rules and etiquette

It is a recommendation that written guidance on workplace behaviours is developed with the employee and the support advisor and/or managers. For example, the employee may have a task on the timetable which cannot be done because of a conflict - such as a required facility being used by another. For situations such as this it is important that a clear rule is developed.

Table 1. Example of workplace rules

	Rule	Why	Consequence	Benefit
	You must not continue to question, contact or email female/male members of staff about non-work related subjects, follow or accompany female members of staff on breaks or after work unless they have reciprocated the invitation in an equal way at least some of the time and are clearly inviting you to do so (see attached examples of clear invitations, including social media contact).	People may be uncomfortable or distressed and have difficulty communicating clearly to you that your attention is unwanted, and may complain about your behaviour to managers.	(Buddy/workplace support advisor) will be informed if this guidance isn't being followed and you will receive an email stating this. These will be recorded in your buddy/workplace support advisor records and a meeting scheduled to discuss. If you continue not to follow your guidance then HR will be informed and further action taken, such as disciplinary measures.	If you don't continue to pursue female members of staff, then this reduces the risk of accidentally causing distress to someone and helps you to maintain positive relationships with your colleagues and managers.
	When told not disclose the particulars of issues that are discussed in meetings, you must pay attention to this instruction.	There are some discussions that, must remain private for reasons that affect other members of staff and may cause distress if not relayed in the right way, and accurately, by a manager.	If you do not keep in confidence, something that you have been instructed to, then your line manager and HR will be notified and further action taken, such as disciplinary measures.	If you keep your managers' confidence this will mean that they are able to trust you and you will avoid any potential disciplinary measures.



Watch the [video](#) about Cultural Pedagogical Theatre

Working environment

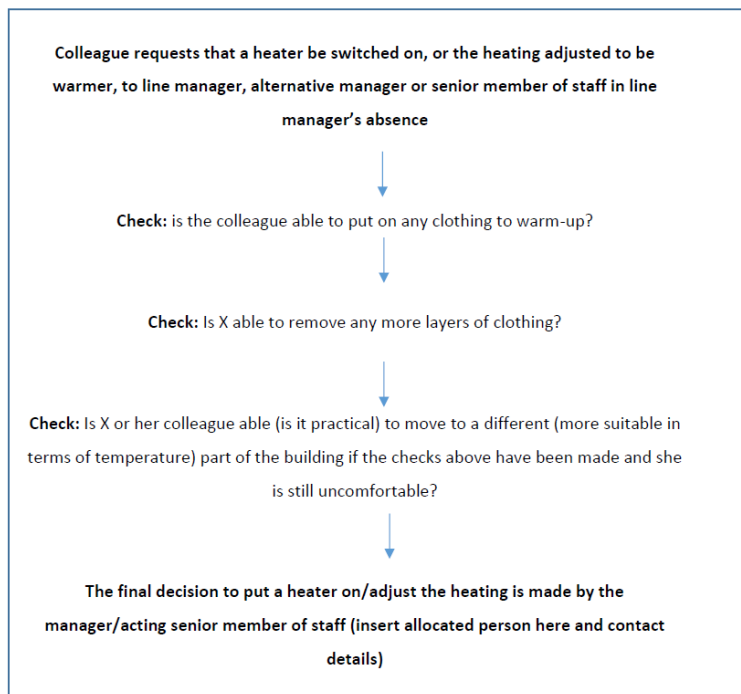
It is clear that sensory sensitivities are having a significant impact on the person on the spectrum's work and well-being. As a result, the following adjustments are recommended to manage this and create a comfortable working environment:

- Desk space: the desk space needs to be suitable to sensory requirements and agreed with the employee. For instance if the employee requires the blinds to be pulled up then a suggestion is that the desk is next to a window. However, this adjustment should prevent isolation from the team.
- Using dark-coloured sound baffles/boards: to ensure confidentiality if working on sensitive documents or to block out visual distractions and dampen harsh light or noise from colleagues seated nearby.
- Using dark-coloured desk coverings, parasols: to absorb and provide shades from harsh or bright lighting overhead.
- Suitable headphones with superior noise-cancelling properties: the autistic adult community frequently recommends quiet comfort models – there are also specialist models that can be used as a head-set for answering telephone calls, but it is important that a model with dual earphones (rather than a single one) is sought out. Moreover, many employers are now furnishing their open plan offices with booths and pods that afford acoustic privacy/shielding for staff that need a quieter environment.
- Silent cooling/heating tower: to better control difficulties with overheating and to cool the air sufficiently in the immediate desk area.
- Developing some workplace behaviour rules for the entire team (rules of engagement) about interaction and feedback/etiquette between staff: also the staff needs to adjust to sensory issues avoiding general office chit-chat, social conversations, “zoning” the desk area as “quieter”/“food free”/deodorant or air- freshener free and follow a clear decision

making process regarding environment adjustments. An example of a process for decision making around increasing the temperature in the office is shown below (Figure 2).

In order to identify and monitor sensorial adjustments, the Sensory Audit (Annex 1 - Sensory Audit for the Labour market) can be very supportive.

Figure 2. Example of correct decision making process to implement sensorial adjustments in common working space



Professional training

Education and training is an essential element for the active inclusion of people with ASC in working environments. Experience and bibliography has proved that, with appropriate training support and environment, people with ASC can work in more businesses and industries.

The importance of onsite training usually addresses not only the worker but also the entire working team.

As far as the training for the worker, onsite training usually mixes simulation task with real job capacitation such as comprehensive training in skills, including knowledge, skills and attitudes, especially those related to communication and interaction in workplaces and organizational issues, aimed at greater inclusiveness of people with ASC and attending to the different particularities of workers.

In this framework, the person on the spectrum should be also specifically trained about appointed responsibilities. It is recommended this to be practical and on a 1:1 basis in order to assure mutual understanding and comfort: the allocation of a buddy can in fact provide direct and personal assistance for any query and ensure good participation in group working activities.

Moreover, in order to assure comprehensive learning, it is helpful during training:

- Provide written and clear course materials with notes and images to support teaching: people on the spectrum, in fact, are essentially visual learners;
- Break the task down into stages and explain each stage focusing on the explanation of the purpose of the task to understand why each stage is necessary: working instructions can be very supportive in this sense;
- Choose a quite environment to allow concentration and avoid distraction and stress.

A welcoming and inclusive working environment, however, is possible only if also colleagues and managers are trained on the idea of Diversity as Value.

In this sense, the foremost topic to be addressed is related to the knowledge and understanding of Autism and how it affects individuals to know how to maximize the strengths of their ASC workers, as not all people with ASC have the same competences.

In addition to this, it is very supportive also to foresee onsite trainings regarding:

- reasonable accommodation for the working environment: small changes in the environment such as the design of a sensory-free work space which is functional to the needs of the worker allows a better performance and incorporation of people with ASC
- effective communication: adjustments in communication styles training for a more precise communicative involvement, clearly indicating expectations, reducing ambiguity, providing consistent feedback will lead to the reduction and avoidance of conflicts or situations that generate nervousness in ASC workers. Peer2Peer or Mentorship trainings for instance where the worker plays the role of a Mentor for the person on the spectrum can smooth integration issues.

Regardless from the training recipient, a successful strategy can be to associate the training to the

acquisition of a certification, favouring certification models in training as they are being developed in some entities (i.e.: www.autismcertificationcenter.org).

Good practice – START Autismo (<http://www.startautismo.it>)

Objective of the good practice

The project, implemented for the period 2012-2014, has the purpose of improving the quality of life of autistic adolescents and adults in Abruzzo Region, favoring a positive transition from the evolutionary age to the adult one, promoting full social and employment inclusion. Through the experimentation of individualized pilot paths of job placement, operator training, activation of one regional and European network, promotion and exchange of tools and experiences, the project intends to promote on the regional territory a new culture of the right to the person with autism to guarantee autonomy and to enhancement in the work and social field of talents and personal resources.

Short Description

The Project's results are:

- training of 20 educational operators with classroom training modules and supervision modules on the job, which will accompany the overall development of the project;
- experimentation of 20 customized work-qualifying projects in favour of adolescents and adults with autism, according to an inclusive intervention model of evaluation and provision of guidance, training, job matching and coaching, job placement, mentoring services;
- design and implementation of a social enterprise that includes the functions of multi-sectoral enterprise for job placement, mediation agency, job supply and demand for autistic subjects, incubating protected laboratory and individualized insertions.

With regards to companies, the Project offered the following specific services:

- Tutoring in the placement process at the companies, thanks to the presence of specific professional figures specifically trained and consultancy support on Job contracts;
- Agreements between the social cooperative of START Autismo and host company for internships, traineeships, etc., with funds for the project;
- Targeted training for the employer and the company tutor predisposing a set of tools for enabling and consolidating fundamental skills needed at the workplace (e.g. relationship with colleagues, social exchanges);
- Portable support technologies thanks to provision of aids and programs innovations to support training and job placement process;
- Supervision and evaluation of placements, periodically monitoring and optimizing the customized design paths.

Successful aspects

Among the most successful aspects of experimentation, there was a broader inclusion in the company or external bodies of young people with autism compared to those hypothesized: this also thanks to all those, entrepreneurs and managers of structures, have accepted the challenge as an opportunity for all.

Integration

The successful integration of an employee with ASC is of a great importance not only for him/herself but also for the employer and for the entire company. The establishment of a positive atmosphere, the full acceptance of the ASC employee, as well as his/her successful adaptation to the specific work environment, predetermines the quality of the implemented tasks, thus achieving high efficiency.

The integration of the employee with special needs has many aspects that need to be taken care of. Many actors from different institutions and in different roles are involved in these efforts and all they should act in full synchrony.

In order an employee with Asperger's Syndrome to be welcomed into the team everyone should be familiar with the peculiarities of such a person's behavior and thinking. This will help in selecting the most suitable work for him and in organizing an atmosphere of mutual assistance, understanding and appropriate support.

The specialised literature most often mentions the strengths of ASC individuals in the following areas:

- Attention to detail and sustained concentration. This leads to accurate and high-quality work
- Excellent long-term memory with a recall of details
- Capacity to repetition and routine which is valuable in all kinds of jobs
- Strong logic and analytic skills
- Vast knowledge of specialized fields
- Ability to think outside the box and discover creative solutions
- Absence of social filtering (will say when the emperor has no clothes!)
- Persistence, honesty, loyalty
- Great desire to do well.

It helps to be familiar with the most common workplace challenges. These are:

- Social and Communication Challenges
- Organizational Challenges
- Sensory Challenges

The successful integration of an ASC employee depends also from the work environment. Having in mind the specifics of the person on the spectrum, the employer should avoid:

- requiring multi-tasking or responding to frequent interruptions;
- involving the ASC person in quick decision-making processes;
- inclusion in high pressure;
- inclusion in activities which are unstructured and rapidly changing;
- inclusion in activities which require lots of social interaction;
- inclusion in activities which involve him/her in managing other people or;
- activities which demand high rates of speed.

Instead, the employer can concentrate her/his efforts on:

- giving one task at a time which allows concentration on it only;
- requiring accuracy and quality and not speed in the performance;
- offering structure and clear performance expectations;
- giving tasks with some elements of routine;
- giving tasks that require minimal social interaction;
- avoiding involvement in management activities.

There are a number of things that employers can do to help individuals with ASC be well integrated, productive and successful at their jobs. Trainings and coaching by specialist in social communication and organization are powerful tools for achieving successful integration of the autistic person. When undertaking such activities, the employer should be patient by splitting the training into small segments.

Consultation and training programs enable managers and human resources personnel to understand differences in the way people on the spectrum process information, and avoid some of the common misunderstandings that can result in lowered productivity, employee turnover or even job loss. The programmes should be tailored to the specific needs and can include half- and full-day workshops, consultations and coaching for managers.

The practices described below are a good example of the approaches used for successful integration of people with special needs into the working environment.

Good practice – Working model of the occupation of young ASC people

Objective of the good practice

For the successful integration of people with ASC into the working environment, it is important to have an understanding of the whole hierarchy in the enterprise as well as acceptance by others in the work team. This working model was developed by the SWITCH U project under the Financial Mechanism of the European Economic Area 2009-2014, supporting non-governmental organizations in Bulgaria. This practice was extended with the implementation of a further project.

Short Description

The model the team has managed to impose is based on good partnerships between NGOs, employers and donors - enable people with disabilities to find their full integration and realisation in society not only through social assistance but through decent work and remuneration.

The initiative was carried out by the European Software Institute - Centre for Eastern Europe (ESI CEE) together with the Autism Association, the Bulgarian Association of Software Companies (BASSCOM), the Adaptation Foundation and the Varna Free University Chernorizets Hrabar.

The unique methodology developed by ESI CEE prepares young people with autism to find highly qualified work, supports their parents and provokes employers to hire these people. Successful integration into the work environment involves four phases:

- Identification and selection of candidates;
- Evaluation and plan for their development;
- Trainings involving all stakeholders - families, professionals, employers, and young people themselves and young people with autism;
- Working in a simulated work environment; and working in a real business environment.

In the frame of the first project ("Model for Training and Employment of People with Autistic Spectrum Disorders"), ESI Centre trained twenty young people took in information technology, 8 of them had a three-month internship and 3 remained at work after the end of the project. The initiative was promoted by the

European Commission as one of the ten best practices in Europe that helped people with autism to get into the labour market.

As a continuation of these efforts, the ESI Centre currently implements "Technologies for the inclusion of children and young people with autism in the life of the community and the labour market" which provides better opportunities for people with disabilities and, respectively, children and young people with autistic spectrum condition to exercise more effectively human and civil through the use of an innovative service for access to education and employment.

Under the project, 19 young people between the ages of 18 and 34 and 6 adolescents (12-16 years old) have mastered the skills to follow a plan for doing business, taking responsibility and engaging in a specific timeframe. With real practical assignments, managers, IT specialists and lecturers from 16 IT companies and educational institutions, including SAP Labs Bulgaria, Infragistics Bulgaria, Software AG Development Center Bulgaria, Kofo, XS Software, Orak, Ladger, Nemetschek Bulgaria, Mellon Bulgaria, Ondo, Balkan Services, Sirma Group Holding and others.

Over the course of two years, 19 young people and 6 children with autistic spectrum disorders have undergone theoretical training to work with basic computer applications and practical training in a simulated work environment to adapt to a real office environment. Six of the young people are trained and trained in Software AG, SAP Labs, Infragistics, EPAM, Flame Education Centre - Varna, and Mediprogress, while four are already working. Following Java programming in Obecto and Ladger, two of the participants developed an e-shop and a mathematics tool.

Successful aspects

This case has been evaluated as a good practice, because during the project implementation, the team and all the major stakeholders involved have implemented and have met the following important conditions for successful integration of the persons with ASC:

- Systematic and clearly targeted cooperation with all stakeholders;
- Extremely concentrated on the specially adapted training of ASC workers. This includes a simulated work environment as well. Training is delivered also to all parties involved - parents, employers, support organisations and the other workers – colleagues of the person with special needs;
- Clear understanding by all involved that no two autistic people are the same;
- All participants are free from prejudices and stereotypes;
- Open to having a conversation to discuss the needs of the workers with ASC;
- Taking into consideration the desire of the ASC worker how he wants to be treated;
- Provision of flexibility to customise the working environment of the ASC worker;
- All stakeholders strive to maximise the strengths of the ASC person and don't place limitations on them;
- Provision of opportunities to progress the careers of the workers with ASC.

Good practice – Acquiring work habits for people with intellectual disabilities - "I'm special and I want to work...!"

Objective of the good practice

Development of the cooperation between ASPID and the socially committed business in the interest of the persons with intellectual disabilities, whose opportunities for work realisation are many times underestimated and neglected. Promoting a new model for working with people with mental disabilities through real-world learning, engaging all stakeholders and innovative publicity methods.

Short Description

Implemented by Association for Support of People with Mental Disabilities (ASPID), Varna (<https://www.varnanamladite.com/?idpub=491>). Varna association is a member of the Bulgarian Association for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities (BAPID).

15 users of the Centre for Social Rehabilitation and Integration (CSRI) "Chaika" and the Daily Centre "Riviera" (managed by the Association) for 6 months received theoretical and practical training for acquiring work skills in two training modules "Hospitality" and "Catering". In a real working environment, young people have become acquainted with the labour responsibilities and the specifics of the activities of two professions - a valet and cook "cold kitchen".

In addition, young people with disabilities have acquired knowledge and skills to build work habits.

The implementation of the practice "I am special and I want to work" started as a project activity for the Association funded by BAPID. Its implementation is related to the need to prepare for work for people with intellectual disabilities. The training was based on a special programme, which included practice in hotel-restaurant "Kamelia" Varna. In a real working environment, the participants in the project were committed to practicing activities related to the preparation of catering products, packaging of home-based products, preparation of guest rooms. This has resulted in communication between SOPs, hotel and restaurant staff, specialists and hotel customers.

Successful aspects

The described good practice "I am Special and I Want to Work" has achieved its goals: changing the attitude of society and the employers' organisation towards people with intellectual disabilities, proving their real opportunities for labour participation. The employees of the restaurant were prepared in advance for the specifics of disability and accepted their role of "supporters" in a real work environment. Overcoming social exclusion by acquiring skills for independent living.

The indicators by which the success of this project to be measured can be divided into two groups:

About the community:

The city community has learned about the real employment situation of people with mental disabilities through the reflection of the success of the practice with local media. Innovative way of promoting the employment of people with intellectual disabilities / special delivery stickers for restaurant customers with the inscription 'Made by a Special Person', a special sign with "Served by a Special Person" at the door of the hotel room, serviced by the users/led to popularizing their skills in front of the hotel-restaurant guests.

For persons with intellectual disabilities:

Self-esteem and self-confidence

Acquiring practical skills for practicing the professions (for example: washing kitchen utensils, working with washing machines and preparations, using various kitchen tools for preparing catering, etc.).

Workplace safety

The term Emergency identifies a situation, a critical moment or an unforeseen event that involves a risk for people living in that environment. Among these, it may be possible to find out persons with all kinds of disabilities, resulting in unpredictable conditions to intervene. Relief, in fact, requires the establishment of an effective communication and relationship in order to firstly transmit a reassuring message and finally to guarantee the success of the rescue activity. This becomes even more critical when the person is on the spectrum.

It is very difficult to predict what the reaction of a person on the spectrum may be in emergency situations such as earthquakes, fires etc. as they might not recognize the danger and persist in carrying out appointed activities by refusing to interrupt them even at the expense of one's own or others' safety, or rather getting scared and having behavioral crises worsening the situation. The European directives establish minimum requirements and fundamental principles, including the principle of prevention and risk assessment, as well as the responsibilities of workers and employers. Therefore, to guarantee greater safety to people on the spectrum and their colleagues as well, it is necessary to train both about the recognition of emergency situations and how to manage them.

As far as the preparation of people on the spectrum, in this case the training should be conducted with the support of visual materials in order to allow the employee to visualize and memorize necessary steps. In addition to this, it will be also necessary to have a practical applications of lessons learnt, in order to let the person on the spectrum be able to perform emergency drills at the end of the training.

The greatest responsibility, however, is on colleagues and managers as they will be the first interlocutor to interact with the person on the spectrum before rescuers. For this reason, it is important that the entire staff is prepared on how to manage dangerous situation. Here are some suggestions on what to do under conditions emergency where people with autism are present:

Prevention

In order to be prepared in case of emergency, the most important thing is to prepare an emergency kit to keep always available in order to be ready-to-use.

The kit should include:

- images and pictures used during the training to represent different types of emergencies
- images and pictures used during the training to represent rescue steps that will be performed
- images and pictures used during the training to represent the external part of the building where the rescue point is settle
- useful numbers of reference people related to the employee on the spectrum
- materials to distract or engage the person on the spectrum after the rescue (e.g. music,

- books, newspaper)
- materials to reduce stress.

Figure 3. Examples of pictures and images to be used to represent dangerous situations



Intervention

When emergency occurs, there are some simple rules that is important to follow in order to correctly and safely implement evacuation protocols.

- Recall the attention of the person and then prepare him/her: pronouncing the name (if known) or any preparatory expression (e.g. *look, listen, be careful ready, etc.*) and establish eye contact
- Carefully observe the person to check their conditions: people with ASC can react uncommonly to painful stimuli or cannot recognize the source of their pain.
- Explain actions before doing them: the person with ASC could not being able to deduce what is happening from the context and may not understand what is being done. Showing actions and communicate them in a consequential order can facilitate communication and collaborations.
- Use a simple language: concrete with short and clear sentences, avoiding metaphors and idioms which are not understandable. Physical prompts and gesture can be supportive.

- Use a low and sweet tone of voice: this will help to concentrate, decrease anxiety and contribute to reduce the "sensory stress" related to the emergency situation.
- Respect the need to keep the distance: avoid physical contact when not strictly necessary.
- Promise a reward: If necessary, to facilitate collaboration it may be useful to promise a prize or to motivate the person on the spectrum when a correct action is performed.
- Use given strategy to interrupt the working activity: compatibly with the level emergency, if the person is performing a task it is necessary to 'normally' end it rather than interrupt it brusquely (e.g. we count up to 3 and then you finish).
- Do not leave the person alone: being unpredictable in managing dangerous situation it is always important, once they are in a safe place, to engage the person on the spectrum in any activity.

Good practice – I help you to rescue me

Objective of the good practice

The training of people with Autism will have to include coordinated actions to prepare children and adults with autism will be educated but also rescuers, families and so on for the implementation of emergency protocols.

Short Description

Implemented by Associazione Bambini e Autismo with the cooperation of the Fire Department of Pordenone (Italy), the project foresees two different phases for the development of a conjoint emergency protocol. One stage involves theoretical and practical training for the teams of the Fire Department, with the following objectives:

- learn the indicators for recognizing a person with Autism and learn about Autism in its main characteristics;
- gain experience with different people with Autism through practical and video simulations;
- draft guidelines for managing the intervention in order to avoid main problems that could arise in emergency situations where people with Autism are involved and guarantee their safety.

A further phase, parallel to the training of the Fire Department, is the training of people with autism: they proceeded with the identification a group of people of different ages and with different ASC severity under the umbrella of the Association. Educational and rehabilitative methods were applied, based on the use of visual aids, such as photos, and ad hoc materials were developed to teach the people on the spectrum what are the emergency situations, for example by resorting to illustrated stories, video and / or virtual situations.

In this phase, the trainees had also the chance to gain practical experience, with visits to the fire station, application of procedures for rescue intervention: after the theoretical preparation that serves to anticipate what will happen, realistic simulations can limit the negative impact unforeseen events and innovations have on people on the spectrum.

The first step was the schedule of meetings the Fire Department to get people with Autism into contact with

rescuers during neutral situations, up to the simulation of emergency situations, performing real fire drills. Everything was filmed in order to have useful material for the successive learning phases.

Successful aspects

The outcome of this experimental phase of the project was very positive for both parties. For the Fire Department this was a preliminary training about Autism that has received much interest. In particular, for the Fire Department, the possibility to meet and relate with different people with Autism has conferred a distinctive added value.

On the other hand, the people on the spectrum who were involved in this phase of the project expressed interest for the presented materials and demonstrated to be comfortable with interactions with the firefighters they have met. Moreover, they also agreed to perform evacuation tests without showing signs of anxiety while showing a collaborative behaviour.

This experience is the demonstration that the appropriate preparation about the problem (emergency situations) and the application of tailored tools and notions can turn difficulties into good practices to share and export, even in working environment in order to assure the safety of both people on the spectrum and their colleagues as well as a key chance to establish cooperation within the working group.

Conclusions

All supportive materials here provided (tables, figures, examples of good practice, videos etc.) demonstrate that it is possible with small adjustments and understanding the needs of the individual, especially sensorial and behavioural needs, can not only facilitate the integration of employees on the spectrum but also their working performance in terms of accomplished tasks and human interaction and cooperation with colleagues.

However, the first and most important prerequisite for implementing these measures is the existence of a culture of inclusion throughout the organisation from senior management (in order to ensure a tailored decision making process) to the working team (in order to ensure the correct implementation of given instructions).

For this reason, it is crucial to be knowledgeable about autism and how it specifically affects individuals and how to support an employee on the spectrum. This guideline provides examples of concrete application and resolution that can be applied, based on others' experiences and adapting them specifically for the working environment.

Moreover, the integration of Cultural Pedagogical Theatre (CPT) practical demonstration of problem-solving should facilitate the acknowledgement and distinction between positive and inclusive approaches from negative and exclusive ones.

Knowledge, in fact, is the foremost weapon against prejudice and the first step to inclusion.

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Annex 1 - Sensory Audit for Labour market

This sensory audit is to help staff to assess and create a suitable environment for autistic workers. It is based on "Sensory Audit for Schools and Classrooms" (<http://www.aetraininghubs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/37.1-Sensory-audit-tool-for-environments.pdf>)

Visual

Good Practice and Evidence to look for	Current Situation	Possible action (if needed)
<p>Workplace illumination is suitable for workers with autism.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fluorescent lights are regularly checked and changed. (Flickering lights can be very disturbing.) • The effects of light coming into the room through blinds and creating distracting patterns are minimized • Light reflecting on objects such as metal or shiny surfaces in the classroom is minimized. 		
<p>The workplace is orderly and not cluttered so that workers can make sense of the environment.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The impact of wall displays is considered. (Busy and cluttered wall displays can be distracting). • Designated areas for specific activities to give clarity to the workplace organization. • Pupils have the opportunity to work at a workstation to focus their attention, if necessary 		

Noise and sounds

Good Practice and Evidence to look for	Current Situation	Possible action (if needed)
<p>Sounds from workplace equipment are kept to a minimum.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Televisions, videos, audio systems, lights and computers are switched off when not in use to avoid a mains hum. 		
<p>There are strategies in place to reduce noise when any spaces are in use.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workplaces are carpeted or adapt to lessen noise created by the movement of people, chairs and desks. • The acoustics of the meetings rooms, dining hall and pass areas are checked and modified to lessen echo 		
<p>Sounds from outside the workplace do not cause problems within workplace.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Windows are suitably soundproofed so that the noise of passing traffic is not a nuisance 		
<p>Workers are warned if a loud noise or bell is going to sound.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategies are put in place to support workers who find loud noises or fire bells very difficult to tolerate. 		

Smell

Pointer	Current Situation	Possible action (if needed)
<p>Smells within the workplace are kept to a minimum.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The smell of paints, glue, clay and cleaning fluids is minimal.• Staff are aware that the smell of perfumes and deodorants may be distressing.• Staff are aware that other workers may react to the smell of others.		
<p>Smells from outside the workplace are monitored and reduced, where possible</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Alternative toileting arrangements are allowed (e.g. possible use of staff or disabled toilets).		

Touch and feel

Pointer	Current Situation	Possible action (if needed)
<p>Uncomfortable clothing (seams, inflexible or itchy fabrics) is avoided, where possible, unless there are safety issues</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Variations of the work uniform offer enough flexibility to enable workers to be able to wear clothing they find comfortable.• Willingness of the enterprise to adapt the work uniform.		

<p>Seating is comfortable.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Padding is used to make hard chairs more comfortable. 		
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General sensory issues

Good Practice and Evidence to look for	Current Situation	Possible action (if needed)
<p>Workers are encouraged to let others know if they are finding a sensory aspect of the environment distressing.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workers know that they can speak to anyone about concerns. • Workers have a designated person or mentor to talk to. 		
<p>Workers are relaxed when moving through corridors.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workers are allowed to leave the workplace slightly earlier or later than other workers to avoid noisy. 		
<p>Workplace organization takes into account the individual needs of workers.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • workplace organisation and individual places plan takes into consideration individual sensory concerns. • Workers who become anxious by the close proximity of others are allowed ample space around their seat 		

Good Practice and Evidence to look for	Current Situation	Possible action (if needed)
<p>Dinner halls and queuing systems do not cause distress (due to the noise levels, smells and crowds).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Workers are allowed to enter the dinner hall before or after peers to avoid queuing and crowds. 		
<p>A system of support is available for workers experiencing sensory overload.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Working breaks are allowed when necessary There is a designated place and a clear system/routine for workers to follow if they feel they need to withdraw due to sensory overload to 'chill out.' 		

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Autism @ Work. Good Practices for Companies to Create a Suitable Environment and a Good Deal for Autistic People

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