Top 5 autism tips: employment - Starting work and performance development

1. Information to provide before an employee starts work

It's really important to provide the employee with some really clear information before they start work. Some key things to consider are the start and finish times – not just the time that the person starts work, but also the time the person's supposed to arrive in the workplace; the dress code; the unwritten rules like the tea/coffee rule and also the locations of the toilets can be really helpful.

Other things to consider could be creating a map of the workplace, so where people sit along with their photos and names, and also a clear point of contact for those first two weeks.

2. Planning an effective induction and probation

So to be able to plan an effective induction and probation for an autistic employee, it's really important to have a clear checklist to work through. Some things you really need to have are a really clear job description – that might need to be in more detail than other employees just to outline the start times/finish times/what the key targets are.

Some other things to consider are having a template, resources, a really clear timetable and any assistive technology that might be able to be helpful. Another thing is to think about your communication style – so we often communicate verbally... for some people with autism that can be really difficult to process the information, so try to write everything down, or back everything up with an e-mail with really clear bullet points and action points.

3. Dealing with performance difficulties during the probation period

During the probation period there may be some difficulties that the employee faces. As a starting point it's really important to categorise where those difficulties are – so are the difficulties around the person not completing work to the expected standard? Are the difficulties around meeting targets and deadlines? Or are there difficulties in communicating with their colleagues?

These are all really common difficulties for autistic people and actually really manageable. As a first step we'd advise getting a workplace assessment. What a workplace assessment does is look at those difficulties for that specific role, for that specific person... and identifies some reasonable adjustments that the employer can implement as best practice.

4. Planning for performance development

It's really important that you plan for performance development and autistic employees are given the exact same opportunities as other employees within your workplace. As a first start, as you would with any employee, it's about speaking to that person and finding out where that person would like to develop within their career.

The difference being that for autistic people it can be really hard to identify where to go, because it's about having all the options available to you and open to you and what that might mean. So as an employer the information that you really need to provide is what are the options; what are the training journeys or development that that person needs to go down; and actually what's the outcome going to be, so what will their job look like at the end of doing the training and developing down that path.

On a separate note for some autistic employees, it's about being creative. So line management isn't always going to be useful but actually there's lot of different ways you can develop somebody, and to full a business need but also to work on the strengths of that autistic person. So sometimes it's better at looking as a technical mentor for an autistic employee so they can teach the skills and the strengths that they have to other employees within your organisation.

5. Key things to consider

To make the induction process as successful as it can be for an autistic employee, there's some really clear simple things that you can consider. For example:

- Your communication style - avoid ambiguous language, avoid vague instructions, be clear, be direct, say what you mean.
- Also have a look at the sensory environment – where does that person sit within the office? Is it at a noisy walkway? Is it by a printer where people gather? Is it under a bright light near an air conditioning unit? All of these things can really impact a person's performance.

- Have weekly one-to-one catch-ups – they don't have to be long, can just be 30 minutes – but it's just a way of making sure that employee feels fully supported and actually you can identify if there's any problems in performance and plan for those really quickly.
- Identify some really clear targets, really clear timetables, and actually just be honest – have honest feedback. If someone isn't doing something right, tell them, but also say how to manage that for next time and how to change it, because feedback's only useful if the person then knows how to correct it. So without giving person that information, it's going to be really difficult for them to correct feedback for the next time.