

Development and Piloting a Model for Occupational Training and Employment of People with ASD in the ICT Sector

a project implemented by:



Асоциация
Аутизъм



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A practical guide for hiring and working with people with autism spectrum disorders

This book is designed to give employers, managers, human resources specialists and members of IT development teams, who have taken the engagement to integrate and support people with autism in the process and work environment of their organizations. More and more proofs exist in support of the fact that the employment of people with different thinking and interests can improve and increase the creativity, productivity and profitability of the companies. Regarding the companies, there is an increased awareness on the fact that in order to meet the diversity of their customer requirements, the company's staff should be also divers in its approach, attitude and way of thinking.

Those two important factors encourage the companies to adopt policies in creation of employment for people with disabilities, representatives of different ethnic minorities and in particular – people with autism spectrum disorders. The proved models for employment of disadvantaged social groups shows that regardless of the challenges, more and more high functioning people with autism manage to succeed in their professional development and career. The provision of trainings and support to the job applicants with ASD stimulates their confidence in the success and improve the possibilities for achieving better results and long-term commitments.

Main challenges for people with autism spectrum disorders

The autism is a complicated development disorder that causes disturbances in the perception of oneself and the surrounding world, communication and social interactions, behavior and learning. The special features in the behavior occur in many situations, but their intensity and level of autistic symptoms are variable in every person. As a result of the specific perception of the reality, the people with autism create their own image of the world and have difficulties in the establishment of relationships and expression of emotions in typical for the others terms. Often, they may look like strange and bizarre because of their behavior and emotional expression of their interests.

The people with autism:

- Experience difficulties with the communication. Many people with autism does not speak, and mostly those who can speak develop this ability in a later age or their speech is specific.



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- Experience difficulties with the understanding of non-verbal language. Mostly they do not always understand body language. They do not understand mimics and voice intonation.
- Experience difficulties with eye-contact. The eye-contact is not always a source of information.
- Experience difficulties with the understanding of abstract terms. Usually they perceive everything literally.
- Hypersensitive towards changes. When changes are about to occur, it is preferable that they should be explained in advance.
- The fast perceiving of new ideas and undertaking initiatives are a challenge for many people with autism.
- Difficulties in perceiving the situations from everyday life and behavior of other people can cause alienation and confusion. Thus, in order to feel safe, the people with autism often become deeply rapt in their interests; they seek for routine and hardly allow external interference in their world.
- Difficulty in expression their feelings in a comprehensive and universal way does not mean that they do not feel and/ or emote. People with autism often have problems to interpret the other's emotions.

Apart **from the speech and social skills**, the autism affects strongly **the perceptions and the imagination**.

In this regard, most of the people with autism perceive and learn the abstract terms with the aid of visual support. The written form of communication often is more successful than the verbal.

The specific sensitivity of some people with autism provokes untypical perceptions of the outer stimulations. Some are hypersensitive towards noise, touch, light, scents, taste or temperature, and others do not react to these stimulations. The preliminary definition of those obstacles lowers occurring of problematic situations.



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The people with autism may experience difficulties in regulating the tone of their voice in different situations. Some of them unstoppably speak either too high or too low, others are too monotonous in their way of speaking. Sometimes they disregard the remarks but this is not by purpose.

Some of the people with autism do not like to sit with the back towards the entrance of the room or the hall. This may cause eventual unwanted sensations in case of a surprise entrance of people or disrupting their concentration on the work tasks. For those, for whom this may be a real obstacle, it is most preferable to consider more suitable work place.

The people with autism need of:

- Foreseen daily schedule;
- Punctuality and definiteness of the expression
- Focusing on definite subjects and details
- Finding shelter in the routine, stereotyped movements and activities

The disposition for registering details and focusing on the particularities could be a precondition for precision in the execution of the tasks assigned. Simultaneously it can become a challenge for the timely execution of the tasks assigned. Within the period of training and adjusting with the essence of the work, it is necessary to monitor this disposition. The respective feedback, advices and boundaries should be established and observed.

The rituals, stereotyped actions and compulsiveness are specific features for the people with autism. With the suitable strategy and consecutive approach towards them, which can be establishment of clear boundaries - when, where and how this could happen without disrupting colleges, what are the processes in the company.

When being hired, the people with autism need:



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- Detailed adjustment in the work environment (main offices and service rooms), personal coach – mentor, a substitute in case that the supporting employee – mentor is absent, colleges and etc.
- Deep and detailed explanation of the work schedule, the rules for behavior and communication, expectations and to whom and how he can address in case of questions and problems.
- Compliance with the company’s hierarchy is a prerequisite for adequate social behavior.
- Clear and unambiguous tasks for performance in a written form.
- Adjustment with the “unwritten rules” of the respective company will prevent problematic or conflict situations. The rules must include the adapted “social norms” during the work process, as well as the usual activities and commitments of the employees during the break. (For example: who and how makes coffee, does one pay for it, does one offer coffee to colleges when made for oneself; where are place for used cups, are the cups individual, is there a responsible person for their cleaning or everyone is responsible for its own etc.)
The company’s unwritten rules include as well the way the office of superiors and colleges is entered.
- The establishment and accumulation of the feeling for good performance; gaining confidence in performing tasks is a sure prerequisite for the good performance of the people with autism. The lack of social and work experience in the past, the frequent cases of discrimination at school, university or at the work place, have created fear and uncertainty that require time and patience in order to be overcome.
- Clarifying the issue about the confidentiality of internal information, regarding the disability of the person with autism. There are cases when the people with autism don’t want to share about their condition. It is desirable but not primary for the job applicants to share information on their condition with the other colleagues in order to create more appropriate conditions for integration.

How to begin?



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I. Defining the domains where support will be needed

The law for people with disabilities provides clear guidelines on this topic. The International Charter on the rights of people with ASD is also good source of information for possible changes in the work environment in terms of provision of the appropriate support to persons with autism.

- Allocation of a part of the tasks of the person with ASD to another person of the company.
- Permission of the person with ASD to leave the work place in case of appointed rehabilitation or other renovations of premises.
- Preliminary training process, adapted to the specification of the challenges that the person with ASD experiences.
- Modification of the instructions and manuals, used during the work (incl. Use of written and verbal instructions).
- The provision of supervision (personal mentor)
- Adapt the work schedule in a way that satisfies the needs of the person with autism
- Discuss the transfer of the job applicant in another office of the company, if the travel causes stress and tension.

Successful strategies

The individual trainings often give better results than the group trainings. Provide the job applicant with the opportunity to choose the form of training - individual or group, visual support or multimedia resources, etc. Give the tasks in small steps, breakdown structure. Provide clear and concrete messages, instructions or practical training. The hypothetical issues are not recommended.

Advices for successful communication

Don't make assumptions



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Sometimes it happens to build bigger expectations from the people with autism, when we witness how good they manage with certain tasks or activities. This, which we understand as a “common sense”, the people with autism don’t understand it as a fact.

Be direct

In order to be polite, we often express our desires or requests indirectly. “I would be grateful if you could send me the project in time”. “It would be great if you can finish this task until the end of the work day” etc.

Be clear and concrete

Despite asking Ivan to make photocopies of a certain document for all the employees in the office, it is preferable to tell the exact number of the documents required or to say the names of the employees that should receive the documents.

Avoid the figurative speech

Metaphorical and figurative expressions could create a lot of confusing situations for the people with autism. Expressions, such as “This bad weather kills me”, “It was so cold this morning, I was going to die”, “This task is endless, I want to shoot myself”, “Wait me for a while, I’ll be there in a minute”. Such expressions, their literal understanding and figurative way of thinking could cause serious confusion in some people with autism. If you don’t really think that you could come back in a minute, etc. it is preferable not to formulate your expressions in such a way.

Emphasize on the important details

Most of the people with autism may need time before they acquire some new capabilities. Emphasizing on the basic stages and details of the task could improve the process of understanding and learning of the desired knowledge and capabilities.

Give suggestions and instructions always in a written form



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The tasks and actions, explained in a written form, the use of images, symbols or visual instructions, as well as schedules for the day and the week are among the possible ways of supporting the people with autism. Depending on the level of functionality, this way for providing instructions and time management guidelines is recommended to become a part of the personal file of the person with autism.

Check if you are understood

It may happen that very hard and complicated tasks are comprehensible and implemented with a great ease from a person with autism, but meanwhile, easy and simple tasks could become an obstacle. In regard with the good results and facilitated work process, it is recommended to act proactive and make sure that all the steps are clear.

Show them respect

Most of the people with autism, regardless of their level of functioning, have strong developed feeling for dignity. This is why it is preferable to avoid the patronizing and preaching tone, the raising out loud, etc.

Defining the boundaries

Define your expectations

The challenges towards the people with autism could limit their ability to manage their work, but many obstacles could be overcome with better communication. The hired people with ASD strive to meet the expectations, required by the position on which they are hired. If their performance is lower than the expected, the first thing to check is whether the provided instructions are clearly understood.

Explain your expectations for quality work

Often, the people with ASD are extremely self-exigent. It is preferable to explain that perfectionism is not applicable in each task. Simultaneously with that, it could be explained that sometimes an employee could be late for work, after that he could work this time out in the same or in another day.



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Define which are the permissible / suitable topics for conversation

Example: *Impermissible topics for conversation:*

- *Age*
- *Money*
- *Physical appearance*
- *Personal life*
- *Topics in regard with the personal hygiene*

Permissible topics for conversation:

- *Questions on how did someone spend the weekend*
- *Music, movies, theatre, books, television programs*
- *Common interests and hobbies*
- *Topics, regarding the function of a person in the organization or the company; what are their commitments, the essence of the work, etc.*
- *Weather*

If you find it necessary, the topics, defined as impermissible could be described and included in the personal file of the person with autism, together with the work schedule, the job description and everything in regard with his rights and commitments to the company.

Keep the focus on the work

In case that the hired person with autism crosses the boundaries of the permissible behavior it is not desirable only to advice him to stop. The mentor or the responsible manager should explain why this type of behavior is not suitable and to offer alternative / different behavior.

Organization of the work place

Time management

Time management during the breaks



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Overcoming change

A change is a situation in which the people with ASD could manage more difficult than others. In the cases where this is possible to occur, it is preferable that the future changes in the company are announced in advance. It is necessary the change to be explained. It would be good if the people with autism can be informed in time about those changes.

Feedback and assessment with the performance

The direct managers and the individual mentor should have the readiness to provide feedback about the work done honestly, constructively and constantly. Often the people with autism are not in the condition to understand the delicate hints made about the way they are performing. The ability for self-assessment is a very individual quality and this is why it is preferable to inform them timely how they are dealing with their work. In case of eventual problems – what is the essence of the problem, what and how could be changed. The timely reporting of existing problems is a prerequisite for better understanding. In a long-term plan this will influence positively to the development of the professional and the social skills of the person with autism. It is a good idea that the meetings for assessment and feedback are regular, for example peer review in every fifteen minutes. In order to support and develop the ability for self-assessment it is good to be given some concrete helping questions, on which the person with autism could think in order to be ready for the meeting.

Confidentiality and sharing personal information

The people with autism react very differently in regard to this topic. The people with the Asperger syndrome often do not want to share information about their condition and the manager or the supporting mentor keeps this information in confidentiality. For others, this doesn't affect on their confidence and they accept their condition as a part of who they are and they do not mind talking about themselves. Frequently, the level of disability is an important factor for the decision whether or not to share the information with the staff of the company. The more “visible” or distinctive features of someone is occurred, the higher level of its dependency from support in the workplace, more imperative is to



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announce the condition of the colleague with ASD and acquire the other colleagues with the instructions how to integrate this person in the team.

Informing the colleges

Sharing the information about the condition of the future or present colleague could be done by the management of the company, as well as by specialists in the field in the form of a short but informative training.

When problems occur

The emerging of different problems is quite possible, despite all the preparations, trainings and efforts - inability to work in harmony with the team, mistakes, reflecting on the work of others and even the excessive effort for integration in work environment, which could result in a misunderstanding. Every problem or situation could be solved with more understanding and taking into account the communication features of the person with autism in individual meetings with explicit, clear and constructive approach.

Main guidelines for managers

- ❖ Create specific rules of behavior
- ❖ Introduce the new tasks under structured form
- ❖ Use written or graphic instructions
- ❖ Provide daily or weekly schedules or timetables of the planned activities
- ❖ If possible prepare the future changes in the work place and explain why they are necessary
- ❖ Monitor closely, especially in the beginning
- ❖ Give a constant and immediate feedback
- ❖ Ensure a consecutive and principled relationship with the person with autism



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