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 [Annie May Noonan](#) - Features Editor, Real Business

 

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Learning from business owners and staff with autism

 9 Mins

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Autism, an umbrella term that includes Asperger syndrome and Pathological Demand Avoidance, (PDA) affects more people in the UK than you might think. According to [2019 statistics](#) from the National Autistic Society, over one in every hundred person in the UK is on the autistic spectrum.

While those who are diagnosed with autism can struggle in school, during adulthood the condition continues to impact their lives, with 70% of autistic adults saying they don't get enough social services support which has led to at least 1 in 3 developing "severe" mental health conditions as a result.

When it comes to autistic adults entering the work economy, the statistics are equally troubling, with only 32% in "some kind of paid work," and even less (16%) saying they are in "full-time paid employment."

Autism and work

The same research says that only 10% of autistic adults “receive employment support” yet over half “say they want it”, which shows the need for the implementation of better recruitment and employment practises to support autistic job candidates and staff in businesses.

As autism is a spectrum, ranging from low functioning to high functioning individuals, integrating those fit and willing to work into an office environment is the right thing to do for society as well as the economy. What’s more, onboarding these types of candidates can bring in talent with an [attractive set of skills](#).

For example, high functioning autistic workers can be reliable, detail orientated and good at following instructions. They can also possess impressive concentration levels and strong research skills.

While certain adjustments might have to be made to make autistic employees feel comfortable, they don’t have to be costly. In fact, they include allowing for flexible working conditions and altering the way employers and colleagues communicate with autistic staff.

The number of autistic people living in the UK has naturally produced a number of autistic business owners and professionals who are forging successful careers. Real Business spoke to some of them to hear from their perspectives...

Autistic entrepreneurs

Rachel Morgan-Trimmer, neurodiversity coach and consultant, [Sparkle Class](#)



While there are lots of challenges in being an autistic business owner, there are lots of benefits as well. Neurodiverse people are 30% to 50% more productive, and we learn faster. We can bring our love of logic and structure to a workplace, plus we tend to communicate more clearly. The single most important feature of being inclusive towards autistic employees is to have the right attitude – to appreciate their unique strengths. If you do that, you will help your autistic staff to develop confidence, be productive, and most of all, finally feel accepted.

Andy Clayton, Head of [Petra Coach](#) Europe



I’ve been an entrepreneur for over 13 years. I’ve met many other autistic entrepreneurs in that time, and have found we share some common traits. Maybe these will help you if you are, or work with, an autistic entrepreneur.

– **Black & White thinking.** Today, my marketing manager explained to me why she thinks I am so uncomfortable with marketing – “It’s because there is no clear link from inputs to outputs”, she said, and I think she’s right. I simply hate ambiguity. I value clarity, insight, and clear answers. Sadly, very little in business fall into these categories, especially when people get involved.

– **Problems vs People.** In a discussion or meeting, I will always prioritise the issue, and its resolution, over the people discussing. A meeting I had recently with a new client who is ADHD was a disaster. He kept talking, rambling at length on long tangents, and I kept interrupting him. He got so close to just throwing me off the project, as I had no interest in listening to his missives.

– **Planning & focus.** I get hired because of my love for planning and focus, and because most people simply don’t plan in their lives. This was a revelation when I discovered it because I realised that’s what makes me useful. My team tease me because I can spend more time on Monday.com creating templates for projects plans than talking to them, or ‘doing something useful’.

Autism from an employee’s perspective

David Reynolds, Senior Software Engineer, [Civica](#)



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The computer software field is an industry that rewards autistic traits because highly structured, logical thinking helps a great deal when it comes to programming. I told my manager once I was diagnosed and the instant reaction was, “how can we support you better?” This was a huge relief, as my condition does increase the tendency for me to worry over how I am perceived socially.

I now work from home four days a week and come in for customer meetings. This puts me in a position where I can save all my social energy, and it’s far easier for me to focus in my quiet home office than with the busier open-plan office. Civica also has a peer-support group for employees with Autistic Spectrum Conditions (ASC) which provides a great communication and support system. Just knowing you’re not alone is a huge help.

My autism has certainly given me an advantage at work. One of my personal interests aligns with a project I am currently working on. This has meant that it’s easier for me to retain information about things that have and haven’t worked in the past, helping me to drive the project forward. I have also generated several ‘out of the box’ ideas – as that’s the way my brain works, it seems to be able to connect widely to different topics and work out how best to fit complex topics together.

Advice for other businesses

Trudi Beswick, CEO of [Caudwell Children](#)



In any business, it is essential to consider different perspectives and points of view to ensure the marketing of products or services is as effective as possible. To recognise that we live in a neuro-diverse society and to employ a workforce which reflects your target market makes good business sense.

Autistic people experience the world differently to most and therefore can have a very different perspective on the messages that a business communicates; employing people with these different perspectives can in some instances provide a business with a competitive advantage.

It is important to recognise that autism is a spectrum condition and how it affects people is individual to each person. But some common characteristics are the ability to focus intently on specific tasks and to process or remember complex information, these skills may be combined with challenges in understanding non-verbal communication or reacting differently to sensory stimuli.

With some reasonable adjustments, including an increased understanding and acceptance of these employees, employers can embrace the positive impact that having a neurodiverse workforce can have on their business.

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