

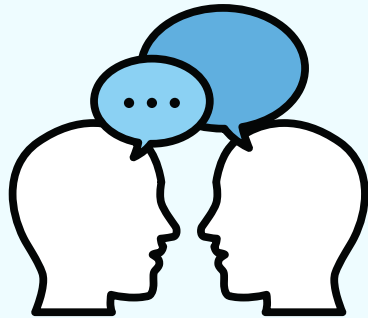


Autism Alliance
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Autistic/Allistic Intercommunication: A Guide for the Workplace



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Introduction

Autistics experience significant disadvantage and discrimination in the workplace. As modern workplaces strive for equity, diversity and inclusivity, it is now a necessity to embed neurodiversity into the fabric of business practices in order to remove social, attitudinal, and infrastructural barriers. Humans are a neurologically diverse species, with different neurological make-up and brain wiring. Acceptance of neurodiversity means challenging supposedly universal assumptions about human nature and being empathetic in engaging with others who think differently than you. Leading with empathy is key to employee engagement, performance management, and accomplishing productivity goals.

This resource may be useful for managers, supervisors and colleagues who are working with autistic staff. This resource provides an overview of autistic communication differences along with explanations for these differences. Guidance on how to adapt verbal and non-verbal communication is also provided.

Methods

This content of this resource was based on 38 interviews with autistic workers and 17 interviews with business managers and disability support specialists from across Canada, as well as academic and grey literature pertaining to workplace communication and autistic communication styles. Interviews with participants were held from January - June, 2022, and were conducted by an autistic PhD student fellow working at Autism Alliance of Canada. Autistic participants shared their challenges experienced over the course of their employment history; commonalities among the participants included challenges with social inclusion, challenges being accommodated at work, challenges being open about being autistic, and lack of autism awareness in the workplace. An intersecting theme among these many challenges was communication with allistics. Findings about intercommunication challenges are aligned with other research studies which show that many autistics have difficulties communicating with allistics, but have little to no difficulties communicating with other autistics because they share the same neurotype [1-2].

The decision to develop this resource is based on the discussion about communication differences with interview participants. Autistic interviewees would like employers to have an understanding about how they socially interact with others. The voices of autistics are quoted in this guide in order to represent the lived experience of employees in a variety of occupational roles, such as executive management, information technology specialist, education, retail and service sectors. Selected quotes from managers and disability support specialists offer insights into the successes that they have had in hiring and supporting autistic workers in their businesses.

Communicating with Empathy is Good for Business

Good communication skills are essential for business leaders to be influential when engaging with colleagues and employees. Communication involves the transmission of messages and making oneself understood by others. While every undertaking of a manager involves communication, the most important component is communicating work expectations to their team. Not only do objectives and deadlines need to be made clear, but the path to accomplishing these objectives needs to be well defined. Managerial decisions are only effective if they are understood by the team. Effective communication allows workers to understand their roles as well as the roles of their coworkers. Managers who understand the vital role of communication consider how they wish their message to be received and whether it was understood how it was intended to be. It is essential to pay attention to the way messages are transmitted as well as the person who is receiving and interpreting the message. Assuming everyone communicates the same will cause a lot of unnecessary aggravation, as well as lost productivity and profit.

How a message is interpreted depends on the receiver's personal frame of reference according to experience, as well as individual characteristics, including culture, gender, age, and style of thinking. The ability to understand the needs of others, their feelings and perceptions, is what is known as empathy. This understanding helps leaders to respond appropriately to the needs of their employees according to the situation. Managers who demonstrate empathy create workplace cultures where employees feel safe and supported. Supported environments enable trust and team work, which are essential to achieving organizational goals. It is easier to be emotionally connected to others who are similar to ourselves. However, this can give rise to what is known as an affinity bias which can prevent diversity and inclusivity in the workplace. Affinity bias is a common underlying cause of groupthink where group members from the same background hold assumptions that are unable to be challenged by those outside the group or culture. Creativity and innovation become stifled when members are not able to bring forth alternative perspectives.

Overcoming affinity bias and connecting with different people can prove challenging. In line with these ideas, the double-empathy problem posits that the more dissimilar we are from another person, the more difficult it can be to have empathy with them [3]. The double-empathy problem has been used to explain the communication gap that is commonly encountered when two groups of people with different thinking styles, such as autistics and allistics, interact with each other.

The communication challenges between autistics and allistics can be considered a bidirectional breakdown in empathy. This absence of understanding from both ends can lead to a lack of empathy as empathy involves the ability to appreciate someone else's perspective. Since most people are allistic (ie., neurotypical), the neuro-majority might fail to empathize with the neuro-minority because their behaviour may be difficult to interpret. Just as neurotypical people tend to communicate more efficiently with other neurotypical people, autistics can communicate well with each other due to similar styles of thinking and manner of communicating [1-3]. As a neuro-minority, autistic people have more opportunities to interact with neurotypical people than neurotypicals have to interact with them. In order to "fit in" with the majority, some autistics may learn how to mask or camouflage their autistic traits in certain social situations. Masking involves mimicking the behaviour of people around them and imitating their tone of voice and mannerisms. Masking autistic tendencies can be exhausting and stressful leading autistic people to believe their authentic self is not accepted.

Participant voices

“Since childhood, like my earliest memories, I can remember masking and thinking, OK, this is how people want me to act, this is what people want me to do. And how I was always performing to fit in and be what I thought it was expected of me to be, and how I was supposed to act and all that. And I ended up in high school, diagnosed with depression and anxiety, and then autism a little later on after. But I now recognize it as autistic burnout.” - Autistic non-binary, business sector employee

“Like you’re expected to still fit within someone else’s box when you are a completely different shape” - Autistic non-binary, business sector employee

For neurodivergent thinkers, particularly, autistic people, communicating with neurotypical thinkers poses some challenges. Autism is a “genetically based human neurological variant that produces distinctive, atypical ways of thinking, moving, interacting, and processing” [4]. Autistic brains are wired to process communication, information, and sensory stimuli differently than allistic brains. Autism is a part of the natural spectrum of human diversity, which includes different neurotypes. It is important to keep in mind that while autistics share the same neurotype, autistics are not a monolithic group and have heterogeneity of experiences and presentations. As the popular adage goes: if you’ve met one person with autism, you’ve met one person with autism. Within this guide, we discuss some common traits among autistics, but each autistic person is unique with their own style of thinking and communication preferences. Coworkers and managers are encouraged to understand the autistic person that they work with rather than trying to fully understand the complex neurocognitive variant of autism in general.

Participant voices

“The other thing that is important to look at is the innovation factor. Innovation in business, or in any company, any workplace, it's not created by hiring very smart people. It's created by hiring regular people who think differently...[disabled folks] have had to adapt to everything differently. So people in that mindset bring that different problem solving mindset into the workforce. That's how innovation is created.” - Allistic male, employer/multi-business owner

“I think the success that I have had is knowing how to surround the building with good people. I think part of my job is to find staff members who have a similar mindset and are open to working with different types of people...and now that we have them in place, it is a world of difference.” - Allistic male, retail manager

“Businesses often think that having someone with a disability means less productivity. So I did an analysis of my baker's work and I found that [disabled workers'] productivity for a week was 18.4% higher than the second best baker. And I have 27 bakers.” - Allistic male, employer/multi-business owner

Common Autistic Communication Differences

Interpersonal communication encompasses more than speech, it involves facial expressions, body language, vocalics, physiological changes, and eye contact. Our state of mind is often revealed through nonverbal gestures. Many people rely on non-verbal cues for self-expression and interpretation of other's intentions. In contrast to neurotypicals, an autistic person's facial expressions may not match what they are actually thinking or feeling. Some autistics may have a flat affect meaning their faces project little emotion or they may express little or low emotion in their voice. They have emotions, but the brain and body will not translate these feelings into a physical expression. Similarly, alexithymia is a term used to describe difficulties expressing, identifying, processing, and communicating emotions. It can also be challenging for alexithymics to identify and respond to emotions in others, especially when people are not verbally expressing their emotions. When faced with workplace challenges, an alexithymic may have difficulty recognizing and describing how they are feeling in the moment. They may recognize that there is an issue, but they require time to process it before being able to respond. Alexithymia is not uncommon among autistics, but a person can have flat affect without having alexithymia, and a person can have alexithymia without being autistic. On the other hand, some autistics experience emotions intensely, for example, they may exhibit loudness in their voice when excited, or speak very softly when nervous.

Participant voices

"I can't do the tones of my voice very easily. Whenever I try to, it ends up sounding like I'm doing a really bad impersonation of a woman. I don't know how to do that like feminine voice thing that most women, even a lot of autistic women, seem to be able to do naturally, which makes them sound more nurturing and likeable." -
Autistic female, retail industry employee

An autistic person may focus less on non-verbal communication and body language. Autistic people are more likely to think, speak, and hear literally and to have distinct preferences for a particular medium of communication, whereas allistic people are more likely to rely on clues from context, tone, gestures and other factors. Autistic people do not focus on any subtleties or social cues. Some autistics process verbal information differently and it is not uncommon for someone to take a pause to contemplate their response before verbalizing their thoughts. Pauses in conversation require patience. This may be particularly challenging for an extroverted personality who prefers to talk aloud to sort out their thoughts.

A long stream of verbal instructions can be especially challenging to process, particularly if the language used is ambiguous in meaning. Using management lingo or jargon, such as “upstream”; “upskill”; “low-hanging fruit”; “square the circle”; “deep dive”; “bucketise”; or putting “ize” at the end of words adds an unnecessary complex layer to the conversation. Speaking succinctly and with clarity, without leaving information or expectations unstated reduces misunderstandings.

Autistics have a reputation for being blunt. Many autistics will approach conversations as an exchange of information, especially in the context of the workplace. Some may have a compulsion to correct or inform as a way to be helpful. Speaking directly and clearly is perceived by autistics as being effective and efficient. A direct and pragmatic style of engagement is not meant to be rude or discourteous; some individuals have a tendency to say exactly what they mean and assume that others speak in the same way. Autistics often do not read between the lines or pick up on nuances, taking what is said literally. Do not take bluntness personally or become defensive. Autistics are merely sharing concerns and would like to assist in making improvements.

Participant voices

“People need to know it's okay to ask me what my intent was behind saying something, because I can say something that may sound - especially as an employer - I can say something that may sound incredibly harsh, right, and no harshness was intended, but I can't read everyone's body language to tell that they think that was harsh. And so I need to create basically a zone or a bubble around me where people feel comfortable asking me questions about my intent behind actions, etc, that normally would be totally socially inappropriate in any other environment and they need to know that's ok, because they need to know without that there's going to be, and there will be, like massive, frequent, sustained misunderstandings between me and everyone else. But it creates an environment where people know that I welcome criticism...if I said something here that offended people, let's talk about it, instead of holding it over my head and then corrupting my social work relationships.” -Autistic male, business executive

Socializing and even small talk or banter does not come naturally for some autistics. Autistics are better at making friends when they have shared interests with others. Having work in common with colleagues is helpful in nurturing relationships in the workplace. Many autistics value autonomy, prefer to work independently, and have less motivation for teamwork. Awkward social encounters and negative past experiences in navigating a neurotypical world have left many autistics with social anxiety. Being acutely aware of their differences has left some autistics less inclined to socially interact with allistics.

Participants voices

"I loathe working in teams, I cannot for the life of me, like, I'm honestly very cooperative. I'm not a combative person. But it drains me mentally to have to work with people because I have a brain that works in the way that it works. Sometimes faster than others, sometimes slower than others, you know, I need to go at my own pace. I am very solitary...I'm very analytical, so I'm gonna do a whole lot of detailed work. But sometimes the assignment is just to summarize or just, you know, be concise, and that will be harder for me. So working in groups means I have to kind of pace myself in a lot of ways and restrict myself." - Autistic female, graduate student/laboratory research assistant

"They just don't like you. Yeah, because of the way we talk, or the way we communicate - or what I call the social niceties, the sugarcoating, whatever ... like you just don't pass...because I'm not interested in talking about what they watch on television, and that kind of thing. They don't like that you're being your own person." -Autistic female, information technology employee

Avoiding eye contact is a distinctive characteristic of autism - it is so common among autistics that it is used as a diagnostic indicator. There are different reasons why autistics avoid eye contact: for some, it feels unnatural, and it might cause over-stimulation, discomfort, and anxiety; for others, especially those who are visual thinkers, they are processing the conversation visually in their mind, which draws their attention inwards while they are listening and responding. On the surface, avoidance of eye contact may be perceived as inattention, lack of interest, or unease with what is being said; however, autistics will pay better attention to the conversation when they are calm and comfortable, which may necessitate focusing elsewhere while processing information. Averting the eyes enhances concentration by reducing the stimulation that comes along with making eye contact. If autistics are verbally participating in the discussion, then they are actively listening. While the absence of consistent eye contact can make the inner states of autistic people difficult to infer, simply asking someone what they are thinking will help you get a sense of their emotions.

Participants voices

“Because like, while I can actively pretend to be not autistic by like, reminding myself to make eye contact, and change my emotions, my expressions, it was really exhausting. And I'd get home just entirely burnt out. Like even if I had done a great job that day, I would be so exhausted afterwards. And just sad that I wasn't able to just be myself that I had to basically hide it.” -Autistic female, service sector employee

Some autistics have prosopagnosia or “face blindness” which is an impaired ability to recognize faces, even people who they see often like coworkers. It is estimated that face blindness occurs in 40% of autistic people. Some people with prosopagnosia are unable to judge a person’s age, follow a person’s gaze, and some may not be able to read a person’s facial expressions. There is no cure or treatment for prosopagnosia. Autistics with this challenge learn to distinguish people by their specific features, such as hair style, clothing style, mannerisms, or way of speaking. Even then, it can be particularly difficult when encountering a familiar face in an unexpected location - such as seeing a coworker outside of the workplace. Autistics with prosopagnosia worry about appearing rude when they cannot recognize a familiar person causing much social anxiety and difficulties forming relationships.

Autistic people's sensory experiences can be more intense than allistic's. Hypersensitivity can cause workplaces to be disabling for some autistics. Direct fluorescent lighting can be problematic for some individuals as it can distort vision and cause headaches and other issues. Other factors include sounds, smells, computer screens, visual distractions, clothing/uniforms, ventilation and temperature. Highly stimulating environments and background noises can increase distractions and decrease attention and concentration. It is challenging for autistics to filter out background noise and other sensory input when in sensory overload. It can be difficult to focus on a conversation or verbal instructions in noisy environments. Stress can also increase sensory sensitivity making it more intense and uncomfortable. Self-stimulating behaviours or "stimming" can be used to manage big emotions, to self-regulate and self-soothe when experiencing sensory or emotional overload. It can also be used when autistics are happy or excited. Stimming is an autistic tendency involving repetitive movements, such as pacing, spinning or tapping objects (e.g., stimming toys), hand flapping, humming or repeating words or phrases (i.e., echolalia). Managers can help an autistic worker's sensory challenges by adjusting the environment to better accommodate their needs.

Participants voices

"Autistics have high anxiety levels and often employers don't know how to recognize that and mediate that. So let's say, they were feeling very anxious, maybe there could be a room that they could go to calm down for a minute at a time if they're feeling anxious or something like that, right." - Allistic female, disability support specialist/job coach

"In terms of the work environment, like needing to withdraw periodically...One of the things that she [Susan Cain, book author of *Quiet: The power of introverts in a world that can't stop talking*] talks about is the emotional drain of having to constantly socially interact. It's not something that energizes me, it's something that drains me. So needing the ability to withdraw periodically, to just sort of catch my breath, clear my head. That's something that I think I'd really like to pursue this year, as something to sort of help others understand." - Autistic male, information technology manager

There are autistic people who are not able to speak (non-verbal autism), struggle with intermittent speech (i.e., will speak sometimes but not always), have unreliable speech, and/or insufficient speech (i.e., some functional speech but can't communicate to meet all their needs). Challenges with speaking are not indicative of one's ability to communicate, nor is it an indication of a person's level of intelligence. Rather, challenges in speaking may result from apraxia of speech (e.g. neurological challenges with fine motor skills and gross motor movement) or how a person's brain developed. Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) includes various strategies and tools that can be used in addition to speech or as a substitute [5]; for example, texting/writing/typing, signs/picture cards, electronic supports such as phone or computer applications designed for communication support, and signed languages such as American Sign Language (ASL). AAC should allow the individual to communicate in a meaningful way. Making requests, choosing between meaningful options, the ability to reject offers, share opinions freely, and communicate feelings, are some of the ways an AAC user should be able to express themselves. Many of the popular apps are available for free (i.e., fluent AAC), or for a small fee (i.e., Proloquo2go). Combining communication strategies such as multiple forms of AAC, or AAC with speech can be an effective way for autistic individuals to have more successful communication in a variety of environments.

Participant voices

"In terms of like needs, and in like a second accessibility things, I get really frustrated with, like bright lights and sounds. I have social difficulties. Very rarely, but on occasion. I think it's called selective mutism, where I'll be so overwhelmed that I'll lose the ability to like, speak verbally. Yeah, I don't really know what else to say about that." -Autistic female, service sector employee

"I guess what I struggle with most is like sensory, so lights, like in terms of brightness, and noise. And also, like social interactions and eye contact. And I struggle with speech sometimes." -Autistic female, education sector employee

Recommendations for Improving Communication

Improving communication between autistic and allistic people can benefit both groups and protect the wellbeing of autistics. We do not all think, learn and relate to others in the same way. Having an awareness of differences helps to bridge empathy, build trust, and improve teamwork. It helps us to understand that environments, policies and practices need to be reflective of the neurodiverse workforce that we are. With simple accommodations or understanding, autistic employees could contribute far more to the workplace. Any workplace that ignores the preferences of their workers is deliberately putting up barriers. The following recommendations are provided as possible ways to address communication mismatch between autistic and allistic people.

Discuss Accommodation Needs with Employees

We cannot simply look at a diagnostic label and assume we know what a person needs. It is helpful to approach the conversation with all employees, ask what their preferences are, and discuss possible options that are suitable for the workplace; however, many autistic individuals do experience challenges in similar areas. Not all autistics or disabled folks will share that they have a disability with their manager or coworkers. There are concerns about stigma, fearing a negative reaction, or encountering barriers and limitations to career advancement, even though sharing about their disability to make adjustments in the workplace would enable them to reach their full potential. Sharing about their autism can help managers and colleagues understand their behaviour and help others realise that they communicate and socialise differently. This may lead to a more welcoming and supportive environment for all differences.

Adapt Your Communication Style

If allistic people use verbal hints in addition to nonverbal cues they can facilitate comprehension of implied meanings during conversation. For example, verbalizing “hmm” in addition to eye-rolling can help to indicate tone to autistic individuals. If you’re unsure about an autistic person’s non-verbal body language, ask what they’re thinking and feeling. Give them time to process the situation. Be comfortable with pauses.

Being more explicit and direct with words is another way to facilitate better communication. Many autistics are very analytical, and while they are comfortable with differences of opinion, it is preferable to present facts about your opinions along with an explanation about why you think the way that you do.

Providing instructions in writing can ensure that communication is direct. In some cases when reading comprehension can be a challenge, the use of pictures to illustrate a task can be effective. Written or pictorial instructions can serve as a reference point when necessary and needed for an employee.

Ensure that closed captions are available for any videos and online meetings. A downloadable transcript would also be helpful for videos.

Welcome and encourage questions. Allow workers adequate time to process information.

Participant voices

“We had an autistic worker...a 17-18 year old, who was very curt...would come across a little abrasive, and so we had that challenge. We reached out to [an employment agency] and their piece of advice was just to not be sensitive to it.

Because you have to understand that he's not doing it with malice; he's not coming at it from a place like that. And that's one of the challenges he was trying to overcome by being in customer service was to develop those language skills. So they said, you know, don't take it personally, keep things short and simple, don't say too many instructions at one time. That will lower the frustration level, which is why they're communicating in that way, because they feel frustrated, you know if you've repeated yourself two or three times in the interaction, that's where that's going to trigger that response. So now he's ok.” - Allitistic male, retail manager

Use alternative text description (or “alt-text” for short) to convey the meaning and context of a photo or image. Alt-text descriptions are used by those who are visually impaired or blind. For autistic people, descriptions are useful for explaining facial expressions, actions, or humor. For example, some autistics have shared that they struggle understanding the humor in memes. Sarcasm can be misunderstood and taken quite literally. Metaphors can also be understood differently than intended. For information on how to add alternative text to objects, please see this guide by [Microsoft](#).

Inquire about Communication Preferences

Ask employees their communication preferences and how they communicate best at work. Discuss workplace communication options with all employees (e.g., email, meetings, online messages, text messages, etc.) that are suitable for your work environment. Communication preferences can be discussed at team meetings or via team email so that everyone is aware of how to best engage with each other.

Research has shown that autistic workers prefer written communication as opposed to direct face-to-face or telephone communication [1,6]. Written communication, such as email, text, instant messaging (e.g. Microsoft Lync, Microsoft Teams, Slack, Yammer, etc.) or social media, provides more thinking time to process information, fewer sensory issues, and increased comprehension in information exchange.

People may understand communication better if they record it in their preferred way: repeating it, making notes, visual reminders, etc. Encourage employees to record key information in their preferred format, and be patient while they do so. Doing so will be particularly helpful during the training period. If feasible, offer to put key ideas into their preferred communication format to assist them.

Teamwork and Meetings

Only have meetings when necessary. If employees do not need to be present during meetings but need to be aware of the outcomes of the discussion, then have the salient information emailed to them. Meetings are useful for making key decisions when looking for group consensus. Make sure the right people are present. In preparation for meetings, participation can be encouraged by sending the agenda and relevant information three days in advance of the meeting. Allow attendees to submit comments and questions in writing, and regulate who is speaking and ensure everyone has a chance to participate.

For online meetings, ensure that employees' communication preferences are adhered to. For example, enabling closed captioning can help those who have stronger reading comprehension; regulating the conversation so that people take turns speaking without anyone talking over another; and enabling the chat function to give people the option to participate in writing is also helpful. Many people prefer to keep their video off when participating in online meetings, and in most situations, not using video, when it is a feasible option to leave it off. Using emoticons, or reactions can also assist with conveying feelings and emotions that are made evident by the common icon representations. A meeting summary with key actions items provided to all meeting participants would aid in organization, a reference for the next meeting, and serve as reminder to participants of what was discussed.

Social Expectations and the Work Environment

Clarify social and situational expectations that are common to your workplace. Social expectations may not be intuitive for autistics, and by explaining your expectations, you get to set the standards that you would like from your employees. This is particularly important during onboarding or training periods. Training should be geared to autistic learning styles and expressed communication needs. Training in groups may present problems because of processing speed differences, social anxiety and distractions.

The sensory environment can interfere with social interactions and communication. It is challenging for autistics with hypersensitivity to focus on a conversation in an overstimulating environment where every motion is felt and every sound is heard. Relocating an office or cubicle, providing low stimulus spaces (e.g., a quiet room), changes in lighting, providing employees with ear defenders or noise canceling headphones are all low cost or no cost workplace adjustments to help employees be more productive at work. Provide breaks throughout the day and encourage autistic workers to take a break if they experience a significant stressful event. Consider a flexible work from home or telework option for all employees. Working from home is beneficial for autistics who need a temporary break or a chance to decompress from the workplace environment, especially if the atmosphere tends to be overstimulating.

While social interaction in the workplace is inevitable, do not pressure employees who hesitate to participate. Allow social events to be optional and do not allow workplace decisions to be made on social occasions.

Customer/Client Service Interactions

For autistic employees who work in customer and client services, modeling behaviour would be helpful, especially when the employee is new to the industry. Social interactions may not be intuitive for some and may require explanations. Let the employee know what is to be expected of them and what to anticipate. Some autistics find scripts to be useful - common phrases and explanations to use with customers/clients, particularly for initiating conversations. Role playing common scenarios and situations are also helpful during training or when introducing an employee to a new or unfamiliar situation.

Provide clear, positive, and critical feedback. Sometimes employees have never been told that conduct is unacceptable. Employees need clear rules. If a specific behaviour is not accepted, then let the employee know. Do not make it personal. Make sure to focus on the behaviour and the act, not the person.

Conclusion

Making systems, practices and policies in the workplace inclusive benefits everyone and disadvantages no one. Being aware and understanding of people's different preferences for communication will help employees participate and reduce the amount of frustrating experiences on the job. The vast majority of autistics will fit right into a job as long as they're provided with the right support. Not everyone will share that they are autistic or have a disability, particularly if they feel that they have been provided with adequate support and do not feel their disability impacts their job. Our understanding of autism has increased over the past decade, and more adults are being diagnosed. You could have an employee who is autistic and they may not even be aware that they are. Managers who recognize different communication styles and acknowledge different communication preferences will begin to shift their thinking towards customizing processes and redesigning operations as needed. The result is maximization of productivity and a happy, welcoming workplace.

Participant voices

“I’ve done a lot of hiring by word of mouth. Once we became known as an employer who would employ people with disabilities, people with disabilities would apply.” - Allistic male, employer/multi-business owner

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