

ADULT AUTISM IN DAILY LIFE · 9.1

Working as an Autistic Adult: Reasonable Adjustments That Actually Help

Most workplace advice for autistic adults treats the job as fixed and the autistic person as the variable to adjust. Work design carries a much larger share of the difficulty than is usually acknowledged. The right adjustments are often about the environment, not the person.

FOR

Diagnosed autistic adults

AUDIENCE AGE

18+

REVIEWED

17 May 2026

PART OF

The NeuroFX resource library

IN SUMMARY

Working as an Autistic Adult: Reasonable Adjustments That Actually Help

Where the law sits

- **Autism usually meets the Equality Act 2010 definition of disability.** A mental impairment with a substantial, long-term effect on day-to-day activities. The social communication, sensory processing and executive function effects fit that definition without difficulty for most autistic adults.
- **The employer has a duty to make reasonable adjustments.** Not 'if it is easy'. 'If it is reasonable', which is a much higher bar. The duty kicks in the moment the employer knows or could reasonably be expected to know about the disability. Disclosure is the trigger.
- **Enforcement runs through ACAS and the Employment Tribunal.** Internal grievance procedure first, then ACAS early conciliation, then Tribunal if needed. ACAS guidance is free and worth using when conversations stall.

What working autistic actually looks like

- **Sensory load is cumulative.** Open-plan offices, fluorescent lighting, hot dining rooms, noise, smell, unpredictable interruption. The day's total exhausts the regulatory budget before the work has been done.
- **Social processing runs in parallel with the work.** Reading colleagues, managing the unspoken rules of a workplace, calibrating tone in emails. None of this is the work itself; all of it is being done at the same time.
- **Masking holds, then stops holding.** Many autistic adults expend substantial effort presenting an acceptable workplace face. The Hull et al. 2017 research is the cleanest evidence anchor; the effort is real, sustained and associated with burnout.
- **Transitions and changes are expensive.** Last-minute meeting reroutes, different rooms, manager absences, reorganisations. Predictability is energy; unpredictability is energy spent restoring it.
- **Executive function difficulties are part of the picture too.** Initiation, switching, prioritisation, ambiguous requirements. Often missed because autism gets framed around social communication, but very real in workplace life.

What helps in practice

- **Useful adjustments are usually low or zero cost.** Quieter desk position, headphones permitted, written confirmation after verbal instructions, agendas in advance, smaller meetings, advance notice of change, structured one-to-ones with written action points. Cameras-off permission on video calls.
- **The duty applies to performance management.** Where autism-related difficulties have led to a performance issue (missed social cues, direct communication, slow processing of ambiguous requirements), the employer must consider reasonable adjustments before treating the difficulty as a performance problem.
- **Choose the right job, not the prestigious one.** Some jobs fit autistic wiring well; others grind it down regardless of strategy. Clear deliverables, autonomy, depth over breadth, lower social-communication load, predictable rhythms, tolerance for direct communication tend to work. Recovery time outside work is load-bearing, not optional.

WHEN TO SPEAK TO A PROFESSIONAL

Speak to your GP if work is being significantly affected and autism has not been formally assessed. Private adult autism assessment with a CQC-registered provider is a legitimate parallel route where the NHS wait is not workable. For workplace legal advice specifically, ACAS, Citizens Advice and a disability rights solicitor are the right routes. Seek urgent help via 111, 999 or A&E for any acute mental health crisis or significant safety concern.

SOURCES

Equality Act 2010; NICE CG142; ACAS reasonable adjustments guidance; Hull et al. 2017 (J Autism Dev Disord); Lancet Commission on Autism (Lord et al. 2022); National Autistic Society

NEXT STEPS**Speak to NeuroFX**

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