

# Autism in the Workplace

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Creating opportunity for  
autistic people

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A collaborative research report by:



**IRISHJOBS.IE**

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## FOREWORD



*“ Perceptions and misconceptions are apparent among autistic people and businesses alike, and it is clear that education is crucial in bringing about shared understanding. ”*

**IrishJobs.ie is proud to partner with Ireland’s National Autism Charity. We believe every organisation has a responsibility to break down barriers that obstruct autistic people from enjoying careers in fields of work that they are genuinely interested in and passionate about.**

**This research report, *Autism in the Workplace*, carried out by IrishJobs and AsIAM, assesses the attitudes of Ireland’s autistic community to the workplace, including their perceived and experienced challenges, and the attitudes of business recruiters to recruiting and retaining autistic talent.**

1 in 65 people in Ireland are autistic. While many do require accommodations to carry out certain roles, such as clearly structured work and working routines, autistic people are fully able to perform many if not all of the workplace duties that neurotypical people can, once they are adequately accommodated.

This fact, however, remains mostly unknown to businesses, and it is this continued lack of understanding of autism that is one of this report’s most striking findings. While almost half of businesses claim to employ at least one autistic person, almost 80% do not have a dedicated autism-friendly policy in the workplace.

A majority perceive difficulties in hiring autistic people or admit to not knowing enough about the process. Many of these difficulties have roots in their business’s lack of knowledge of autism or their own firm’s lack of flexibility. What is clear, is that there are not enough adequately resourced autism-specific government supports in place for autistic people and the businesses that wish to recruit and retain them.

More than 90% of businesses do not think there are enough external supports or information, while 87% of autistic people believe that businesses need to provide more in the way of employment and entrepreneurial supports. Government supports do exist, but public awareness of them is minimal. “Reasonable Accommodations”, for example, which allow for workplace changes that benefit autistic or other differently abled people, remain significantly under-utilised by both employers and autistic people. Tellingly, however, 42% of autistic people believe that even requesting such an accommodation during the interview process would reduce their chances of being recruited.

Perceptions and misconceptions are apparent among autistic people and businesses alike, and it is clear that education is crucial in bringing about shared understanding. Together, IrishJobs.ie and AsIAM aim to make the world of work more accessible to autistic talent by building a culture of inclusion and understanding. We will shortly commence a series of seven monthly masterclass webinars to help businesses hone the skills required to develop inclusive, autism-friendly workplaces.

**Orla Moran**

*General Manager, IrishJobs.ie*



*“ Through our partnership with IrishJobs.ie, it is our hope that more organisations can bridge their autism knowledge gap and harness the immense potential of the autistic community to the benefit of everyone in Ireland. ”*

**April is World Autism Month, and AsIAM, Ireland's National Autism Charity, is pleased to share this new research report exploring the Irish autistic community's experiences of work and the workplace.**

Autism is a lifelong developmental condition. It exists on a spectrum, and no one autistic person is the same. All autistic people have the right to access the workplace and to lead fully independent, fulfilling, and productive lives.

Autistic people have different ways of communicating, thinking, and experiencing the world to neurotypical people. These differences mean that autistic people often face major barriers to inclusion in the workplace and entrepreneurship.

AsIAM estimates that as many as 85% of autistic people in Ireland are un- or under-employed, despite the wide array of talents, skills, and abilities present in the autistic community. This high rate leads to isolation, increased mental health problems, lack of independence, poverty and social disadvantage.

There is a lot which can be done to improve this situation, and education and training are crucial starting points. Businesses, particularly recruiters, need to know how to interview and accommodate autistic candidates and better understand where an

autistic employee's talents can be directed and utilised.

Partnerships too are important. While government undoubtedly has a role to play in raising awareness of existing supports for autistic people and the businesses that hire them, as well as creating new supports where necessary, private partnerships between businesses and NGOs or other advocacy groups provide for flexible, rapid responses to autism employment. In particular, sectors or regions where organisations and the autistic community would quickly benefit from a more inclusive and understanding hiring process.

The Covid pandemic has been extremely disruptive for everyone in Irish society but it has had a particularly profound impact on autistic people, whose routines and support structures have been upset or completely upended. Despite this, when businesses and their employees do eventually return to the new post-Covid workspace, there is a chance for a "reset" of sorts. Greater acceptance and uptake of remote working and flexible hours are perfect opportunities for autistic people, who might otherwise struggle in a crowded or frantic office environment, to become full-time employees.

Businesses that embrace diversity are more competitive, more productive, and more profitable. Through our partnership with IrishJobs.ie, it is our hope that more organisations can bridge their autism knowledge gap and harness the immense potential of the autistic community to the benefit of everyone in Ireland.

**Adam Harris**  
Ceo and Founder, AsIAM

## KEY FINDINGS

**The Autism in The Workplace Report was carried out across January and February 2021 and assessed the attitudes of more than 340 Irish autistic people and businesses of the workplace and employment.**

Irish autistic people responded to questions regarding finding employment in a neurotypical workplace, the challenges they face in those spaces, and their understanding of supports, either from their employer or from external parties, such as the government, and the accessibility of these supports.

Employers were asked about their organisation's attitudes to hiring and retaining autistic talent, the structures in place to facilitate these processes, and the perceived and experienced barriers to recruiting and supporting autistic employees.



## KEY FINDINGS

### How the autistic community perceives the neurotypical workplace

**77% of all autistic people believe they would face barriers getting the job they want or starting their own business.** 72% said that having to mask or hide autistic traits to fit in with colleagues would be the biggest challenge.

**70% do not feel confident that managers, colleagues or clients know enough about autism to support them at work.** Less than 10% feel confident enough to be open about their autism diagnosis in the workplace.

**Just 20% of autistic people have requested a "Reasonable Accommodation" from an employer during interview or application stage.** 42% believe that making such a request would hinder their chances of finding their preferred role.

### How recruiters perceive the hiring and retention of autistic talent

**76% of recruiters said their organisation lacks a dedicated autism-friendly workplace policy.** Only 8% said their business has an autism-friendly policy that is strongly implemented.

**Almost 70% of recruiters believe that hiring an autistic person is more difficult than hiring a neurotypical person or are unsure about the process.** Many respondents believe that their firm could struggle to adapt its recruitment processes to suit the needs of autistic candidates.

**57% of businesses provide work experience for autistic candidates.** However, just 2% have availed of government supports to help in the recruitment and retention of autistic talent.

# The autistic community's experience of the workplace



# AUTISTIC COMMUNITY

**The autistic community faces a number of barriers to the traditional neurotypical workplace, including a lack of accommodations and supports and outdated perceptions of autism and autistic people.**

**Just under half (48%) of autistic people say that the opportunities they need to help them develop their careers are not currently available,** while over a quarter (26%) are uncertain.

**Over three-quarters (77%) of all autistic people believe they would face barriers getting the job they want or starting their own business.** 72% said that having to mask or hide autistic traits to fit in with colleagues would be the biggest challenge, followed by the difficulty of explaining their diagnosis to colleagues (66%), navigating a job interview (63%), and dealing with outdated perceptions of autism in the workplace (63%).

Indeed, the **overwhelming majority (91%) of autistic people believe that it would be more difficult for them to find a job than a neurotypical person.** 60% do not believe that the business and organisational recruitment process is accessible to them.

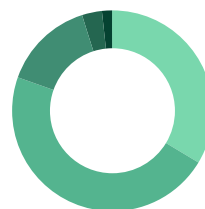
Even after the recruitment process, autistic people perceive challenges. **70% do not feel confident that managers, colleagues or clients know enough about autism to support them at work.** Fewer than 10% feel confident enough in their peers' knowledge of autism to disclose or otherwise be open about their autism diagnosis.

This lack of confidence in workplace knowledge of autism is **potentially undermining mutual**

**understanding;** three-quarters of autistic people believe that disclosing their autism diagnosis would help their colleagues and clients better understand and support them professionally.

Neurotypical people's understanding of autism is a common anxiety among autistic people. **Knowing that autistic people may require additional assistance with certain aspects of workplace life is important in helping them reach their full potential.** For example, 67% of autistic people say they might require help from their employers managing workplace stress and anxiety, 65% communicating with colleagues or managers, and 65% in addressing outdated perceptions of autism.

**How far do you agree or disagree with this statement: I believe that I would face barriers to getting the job or business I want.**



35% Strongly agree  
42% Agree  
15% Neither agree nor disagree  
3% Disagree  
2% Strongly disagree

**How much do you agree or disagree with this statement: I believe that the recruitment process businesses or organisations use is accessible to autistic people.**



7% Strongly agree  
8% Agree  
23% Neither agree nor disagree  
30% Disagree  
29% Strongly disagree



# REASONABLE ACCOMMODATIONS

**Reasonable Accommodations are changes or adaptations an employer makes to the workplace, such as adjustments to the workplace environment or to a specific work routine or practice, which supports autistic people and people with other disabilities to carry out their work and access the same training and development opportunities on an equal footing as their non-disabled colleagues.**

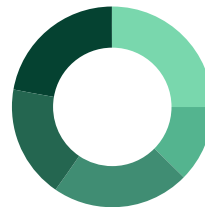
**A Reasonable Accommodation might, for example, include advance notice of meeting times or topics, which 63% of autistic people said would be of benefit to them.**

60% of autistic people called for autism or disability-specific understanding and acceptance training at the workplace, followed by an opportunity to work from home for part or all of the week (58%), a quiet workspace (56%), and the use of written communications as a substitute for verbal communications in certain circumstances (51%).

However, **just 20% of autistic people have requested a Reasonable Accommodation from an employer during interview or application stage** or have otherwise sought funding opportunities for such an accommodation. Unfortunately, 42% believe that making such a request would hinder their chances of finding their preferred role.

Overall, 87% of autistic people believe that businesses can do more to provide employment and entrepreneurship opportunities to autistic people with high support needs, **but 91% believe that these organisations do not receive enough external (e.g. government) support.**

**What Reasonable Accommodations do you think might support you at work?**



**63%** Advance notice of meetings times and topics

**60%** Autism/disability-specific understanding and acceptance training for colleagues and managers

**58%** Opportunity to work from home for all or most of the working week

**56%** Workspace in a quieter part of the workplace

**51%** Allow for use of written communications

**Do you think that requesting Reasonable Accommodations would make your chances of finding your preferred role better or worse?**



**28%** Better

**29%** About the same

**42%** Worse

# How businesses understand and support autistic employees



# BUSINESSES AND AUTISTIC PEOPLE

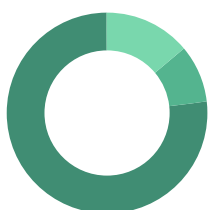
**Lack of understanding is the biggest barrier separating autistic people and businesses with a predominantly neurotypical workforce.**

**Our research shows that most businesses are open to recruiting autistic talent but are not sure how to do so appropriately or where to look for support.**

While just over a third of businesses believe their recruitment processes are open to the widest talent pool possible, **63% believe that it is not or that they do not know.** Despite this, 56% claim to have at least one member of staff with a disability and 46% an autistic staff member.

**Autism-friendly workplace policies are rare.** 76% of recruiters said their organisation lacks a dedicated autism policy. 15% said their business has one but they are not familiar with it, while just 8% said their business has one and is strongly implemented.

**Does your organisation have a dedicated autism-friendly policy?**



**15%** Yes, but I'm not familiar with it

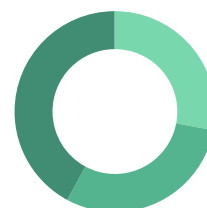
**8%** Yes, and it is strongly implemented

**76%** No

**A lack of autism-friendly workplace policies means that employees are generally not aware of how to support autistic colleagues.** Only a quarter of recruiters believe that their staff have the requisite knowledge about autism to support an autistic colleague.

When it comes to the recruitment process, again, lack of understanding comes into play. While 29% of recruiters believe it would not be more difficult to recruit an autistic person over a neurotypical person, almost 70% either do not know or believe that it would be.

**Do you believe that it would be more difficult to recruit an autistic person?**



**27%** Yes

**29%** No

**42%** Unsure

When considering the potential challenges of hiring an autistic person, **many recruiters cited their firm or firm's leadership lack of understanding of autism** and their ability to adapt to change. Others believe that their staff may be unconsciously biased against autistic people or that autistic employees might struggle with certain roles.

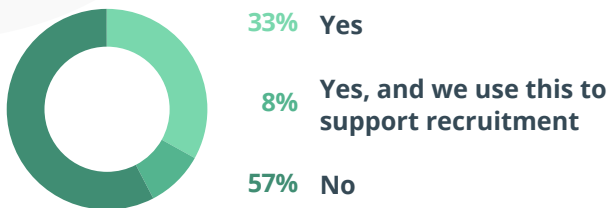
When asked what an autistic staff member might require, **most recruiters suggested a fixed work schedule in a quiet area with structured breaks.**

Others stressed that no autistic person is the same and that each individual requires personalised management, while a smaller number suggested that autistic people do not want special treatment.

## WORK EXPERIENCE AND EXTERNAL SUPPORTS

**A small majority of businesses (57%) do not provide work experience opportunities for autistic people. 33% do provide them, and a further 8% proactively use them to recruit talent to their organisation.**

**Does your organisation provide work experience opportunities for autistic people?**

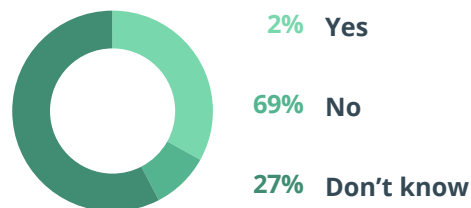


However, **few businesses (17%) provide opportunities for autistic people to work in a very specific area of the business for a small number of hours each week.** Most do not (58%), while almost a quarter of recruiters are unaware if such a policy exists within their organisation.

While the autistic community believes that cost is a factor that businesses consider when interviewing or hiring an autistic person, the majority of recruiters disagree: **61% do not think that it would be too expensive to support an autistic staff member in the workplace.**

However, understanding is an issue. **Few recruiters believe there is sufficient information available to businesses and hiring managers on recruiting autistic talent.** 91% said there were not adequate supports or information, and just 2% have availed of any government support or schemes to help recruit or retain autistic talent.

**Has your organisation availed of any government support or schemes to assist you in recruiting or retaining autistic talent?**



# INSIGHTS

Based on this report's findings, AsIAM and IrishJobs.ie have determined five key insights that show how employers and broader society, including NGOs, can help make the world of work a more inclusive, understanding, and productive space for Ireland's autistic community.

## 1

### **Training leads to understanding**

Employers want to be engaged but lack access to sufficient training to become truly autism-friendly employers. Employers need access to a suite of supports to build whole-of-company confidence to recruit, onboard, support, and progress the careers of autistic people.

## 2

### **Confidence through partnerships**

Employers value partnership. They want to work in close partnership with thought-leaders in autism support and advocacy so they can confidently and credibly engage with the autism community and support autistic staff members.

## 3

### **The Covid reset**

Covid-19 has created unprecedented challenges and opportunities. On the one hand, it has been a hugely challenging time for autistic people (loss of support coupled with the loss of structure and routine); on the other, it has challenged how and where we work. There is a chance to press reset and ensure we re-build workplaces that are more inclusive (e.g. flexible working for those who find the office environment challenging).

## 4

### **Embracing diversity**

Autism is a broad and varied spectrum. The community has a wide array of talent and skills and different needs and ambitions within the workplace. We need more employers, in a wider variety of sectors and locations, to offer a range of employment opportunities (from full-time traditional roles to part-time jobs to supported employment opportunities).

## 5

### **Cross-society response**

The government alone will not end autism unemployment. Industry and NGOs must lead the conversation, that being said the government must become more engaged in seeking out solutions.

## METHODOLOGY / ABOUT



### About AsIAM

AsIAM is Ireland's National Autism Charity. We are working to create a society in which every autistic person is empowered to reach their own personal potential and fully participate in society.

We believe that by developing the capacity of the autism community and addressing the societal barriers to inclusion we can make Ireland the world's most autism-friendly country.

What began in 2014 as an online platform for the community to access information and share experiences, has quickly grown into a movement for change for the autism community.

Today, AsIAM is Ireland's largest autism charity with a team of 14 staff, half of whom are on the autism spectrum.

## IRISHJOBS.IE

### About IrishJobs.ie

We believe in the power of people and finding the best talent to help businesses grow.

IrishJobs.ie is the leading and trusted e-recruitment partner, part of the world's leading e-recruitment group, Stepstone.

We help talent and companies connect. IrishJobs.ie has 1.1 million registered career seekers and 694k active monthly users on our platform.

We deliver quality local and international talent to organisations through innovative and leading technology, all with a human touch.

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### Research was carried out by AsIAM and IrishJobs.ie among samples of their member databases.

- AsIAM surveyed 234 autistic people across January and February 2021.
- IrishJobs.ie surveyed 110 businesses of various sizes and industries from across Ireland between January and February 2021.

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