Supports for individuals in the workplace can take the form of job accommodations and adaptations. Some commonly used supports are listed below. If you are an individual with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), you may need to self-advocate in order to receive one or more of these. If it is difficult for you to self-advocate, consider working with a counselor or job coach who can help you figure out how to ask for supports or who can advocate on your behalf.

To address communication issues – If it is difficult to remember instructions given verbally, request to have instructions communicated in writing. For example, instructions can be delivered by email. Questions can be submitted online, resulting in a written record, which can be used for review, as needed. Another possible accommodation may be “recorded verbal instructions.” These recordings can be listened to whenever necessary.

To prepare for sensory sensitivities – Determine what sensitivities exist and consider ways to avoid them. For example, if the florescent lights are a problem, have a workstation near a window, allowing for natural light, or bring in an incandescent lamp to the work area. If there is annoying noise, consider wearing headphones to block it out. If odors are an issue, consider positioning your workstation away from the kitchen and food smells, etc.

To address behavioral concerns – Consider limiting the day to the time frame that the behavior can remain in check, and expand work hours slowly as appropriate. Perhaps working a shorter day or working fewer days per week may be helpful initially. A job coach and/or work mentor can set up a reward system for appropriate work behavior and help develop a plan to extend work hours gradually over time, or not. Part-time work may be appropriate for some individuals who are not able to work a full day.

To support organizational needs – Ask the employer to provide samples of the work
at various stages. Perhaps the beginning – before the work is assembled, in the middle – partially assembled, and at the end – a completed product. Or ask the employer to provide pictures of the work organized at various stages to help provide a visual model of what is expected. A posted calendar can be useful to guide the various stages of the project to completion.

To prepare for transition difficulties – Plan for unexpected changes. A “back-up plan” can be in place to anticipate when a change in schedule might occur. For example, “I have a meeting with Sally every Monday at 1 pm; if Sally is not here, I will do data entry work and meet with her the following Monday at 1 pm” or “if Sally is not here, I will meet with Joe.” Additionally, if there is a drastic change in schedule, such as office training or a retreat day, it needs to be planned for. Maybe the dress code is different for that day, or this different day is only a half-day program. The individual with ASD needs to know what to expect, and the differences need to be planned for, from the location change, dress code change, the types of activities, to the fact that joking and poking fun may be part of the program. The individual with ASD needs to know what may be expected of him or her, whether that means participating in various activities as part of a team or individually. Careful planning can minimize the misinterpretation of remarks or actions and can avoid bad or sad feelings due to not understanding the different social expectations and behavior.

To ensure the individual can get to work – Develop a practical way to travel to the workplace. (Public transportation, handicap transport, and family transport are all possibilities.) Prior to beginning employment, make sure the employee has practiced the method until he or she is comfortable with it. If the individual needs a pass or tokens to travel, develop a plan for where to carry and store the pass/tokens after using them. (For example, always keep them in a particular zipped pocket in a backpack that travels each day with the individual.) A job coach can help develop this plan.

To address physical needs – An individual can work in a study carrel or other more private space to help avoid distractions. The individual may benefit from using specific office supplies to improve work product, such as an electric stapler and paper guide to keep a stack of papers neat before fastening them together. Some individuals may need more physical space than other employees in order not to feel “closed in.”
To support pro-social behaviors – Practice and provide reminders of basic social principles. For example, say “good morning” or “good afternoon” as appropriate, hold the door for a colleague coming down the hall, take turns at the water cooler, and wait for your turn to speak. If it is difficult for an individual to respond to social chatter during the work day, he or she can be encouraged to request to have the discussion during a break time or lunch hour. A job coach can be very useful in practicing these skills and finding ways to support this area of need in the workplace.

Related Articles:

- The Role of a Job Coach
- The Right to Accommodations in the Workplace
- Assessing Needs for Supports in the Workplace
- Self-Advocacy
- Time Management and Other Executive Functioning Issues in the Workplace
- Being Social as an Adult with ASD

Additional Resources:

- Employment and Other Options, from Autism Speaks
- Life Journey through Autism, from the Organization for Autism Research
- On-the-Job Accommodations, from the Job Accommodation Network
- Transition to Work, from the Autism Transition Handbook
- An Autistic View of Employment