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## Making your workplace more autistic-friendly

*Kelly and Hester Grainger are the co-founders of [Perfectly Autistic](#), and have years of experience of different workplace cultures and are both neurodivergent. Kelly was diagnosed as autistic at 44 and with ADHD at 45. Hester was diagnosed with ADHD when she was 43.*

[Only 16% of autistic adults are in full-time employment](#), and most would like to work more. So, we asked Hester and Kelly to share some principles, and recommend some resources, that can help make work environments better for autistic people.

As you'll see, what they've suggested are simple ideas that can make working life more comfortable and productive for **everyone**.

Autism

**You may have heard of it, but what actually is it?** According to the National Autistic Society: 'Autism affects how people communicate and interact with the world. There are approximately 700,000 autistic adults and children in the UK. Autistic people see, hear and feel the world differently to other people.'

All autistic people share certain difficulties around communication, social interaction and imagination, but being autistic will affect everyone in different ways. Not all autistic people know they are autistic, or if they do, they may not want to share it at work. By taking an autism friendly approach at work, it will not only help people who are autistic but actually all staff. **Using autism friendly principles can help to create a happier, calmer and more productive workplace for all.**

An extensive study into happiness and productivity from Oxford University's Saïd Business School has found that workers are 13% more productive when happy. Hester is not surprised by this at all. She has worked for a number of companies over the years from large corporations to small businesses. **The job she loved the most was also the job where, looking back, she worked the hardest.** As a company they were regularly rewarded with fab events and nights out.

But the company wouldn't have been great for everyone, including Kelly. It was a large open-plan office. It was often noisy. The kitchen was in the middle of the office, and colleagues would often microwave their lunch, so the whole office could smell it. The overhead lighting was also very bright.

For someone who is autistic, like Kelly, **all these elements would have made coming to work very hard to endure and at times unbearable.**

So what should you do if you have a colleague who has been diagnosed autistic or who you may suspect is?

**There are some really simple strategies that can be put in place, that will make the autistic person's life easier and work a more enjoyable place to be, but also help the mood of the office as a whole.** After all, no-one wants to smell Barry from Accounts' leftover tuna pasta bake wafting across the office. Autistic or not.

## Lighting

Peter Kay jokes about turning on the 'big light'. But big lights or overhead fluorescent lighting in offices are often harsh and can be overbearing for an autistic person. Poor lighting can also be damaging to office productivity as a whole. Work environments that are too dark or too bright can lead to eye strain and headaches. So it's no surprise that **natural lighting used in office spaces or home offices can help relax employees and reduce stress levels** and help with their circadian rhythm (natural body clock).

Changing the lighting around the office, or adding desk and floor lamps, can make the lighting much more bearable. Dimmer switches can also be used and motion sensor lighting can save money and energy on areas that aren't used as much.

## Meetings

If you want to hold a meeting, don't just spring it on them. An autistic person like Kelly will have planned their day meticulously and **springing a meeting out of the blue can not only cause them to feel uncomfortable, it can actually ruin their whole day**. At work, situations do arise that can't always be scheduled. But even giving a 10-minute warning or another time option can help. Simply asking 'Are you free to chat in 10 minutes or can we catch up in an hour?' gives the autistic person a choice and lets them feel more in control.

Also, don't be late. No-one likes to be kept waiting, especially Kelly. He will have scheduled the meeting in his diary and will expect the person he's meeting to be on time (or even five minutes early). If you are late, do always apologise. Otherwise the person may not listen to anything during the meeting as they are so incensed and none of the information will be retained.

### A quiet space

Some days can just be overwhelming. By having a quiet space for a person to decompress (autistic or not), they can take stock of the day and recharge their batteries. The fizzy Coke analogy is often used with autism. If a person is constantly feeling stressed they will fizz up. Maybe someone has sprung a deadline on them, someone else has made small talk when they had a phone call or the office is too loud, can cause them to fizz up and 'explode' like a Coke bottle that's been shaken too much. This could be snapping at someone, saying something inappropriate or simply shutting down and being unable to respond. By allowing a quiet space to go and work, ensures that the person can 'defizz'.

### Food and smells

We used to joke that Kelly had smell stress as he really didn't like strong smelling foods. Having learnt more about sensory processing disorder, strong smells can cause genuine anxiety and stress to an autistic person. Making sure your staff have a place to eat lunch away from their desk will really help. Or if people do want to eat last night's takeaway leftovers, make sure this is done away from other people who don't want to smell it.

### Healthier, happier, more productive

Just by following these simple and quick-to-implement autistic friendly strategies, you'll ensure that you have a healthy, happier and more productive workforce.

Below, we've recommended some easy ways to find out more.

## **Resources in this toolkit:**

### [Kelly Grainger: adults with autism](#)

There are many things in an everyday workplace environment that might make life harder for autistic people that their neurotypical colleagues might not notice, or be able to ignore. In this radio show, Kelly discusses his experience of having autism.

### [Support at work – a guide for autistic people](#)

This guide is for autistic people in work, but we'd recommend it for everybody as a way to see some of the issues that might be tricky for autistic colleagues, from unwritten kitchen rules to workplace banter.

### [Autistic burnout explained](#)

'Autistic burnout' is the intense physical, mental or emotional exhaustion, often accompanied by a loss of skills, that some autistic adults experience. This article explains what autistic burnout feels like and what might cause it in the workplace.

### [Three people reveal what it's like to live with executive function disorder](#)

Executive function disorder is linked to the autism spectrum and attention deficit disorders like ADHD. In this article from the Metro, three people share their experiences of having executive function disorder.

### [How can you have the right conversation to support an employee at work?](#)

If a colleague decides to disclose to you that they're autistic, it's important you're confident that you can have a supportive conversation. This two-page guide can help.

### [Employing disabled people and people with health conditions](#)

There are all sorts of reasons why employees might appreciate small adjustments to the workplace. This guidance has a wide range of advice for employers to consider.