



Development and Retention of Autistic Staff in Hospitality

Module (1)

Autism in the European Hospitality Sector and Social Policies

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Module Title	Module 1: Autism in the European Hospitality Sector and Social Policies
LEARNING OBJECTIVES	<p>Module 1 aims to introduce learners to Social Policies and their impact on the EU Hospitality Sector, provide general information about autism, and explain how autistic staff can be included in such organisations.</p> <p>Module 1 aims to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce learners to the concept of Social Responsibility Policies and its impact and value in the Hospitality sector • Understand the concept of Inclusive Employment and its primary definition • Understand the definition of the Autism Spectrum and its general characteristics, focusing on the value, advantages and challenges of employing Autistic Staff in the hospitality sector.
LEARNING OUTCOMES	<p>Through Module 1, learners will be able to understand the following topics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corporate Social Responsibility Policies: value, impact, requirements, methodology • CSR Policies in Europe • Best practice of CSR and autism inclusion in Europe • Inclusive employment: value, implications and requirements • Autism Spectrum: definition, main features, challenges and the work environment • Description of the employment cycle.

1. Introduction

Globally, people with disabilities represent approximately 15% of the population (World Health Organization, World Report on Disability, 2011). An estimated 785 to 975 million are of working age and face disproportionately high levels of unemployment, particularly in regions where inclusive labour policies are limited (World Bank, Disability Inclusion Overview, updated 2023). For individuals on the autism spectrum, employment prospects are even more concerning: fewer than 10% are in paid employment, compared to 45% of individuals with other disabilities and nearly 66% of people without disabilities (National Autistic Society UK, Autism Employment Gap report; Office for National Statistics UK, 2021). Nevertheless, it is worth emphasising that, in the last decade, the number of diagnoses of neurodivergent conditions, such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), has been increasing worldwide. "Neurodivergent" describes individuals whose selective neurocognitive functions/neurodevelopmental differences fall outside prevalent societal norms. They do not necessarily have a neurodevelopmental disorder (Shah et al., 2022). ASD is "a complex developmental condition involving persistent challenges with social communication, restricted interests and repetitive behaviour" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The World Health Organization estimates that approximately one in 100 children worldwide has ASD (World Health Organization, 2023). An extensive systematic review of 66 population studies refined this figure to 0.77 %, or roughly one child in 130 (Issac et al., 2025). The upward trend reported over recent decades is driven mainly by broader diagnostic criteria and increased societal awareness (Zeidan et al., 2022). Autistic individuals frequently encounter barriers to employment due to systemic and social factors. Challenges related to communication, sensory processing, and social expectations can make traditional hiring and work environments inaccessible. Nevertheless, exclusion often begins even earlier, rooted in persistent stigma, stereotyping, and a lack of public understanding of autism and neurodiversity. Many employers lack adequate knowledge or tools to accommodate neurodiverse candidates. Without inclusive recruitment processes or supportive work practices, qualified individuals are often excluded — not due to their skills, but due to inflexible systems. There is a pressing need for adapted education and vocational training opportunities tailored to autistic learners, especially in high-contact sectors like tourism and hospitality. At the same time, businesses must receive targeted training to implement inclusive practices in hiring, onboarding, and ongoing staff development.

In tourism and hospitality — sectors that thrive on diversity, personalisation, and human connection — embracing neurodiversity is not only ethical. With proper support, autistic professionals bring strong assets such as attention to detail, reliability, creative problem-solving, and customer care consistency. Employing autistic individuals also benefits broader society: it promotes independence, enhances well-being, and enables individuals to contribute economically and socially, including through taxation and civic participation (Harvard Health, The value of neurodiverse workplaces, 2021). Inclusive employment should not be viewed solely as an act of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) but as an investment in talent and innovation. As inclusion becomes embedded in CSR policies worldwide, hiring people with autism must be recognised as part of building genuinely diverse and high-performing teams.

2. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Policies

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) represents a company's commitment to operating to enhance societal well-being while minimising negative impacts on people and the planet. Today, businesses' role extends far beyond creating jobs and delivering goods and services— it includes responsibilities related to human rights, labour conditions, public health, environmental protection, education, and inclusive development.

The European Commission defines CSR as "companies' responsibility for their impacts on society." It encourages the integration of social, environmental, ethical, consumer, and human rights concerns into business strategy in partnership with stakeholders and in compliance with the law. This includes areas such as labour practices (e.g., gender equality, health, and diversity), environmental protection (e.g., climate change, biodiversity, pollution), anti-corruption, community engagement, and consumer protection (European Commission, 2011). Similarly, the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), through its ISO 26000:2010 standard, describes social responsibility as an organisation's accountability for its decisions and activities in society and the environment. It requires ethical and transparent behaviour that contributes to sustainable development, respects stakeholder expectations, complies with laws, and is integrated throughout the organisation.

The OECD emphasises Responsible Business Conduct (RBC) as a company's positive contribution to sustainable development and a commitment to avoiding adverse impacts on their operations, supply chains, or services. The OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises offer governments and businesses a global, non-binding reference framework.

CSR is not a new concept—it has evolved over centuries. Robert Owen (1812) introduced a socially conscious business model focused on community welfare. The modern understanding of CSR took shape with scholars like Keith Davis (1960) and Archie Carroll (1979), who framed CSR as a layered responsibility: economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic.

Carroll's CSR Pyramid (1991) is still influential. It advocates that firms must simultaneously fulfil profit objectives, legal compliance, ethical standards, and discretionary (philanthropic) responsibilities. More recently, Schwartz and Carroll (2003) proposed a Three-Domain Model integrating ethical, legal, and economic imperatives.

CSR today is recognised as a strategic asset. According to Porter and Kramer (2007), companies should pursue shared value, aligning social progress with business success. This approach improves reputation, attracts talent, reduces risks, and can drive innovation. Sciarelli and Sciarelli (2018) further argue that CSR is a source of competitive advantage, especially when embedded into the company's value chain (Porter, 1985).

CSR is deeply interwoven with sustainable development, as defined by the Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987): "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." The United Nations' Agenda 2030 and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a universal framework for businesses to contribute to social equity, environmental protection, and economic growth.

John Elkington's Triple Bottom Line (1997)—People, Planet, Profit—underscores the need for a multidimensional evaluation of business performance. His recent Green Swans (2020) concept reflects systemic, regenerative solutions with exponential social and environmental value.

To promote credible CSR practices, organisations are encouraged to follow ISO 26000 guidelines and OECD principles and work with governments and civil society. However, the rising threat of greenwashing—where companies exaggerate or misrepresent their sustainability claims—necessitates greater transparency and accountability (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

In recent years, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has evolved from being viewed primarily as a moral obligation to being recognised as a strategic driver of business success and resilience. This shift is particularly relevant in the hospitality industry, where social, environmental, and ethical considerations are increasingly seen as key factors in long-term competitiveness, customer loyalty, and brand reputation.

2. a. Value in the tourism and hospitality sector

Since CSR has been integrated into business strategy, its understanding has partially shifted from being seen as a moral imperative to being a key factor in a firm's strategy and success. This shift is particularly relevant in the tourism and hospitality sector, where businesses operate at the intersection of service, culture, and community engagement. Hotels, restaurants, and tourism operators are not only economic entities — they are also actors that influence the well-being of local populations, shape guest experiences, and contribute to cultural exchange and sustainable development. When developing CSR policies, hospitality businesses should consider the added value they bring to their organisation and the broader tourism ecosystem, local economy, and society. Adopting a strategic approach to CSR is becoming increasingly crucial for competitiveness and long-term success.

Moreover, CSR is vital in restoring consumer trust, especially in a post-crisis era when transparency and ethical conduct are in high demand. Traveller's today is more likely to choose businesses aligning with their values, whether supporting local producers, reducing environmental impact, or employing individuals from underrepresented groups.

To create shared value, hospitality businesses must move beyond one-off social initiatives and embrace a long-term, strategic CSR vision. This means designing innovative services, experiences, and operations that delight guests and contribute meaningfully to social cohesion, environmental sustainability, and inclusive economic growth. Tourism businesses can drive quality employment, community development, and a more resilient and human-centred industry.

2.b. CSR impact in tourism and hospitality

Adopting a strategy focused on CSR might initially appear to be a potential burden for organisations, especially in the tourism and hospitality sectors, due to the investments in resources it requires. However, fostering an organisational culture that emphasises CSR offers several clear advantages. It helps attract and retain skilled talent, boosting motivation and productivity within the organisation. Additionally, CSR encourages the engagement of customers, partners, suppliers, and investors motivated by social causes. It also enhances resilience, enabling businesses to manage risks better and navigate crisis scenarios.

Furthermore, CSR gives organisations a competitive edge, improving their public image and reputation. It can also help reduce the risks related to resource scarcity, positively impacting

both the supply chain and the organisation itself. By promoting positive societal impacts, CSR can create valuable opportunities for individuals and communities affected by the organisation's activities. Through CSR initiatives, companies become stronger and better equipped to face social and economic crises, ensuring long-term business sustainability. CSR fosters deeper engagement with internal and external stakeholders, allowing businesses to better anticipate and capitalise on shifting societal expectations and changing operating conditions. This proactive approach can open new markets and growth opportunities, as higher levels of trust create an environment conducive to innovation.

In doing so, companies can significantly contribute to the EU's sustainable development objectives and develop a highly competitive, socially responsible, and sustainable market economy. Undoubtedly, companies that embrace CSR play an essential role in building a better society and generating positive impacts for the organisation and the community.

2.c. CSR Requirements

When discussing CSR, it is essential to recognise that there is not a unique reference model. Instead, many international frameworks and guidelines help organisations develop responsible and sustainable policies, including those in the tourism and hospitality sectors.

Among the most relevant global references, the **2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**, promoted by the United Nations, deserves special attention. This framework sets out 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and is a universal roadmap for promoting more equitable economic, environmental, and social development. Today, businesses are encouraged to integrate these goals into their strategies, contributing to global well-being and building a more inclusive and resilient society. According to the World Tourism Organization and the United Nations Development Program, the tourism industry can contribute to all 17 SDGs, especially SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) and SDG 14 (Life below Water).

Another essential tool is the **United Nations Global Compact**. This global pact is built on ten principles covering human rights, labour standards, environmental protection, and anti-corruption. Companies that join the Global Compact commit to integrating these principles into their daily operations, thereby contributing to achieving the SDGs.

In addition, **ISO 26000** is the international guideline for social responsibility. While it is not certifiable, ISO 26000 is widely recognised. It outlines the core areas of CSR: organisational

governance, human rights, labour practices, environmental issues, fair operating practices, consumer concerns, and community involvement and development.

The **OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises** provide another essential reference, especially for international businesses. These guidelines promote responsible conduct in employment, environment, innovation, taxation, transparency, and human rights. A key aspect of these guidelines is due diligence assessing the social and environmental impacts throughout the company's value chain.

The **UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights** are also a key framework. Based on the "Protect, Respect, and Remedy" framework, companies must avoid causing or contributing to human rights abuses and prevent and address any adverse impacts on their operations or business relationships.

Regarding reporting and transparency, the **Global Reporting Initiative (GRI)** provides a comprehensive standard for communicating a company's social, environmental, and economic impacts. It is a valuable tool for monitoring CSR performance and building stakeholder trust. Lastly, for the specific context of the tourism and hospitality sector, the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) offers internationally recognised sustainability standards. These are tailored for hotels, tour operators, and travel destinations and focus on sustainable management, socio-economic impact, cultural heritage protection, and environmental conservation.

In conclusion, tourism and hospitality businesses—like any organisation—can rely on a rich and coherent set of international frameworks to build a CSR strategy that is concrete, measurable, and long-term oriented. These models are not mutually exclusive; they often complement one another. Implementing them enables companies to create economic, social, and environmental value, contributing to a more sustainable future.

In addition to these major frameworks, other models are increasingly relevant to companies aiming to structure their sustainability strategies more effectively.

One such model is the **B Corp Certification**. It assesses a company's entire social and environmental performance and is awarded to businesses that balance purpose and profit, meeting high standards of accountability and transparency. It encourages companies to consider the impact of their decisions on all stakeholders, including workers, communities, and the environment.

SA8000, developed by Social Accountability International, is another leading standard focused on social accountability in the workplace. It emphasises decent working conditions

and establishes strong, effective management systems to protect workers' rights and promote ethical business operations.

The **Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS)**, created by the European Union, offers a voluntary tool for organisations to evaluate, report, and continuously improve their environmental performance. EMAS goes beyond legal compliance and supports transparency and ecological excellence.

Finally, the **UNWTO Global Code of Ethics for Tourism** is a fundamental reference for ethical tourism development. It outlines principles that encourage respect for cultural heritage, local communities, human rights, and the environment, promoting sustainability across the tourism value chain.

In conclusion, tourism and hospitality businesses can draw on a wide and coherent set of international frameworks to build ethical, measurable, and forward-looking CSR strategies. These models are not mutually exclusive; they complement each other and provide businesses with powerful tools to generate economic value and lasting social and environmental impact. By aligning their practices with these standards, companies can strengthen their competitive edge, gain stakeholder trust, and contribute meaningfully to a more sustainable and inclusive global economy.

2.d. CSR Methodology and Structure

While this module encourages tourism and hospitality organisations to adopt CSR practices, implementing an overall CSR strategy from the outset may be unrealistic due to limited resources. Successful implementation begins with the active involvement of both management and staff. Organisations should align CSR efforts with their mission, vision, and values, identify key stakeholders (employees, guests, suppliers, and communities), and understand which social and environmental issues matter most to them. This can be achieved through surveys and consultations. Reviewing existing or past initiatives can also help shape a practical CSR plan. Once a strategy is drafted, it should be shared with stakeholders to ensure alignment and support. The CSR plan can then be implemented gradually and reviewed regularly to assess progress and adapt to evolving needs. Using reliable indicators—such as those from the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) or Hopkins Institute—can help measure impact effectively. CSR in tourism and hospitality is a long-term investment that supports business resilience, enhances reputation, and creates shared value for society.

3. CSR Policies in Europe

The European Union has increasingly recognised the importance of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in fostering sustainable economic development. Over the past two decades, the EU has taken significant steps to create a shared policy framework encouraging companies to integrate social and environmental responsibility into their operations.

The push began in 2001–2002 with the publication of the Green Paper and a Communication from the European Commission, promoting voluntary CSR adoption as part of a broader strategy for sustainable development. In 2011, the EU introduced a renewed CSR strategy aligning with global frameworks such as the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. This strategy emphasised enterprise-led development, supported by public policy where necessary. In 2015, the EU formally endorsed these UN principles. By 2017, CSR reporting had become mandatory for large companies under Directive 2014/95/EU, leading to wider CSR implementation. In 2019, the European Green Deal prompted a review of CSR reporting standards, followed by a 2021 legislative proposal to expand corporate sustainability obligations. Together, these milestones reflect the EU's commitment to making CSR a core of European business strategy and sustainability.

4. Best practices of CSR and autism inclusion in Europe

In the following Table, some best practices related to the application of CSR in the EU tourism and hospitality sector are presented.

Company/ Organisation	Country	CSR Initiative	Link
Accor	France / Global	"Planet 21" program promoting sustainable food, water/energy efficiency, and local sourcing in hotels worldwide.	https://group.accor.com/en/sustainable-development/planet-21
Sodexo	France / Global	"Stop Hunger" is a global initiative fighting food insecurity through donations, volunteer work, and job training for vulnerable groups.	https://www.sodexo.com/en/home/corporate-responsibility.html
Meliá Hotels International	Spain	EarthCheck certification for environmental transparency, waste and energy monitoring, and sustainability staff training.	https://www.meli-hotels-international.com/en/sustainability
Autogrill	Italy	Use of biodegradable materials, food waste monitoring, and sustainable sourcing in Italian rest stops.	https://www.autogrill.com/en/sustainability

Elior Group	France / Global	Local supplier partnerships, healthy school meal programs, and food education projects for children and families.	https://www.eliorgroup.com/sustainability
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In the following Table, some best practice of CSR Initiatives for Autism Inclusion in the EU tourism and hospitality sector are proposed.

Company/ Organisation	Country	CSR Initiative Related to Autism	Link
DeLuna Hotels	Spain	It has adapted its three hotels in Granada to be 'Autism Friendly', implementing specific staff training, signage with pictograms, adapted rooms, personalised service, and quiet rest areas.	https://elpais.com/elviajero/escapadas/espana/2025-05-05/deluna-hotels-convierte-sus-tres-establecimientos-en-granada-en-espacios-amigables-con-el-autismo.html
Gloria Thalasso & Hotels	Spain	Certified as 'Autism Friendly', it offers quick check-in, adapted menus with pictograms, trained staff, easy signage and visual guides to help guests with autism find their way around and feel at ease.	https://www.gloriapalaceth.com/en/autism-friendly/
Ashling Hotel Dublin	Ireland	In collaboration with AsIAM, it has created sensory rooms designed to offer a calming and immersive environment, enhancing the experience for guests with autism.	https://www.ashlinghotel.ie/csr
Slieve Russell Hotel	Ireland	It offers a sensory room with soft play toys, online check-in to avoid queues, and sensory maps to help autistic guests plan and enjoy their stay.	https://www.slieverussell.ie/autism-friendly/
Çırağan Palace Kempinski Istanbul	Turkey	In collaboration with the Tohum Autism Foundation, it has equipped seven special education classrooms in Istanbul with appropriate materials for teaching autistic children, contributing to educational inclusion.	https://www.kempinski.com/en/ciragan-palace/press-room/7-special-education-classrooms-are-opened
Accor Hotels	France	He has developed inclusive recruitment processes for people with disabilities, including individuals with autism, promoting workplace inclusion in the hotel industry.	https://group.accor.com/en/Actualites/2024/05/recruitment-fostering-disability-inclusion
PizzAut	Italy	Social enterprise and restaurant projects employ and train young people with autism in the HORECA sector, promoting autonomy, inclusion, and awareness.	https://www.pizzaut.it

5. Inclusive Employment

Inclusive employment for individuals is not only a cornerstone of Article 27 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities—which affirms the right of every person with a disability “to work, on an equal basis with others,” in an inclusive and accessible labour market—but also directly advances the United Nations’ 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. By ensuring that people with autism have equal access to job opportunities, reasonable accommodations, and supportive work environments, we uphold the Convention’s mandate against segregation and exclusion while promoting SDG 8 (“Decent Work and Economic Growth”) and SDG 10 (“Reduced Inequalities”). This dual alignment means that when tourism and hospitality organisations commit to inclusive employment practices—treating individuals with autism as equals, valuing their contributions, and providing the tools they need to thrive—they are both fulfilling an internationally recognised human right and embodying the 2030 Agenda’s principle of “leaving no one behind.” In doing so, they create a more diverse and resilient workforce, foster social cohesion, and contribute materially to sustainable economic growth and social inclusion across communities.

5.a. Value, impact and requirements

Many companies today promote diversity but fail to fully understand its value or the crucial role of inclusion. While diversity is widely accepted as a core value, it cannot thrive without inclusion. Businesses must see Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion as strategic assets rather than just corporate social responsibility initiatives.

Hiring individuals with autism contributes to a more diverse workforce, enhancing innovation, creativity, accessibility, and customer focus. Companies that embrace inclusion tend to make better decisions, attract and retain top talent, and strengthen their organisational reputation. Inclusive environments foster a sense of belonging, where employees feel accepted, valued, and respected. This sense of inclusion is key to employee engagement and retention. Managers with autistic employees often become better leaders, offering more precise feedback and setting well-defined expectations. Conversely, a lack of diversity and inclusion seriously threatens a healthy company culture. Inclusive employment has numerous benefits. It positively affects overall workforce morale, as non-disabled employees often feel more connected to a company that values all community members. Managers also improve their ability to understand employee needs and enhance communication. Productivity tends to increase while absenteeism and turnover decrease. Many employees with disabilities perform

at equal or even higher levels than their peers. Business practices also evolve, creating environments that are more accessible and beneficial to everyone, not just those with disabilities. Accommodations—such as physical modifications—lead to broader improvements in workspaces and services. A diverse workforce that includes people with disabilities often results in better customer service for disabled clients and fosters a culture of dedication and innovation. Truly inclusive employment must meet several key conditions. Jobs should align with the individual's skills and interests. Support must also extend to family members who care for individuals with disabilities. Employers need access to appropriate tools to foster inclusive workplaces and eliminate discrimination in all work-related activities.

The European Union introduced Directive 2000/78/EC to address discrimination, requiring all Member States to implement laws that protect people with disabilities in employment and professional training. This includes the obligation to provide reasonable accommodations and ensure individuals can access, participate in, and progress within the workplace on equal terms. According to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, companies should commit to respecting individual differences and making the necessary adjustments to ensure equal contributions from all employees. They must also ensure fair treatment in all employment matters, including equal pay and safe working conditions, protect labour rights, and provide access to vocational guidance.

6. Autism Spectrum

6.a. ASD definition: ASD is “a complex developmental condition involving persistent challenges with social communication, restricted interests and repetitive behaviour” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are a diverse group of conditions. They are characterised by some degree of difficulty with social interaction and communication. Other characteristics are atypical patterns of activities and behaviours, such as difficulty with transition from one activity to another, a focus on details and unusual reactions to sensations. (World Health Organization, 2023).

6.b. Main features: Autistic people show a wide range of abilities and support needs: some live independently, while others need lifelong care. Autism can limit educational and job opportunities and place heavy demands on families, so social attitudes and formal services strongly shape the quality of life. Although signs may appear in early childhood, diagnosis is often delayed, and many autistic individuals experience additional conditions—such as

epilepsy, anxiety, depression, ADHD, sleep problems, or self-injury—with intellectual abilities spanning from profound impairment to exceptionally high levels.

6.c. Challenges: Early, evidence-based support—beginning in infancy and coordinated across health, education, employment and social services—can greatly improve autistic people’s communication, social skills and quality of life. Yet stigma, insufficient provider knowledge and fragmented systems leave many without the care and protections to which they are entitled, leading to higher unmet health needs and vulnerability to chronic illness, violence and abuse. (World Health Organization, 2023)

6.d. People with autism in the workplace:

The scholarly literature on the employment of autistic people in the tourism and hospitality sector is still limited but converges on two findings. First, when tasks and settings are well structured (clear role descriptions, reduced sensory load, and on-site job coaching), employment and retention rates are high (Bertran Serrano, Abellan-Calvet, 2024; Feerasta, 2017). Second, despite these good practices, autistic adults remain under-represented in the ‘Service Providers/Hospitality/Science’ sectors: sensory overload, unpredictable shifts, and limited managerial training are key barriers (Goldfarb et al., 2024). Recent conceptual work, therefore, calls for a shift from "accessible tourism" aimed solely at customers to full neurodivergent workforce inclusion (Jepson et al., 2023). Long-term studies on career progression and cost-effectiveness, especially in independent restaurants and experiential tourism, are still lacking.

7. Description of the employment cycle

7.a. Value and challenges of employing staff with autism

Autistic individuals remain dramatically underrepresented in the workforce: globally, an estimated 80% of adults on the autism spectrum are unemployed (Ki-moon, 2015). Instead, employing people on the autism spectrum can yield numerous benefits for organisations, individuals, and society. Autistic employees often bring specific strengths and perspectives: research and employer reports features such as strong attention to detail, error-detection ability, deep focus, reliability, and creative problem-solving (Gomez & Sheikh, 2023). There is also evidence of an ethical or productivity advantage in certain contexts: autistic employees

were far more likely to speak up about workplace problems or unethical practices, helping the organisation identify and address issues quickly (Hartman L. & Hartman B., 2024). From an organisational perspective, the employment of neurodivergent individuals constitutes a strategic advantage rather than a mere corporate social responsibility initiative. Empirical research demonstrates that collaborative pairs comprising both autistic and neurotypical individuals generated solutions of greater originality in structured creativity tasks with no decline in overall performance (Axbey et al., 2023). Other studies show that organisations employing neurodivergent personnel often outperform their competitors, generating 28% higher revenue on average and delivering superior returns on investment for shareholders (Rollnik-Sadowska & Grabińska, 2024). At the same time, significant challenges and barriers have historically kept autism employment rates low. Surveys of employers reveal that a major obstacle is simply a lack of knowledge about autism: hiring managers often do not understand what supports or adjustments autistic workers might require or hold misinformed stereotypes about their abilities (Day et al., 2024). Conventional HR practices—especially unstructured, face-to-face interviews—frequently penalise autistic applicants. Experimental evidence shows that when recruiters view recorded interviews, autistic candidates who are *just as qualified* as neurotypical peers are rated markedly less hireable because of atypical eye contact, body language, vocal inflexion and overall "social composure"; the bias disappears when the same answers are assessed from transcripts alone (Whelpley & May 2022)

7.b. Description of the employment cycle

The main difficulties related to the recruiting phase have already been analysed; we will now examine the other stages of work. During onboarding, a written day-by-day schedule, a trained supervisor and sensory-friendly workspaces cut first-week attrition and speed skill acquisition (Scott et al., 2018). A 12-month follow-up of autistic adults in a supported-employment programme found that all participants retained their jobs for the full year, indicating that the model—structured routines, on-site coaching and low-cost environmental tweaks—can secure long-term job stability. Crucially, higher baseline positive well-being predicted lower depression at 12 months, suggesting that boosting well-being acts as a protective buffer against mental health decline and indirectly sustains employment. (Wehman et al., 2014). Autistic workers typically remain under-advanced despite their skills. For example, many autistic employees are in jobs lower than their abilities, with 37–46% of study participants reporting they were overqualified for their roles. In contrast, deliberate support

can boost career growth. Mentorship and coaching consistently emerge as the top facilitator: autistic employees in qualitative studies say that having a regular mentor or "job coach" makes a difference in how successful they will be at work (Davies et al., 2024).

By contrast, virtually no studies focus on autistic employees' exit or offboarding.

8. Summary

This module provides a comprehensive introduction to integrating social responsibility and inclusive employment in the European hospitality sector, specifically focusing on autism. It explores the growing relevance of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and the strategic role businesses play in fostering inclusive work environments and contributing to broader social goals. The module begins by contextualising autism within the global and European landscape, highlighting its prevalence, diagnostic challenges, and the underrepresentation of autistic individuals in the labour market—particularly in high-contact sectors like hospitality. It underlines the mismatch between the talents of autistic individuals and the rigid structures of traditional workplaces, reinforcing the need for inclusive hiring practices and adapted work environments. The concept of CSR is then thoroughly examined, drawing on key frameworks such as ISO 26000, the UN Global Compact, the OECD Guidelines, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The module explains how CSR has evolved into a strategic business asset that supports innovation, risk management, and long-term resilience, especially for SMEs operating in tourism and hospitality.

Through real-world examples, learners gain insight into CSR applications across Europe, including general sustainability efforts and specific autism-inclusive initiatives (e.g., Gloria Thalasso & Hotels in Spain, Ashling Hotel Dublin, and PizzAut in Italy). These cases illustrate how inclusive employment not only supports the rights of people with autism but also enhances brand reputation, staff morale, customer experience, and overall service quality.

The module concludes by outlining actionable steps for building and implementing CSR policies. It emphasises stakeholder engagement, alignment with organisational values, and the use of global reporting standards to track progress. It encourages hospitality businesses—regardless of size—to see inclusion not as charity but as an investment in human potential and sustainable growth.

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