Development and Retention of Autistic Staff in Hospitality

Module 2

Hospitality Management Soft Skills

Author: Kallis Filoxeniaki Ltd.

Cyprus

Module Title	Module 2: Hospitality Management Soft Skills
LEARNING OBJECTIVES	Module 2 aims to: 1. Educate learners develop the soft skills required to support autistic staff 2. Educate learners on how to develop communication skills. 3. Educate learners on ways to practice active listening. 4. Educate learners to apply SWOT analysis on problem solving. 5. Educate learners to distinguish between leadership and management. 6. Educate learners about diversity and how to handle it.
LEARNING OUTCOMES	Through Module 2, learners will be able to: 1. Understand the required soft skills to manage autistic staff 2. Develop effective communication skills, incl. active listening 3. Apply required techniques i.e. SWOT analysis 4. Gain understanding about empathy and diversity. 5. Know how to manage tasks and time

1. Introduction

In the workplace, autistic employees may benefit from support—often small changes can make a big difference. Along with their own strengths, many autistic individuals show outstanding abilities in areas such as focus, reliability, persistence, accuracy, attention to detail, technical skills (like IT), factual knowledge, and memory.

If you are a manager, HR professional, or part of the hiring team, it's important to understand how to support autistic staff effectively. Regardless of whether an employee is autistic or not, managers are expected to demonstrate strong soft skills. While job-specific knowledge is essential, employees who excel tend to have additional abilities like clear communication, teamwork, and time management. These are known as **soft skills**.

2. Communication Skills

Communication skills involve the ability to give and receive different types of information clearly and respectfully. For autistic individuals, communication may differ from neurotypical norms. Some may have difficulty with spoken language or interpreting what others say. Others may struggle with nonverbal cues like facial expressions, gestures, or eye contact. Social interactions can feel overwhelming, especially when it involves abstract language, sarcasm, or knowing when to speak or listen.

For example, autistic individuals may take language literally, leading to confusion in conversations with idioms or indirect messages. In group discussions, they might speak at length or appear withdrawn—not due to disinterest, but because of how they process social cues.

Due to these differences, it is important for managers to develop adaptable communication skills. These include active speaking and listening, showing empathy, and being aware of tone, body language, and context. Communication also varies by format—whether in-person, over the phone, by email, or via digital platforms.

Main Types of Communication in the Workplace

1. *Verbal* – Speaking directly to share ideas or instructions.
2. *Nonverbal* – Using tone, body language, and expressions.
3. *Written* – Communicating through text such as emails or notes.
4. *Visual* – Using images, diagrams, or charts to clarify messages.

2. a. Non-verbal Communication

Non-verbal communication is the exchange of information without spoken or written words. It includes facial expressions, gestures, posture, and body movement. Unlike verbal communication, which typically conveys facts, non-verbal cues help build relationships and express emotions, attitudes, and personality.

People use non-verbal signals for greetings, emotional expression, and everyday interaction. These cues can often reinforce or even replace verbal messages.

Common Forms of Non-verbal Communication

- Eye contact
- Facial expressions
- Gestures
- Body movement
- Posture
- Personal space (proxemics)
- Paralanguage (tone, pitch, volume)
- Touch

For managers, recognising and appropriately responding to non-verbal cues is essential to creating a respectful and inclusive work environment—especially for autistic employees who may interpret or use these cues differently.

3. Active Listening Skills

Active listening is a key component of effective communication. It involves more than just hearing words—it requires paying close attention to the speaker while genuinely trying to understand the meaning and intention behind what is being said. Active listening means being fully present and engaged in the conversation, rather than simply waiting for your turn to speak.

In fact, listening is often more important than speaking. The goal of an active listener is not to immediately agree or disagree, but to fully understand the other person's perspective and communicate that understanding in a respectful and thoughtful way.

3c. Tips for Practicing Active Listening

✅ Do's:

- Listen more than you speak
- Let the speaker finish without interrupting
- Ask open-ended questions
- Stay focused and attentive
- Be aware of your own biases
- Keep emotions in check
- Use eye contact and nodding to show engagement
- Pay attention to both words and feelings

✖ Don'ts:

- Don't interrupt or talk over others
- Don't finish others' sentences
- Don't jump to conclusions
- Don't blame or use accusatory language
- Don't argue or get defensive
- Don't multitask or show impatience
- Don't plan your response while the other person is talking
- Don't let bias block new ideas

Active listening is especially valuable when working with autistic employees, as it helps build trust, reduce misunderstandings, and support clear and respectful communication.

4. Empathy

Psychologist Daniel Goleman identified three core elements of empathy that are especially important in leadership and interpersonal communication:

1. Understanding Others
2. Developing Others
3. Leveraging Diversity

4. a. Understanding Others

This is the most recognized aspect of empathy. As Goleman defines it: "sensing others' feelings and perspectives and taking an active interest in their concerns."

Individuals who demonstrate this ability:

- Are highly attuned to emotional cues, including subtle forms of non-verbal communication.
- Listen actively and empathetically, often picking up on what is left unsaid.
- Show genuine sensitivity to others' experiences and viewpoints.
- Offer support and assistance based on a clear understanding of others' emotional needs.

4. b. Developing Others

This element involves responding to people's needs and supporting their growth and development. Those skilled in this area:

- Acknowledge and celebrate others' strengths and achievements.
- Offer constructive feedback focused on improvement, not criticism.
- Provide coaching and mentorship opportunities to encourage growth.
- Assign meaningful tasks and challenges that promote professional development and confidence.

These first two elements—*Understanding Others* and *Developing Others*—are particularly valuable when managing diverse teams, including neurodivergent individuals. By practicing

empathy in both perception and action, managers can create more inclusive, respectful, and supportive workplaces.

4. c. Leveraging Diversity

Leveraging diversity means being able to create and develop opportunities through different kinds of people, recognizing and celebrating that we all bring something different to the table. This is especially important when deciding on taking the road to hiring a person with autism. Leveraging diversity does not mean that you treat everyone in exactly the same way, but that you tailor the way you interact with others to fit with their needs and feelings. People with this skill respect and relate well to everyone, regardless of their background. As a general rule, they see diversity as an opportunity, understanding that diverse teams work much better than teams that are more homogeneous. People who are good at leveraging diversity also challenge intolerance, bias and stereotyping when they see it, creating an atmosphere that is respectful towards everyone.

5. Problem Solving Skills

Problem solving is a vital skill for both managers and team members. It involves recognizing challenges, analyzing them, and finding effective solutions. Two common structured approaches include *SWOT analysis* and *decision-making frameworks*.

5. a. Applying SWOT for Problem Solving

While originally used in business strategy (Dess, Lumpkin & Taylor, 2005), SWOT Analysis it can also help individuals and teams tackle workplace challenges.

The strategic management model (Bratton & Gold, 2003) outlines five steps for applying SWOT to problem solving:

1. Mission and Goals – Define core values and objectives.
2. Environmental Analysis – Identify internal strengths and weaknesses, and external opportunities and threats.
3. Strategy Formulation – Evaluate these factors and choose an effective strategy.
4. Strategy Implementation – Put the strategy into action.

5. Strategy Evaluation – Assess results and adjust as needed.

By applying SWOT, teams can make more informed and strategic decisions by understanding internal capabilities and external influences.

5. b. Decision Making for Problem Solving

Effective problem solving also requires clear decision making. As outlined by Ritchie and Thompson (1988), decision making includes a series of logical steps:

- Define the problem
- Gather relevant information
- Generate possible solutions
- Weigh pros and cons
- Choose the best solution
- Implement it
- Review results and adjust as needed

Following a structured approach helps ensure that decisions are made thoughtfully and objectively, which is especially important in fast-paced or complex environments.

6. Teamwork

Effective teamwork depends on the right team size, which can vary based on the task or context. While sports teams follow fixed rules, work teams may shift in size depending on project needs. Essential elements for productivity include access to resources (e.g., meeting space, tools), organizational support, and clearly defined roles so everyone understands their responsibilities.

Teamwork exists in many settings—corporate environments, schools, sports, and healthcare. The degree of interdependence varies: some teams (like in golf) require minimal coordination, while others (like in basketball or operating rooms) need high levels of communication and collaboration.

6. a. Effective Teamwork

To function well, teams must demonstrate certain qualities:

- Cohesion: A strong sense of unity leads to better performance.
- Communication: Clear, consistent communication helps resolve conflict, reduce confusion, and align members around the team's purpose.
- Common Goals: When everyone shares the same objective, teamwork becomes more focused and supportive.
- Commitment: Members who are dedicated to the goal contribute more actively and dependably.
- Accountability: Holding each member responsible ensures progress and reinforces commitment across the team.

These characteristics are interlinked—strong communication builds cohesion, which boosts commitment and drives team success.

7. Adaptability Skills

Adaptability is the ability to adjust one's actions, approach, or mindset in response to new or changing situations. In a world that is constantly evolving—whether due to technology, market trends, or global events—being adaptable is essential. For example, when a product becomes scarce in the market, we naturally shift our preference to available alternatives. This simple decision reflects adaptability in action.

However, adaptability goes beyond just making changes. It involves adjusting smoothly and efficiently, without causing major disruptions or delays. It requires flexibility, resilience, and the readiness to modify behavior when faced with new challenges or circumstances. Given the many unpredictable factors that influence our environment—such as shifting regulations, economic changes, or workplace dynamics—developing adaptability is a critical skill for both personal and professional success.

7. a. Tips to Improve Adaptability

While some people may be naturally more adaptable, it is a skill that can be strengthened over time through practice and awareness. Here are a few ways to enhance your adaptability:

- **Observe and Monitor Your Environment:** Stay alert to changes in your surroundings—social, technological, or professional—so you can respond proactively rather than reactively.
- **Be Open to Learning:** Adaptable individuals embrace lifelong learning. Being curious and willing to acquire new skills or knowledge helps you stay relevant and flexible.
- **Avoid Procrastination:** Delaying action can make change more difficult. Try to respond promptly and decisively when faced with new situations.
- **Accept That Change is Inevitable:** Recognise that change is a constant part of life. Developing a mindset that views change as an opportunity rather than a threat helps build emotional resilience.

8. Time Management

Time management is the intentional process of planning and organizing how to divide time between tasks to boost *productivity*, *efficiency*, and *well-being*. It involves balancing work duties, personal responsibilities, and leisure, while recognizing time as a limited resource.

Effective time management gives individuals more control over their schedules, reduces stress, and allows for more focused and meaningful work. Originally linked to business, it now applies across all areas of life. A strong time management system includes setting goals, prioritising tasks, scheduling, and regularly reviewing progress. It's also important to note that cultural views of time can shape how people manage it.

In project settings, good time management is essential to meeting deadlines, staying on track, and delivering results. Poor time use often leads to delays and reduced productivity.

8. a. Benefits of Time Management

1. *Lower Stress* – Avoid last-minute pressure and missed deadlines.

2. *More Free Time* – Gain time for rest, hobbies, and personal growth.

3. *New Opportunities* – Make room for taking on more meaningful tasks.

4. *Goal Achievement* – Stay focused and organised to meet objectives.

8. b. Strategies for Effective Time Management

1. *Set Clear Goals* – Break goals into small, manageable steps.

2. *Prioritize Tasks* – Focus on what matters most (e.g., using the Eisenhower Matrix).

3. *Limit Time per Task* – Stay efficient by setting time boundaries.

4. *Take Breaks* – Short pauses help maintain focus and energy.

5. *Stay Organized* – Use tools like calendars and to-do lists.

6. *Cut Non-Essential Tasks* – Eliminate distractions and low-value activities.

7. *Plan Ahead* – Prepare for the day or week in advance to avoid surprises.

9. Task Management

Task management is the process of overseeing a task throughout its entire life cycle—from initiation to completion. It includes planning, execution, monitoring, and reporting. Effective task management helps individuals achieve personal goals and enables teams to collaborate efficiently toward shared objectives. Tasks can vary in complexity, ranging from simple, routine actions to multifaceted assignments requiring coordination across roles and resources.

Successful task management involves handling all relevant aspects of a task, including:

- Task status and progress
- Priority levels
- Timeframes and deadlines
- Assigned personnel and budgetary resources
- Task dependencies and recurrence
- Notifications and updates

These elements can be grouped into the core activities of task management. For teams and larger projects, specialized tools such as workflow systems or project management software can help streamline coordination and improve visibility across tasks.

Task management is often part of broader systems like project management or process management. It serves as a foundation for building structured workflows and improving organizational efficiency. Project managers who focus on task-oriented strategies usually maintain clear, up-to-date schedules and are skilled at coordinating team efforts to ensure project progress.

Tasks generally move through various stages during their life cycle. Common task statuses include:

- *Ready*
- *Assigned*
- *Started*
- *Paused*

- *Finished*
- *Verified*
- *Terminated*
- *Expired*

- *Forwarded*
- *Failed*

(**Note: The full task life cycle is often illustrated using task-state diagrams, such as those developed by IBM.**)

9. a. SMART Objectives Framework

A SMART objective helps set clear, focused, and achievable goals:

Letter	Meaning	Summary
S	*Specific*	Clear and defined—Who, what, where, and why?
M	*Measurable*	Trackable with data or observable results
A	*Achievable*	Realistic within available resources and time
R	*Relevant*	Aligned with broader goals or strategy
T	*Time-bound*	Has a set deadline or timeframe

10. Creativity

Creativity was once believed to stem mainly from the brain's right hemisphere, supporting the idea that "left-brain dominant" individuals were more analytical and less emotionally inclined. However, modern neuroscience reveals that creativity is much more complex, involving dynamic interactions across various brain regions. Emotion and memory—especially the ability to set aside routine thinking—play key roles in generating original ideas.

In an article for **Livestrong**, author Tracey R. notes that creativity arises from specific patterns of activation and suppression in neural pathways. This unique brain activity enables *divergent thinking*, which allows individuals to see problems from new angles and challenge traditional approaches.

Creativity is studied in fields such as psychology, cognitive science, education, technology, the arts, and artificial intelligence. Researchers examine how it relates to intelligence, personality, brain function, mental health, and the ways creativity can be fostered through education and training. There is also growing focus on its role in economic development and innovation.

Within organisations, creativity is a key driver of effectiveness and adaptability. However, how creativity impacts performance can vary based on the organization's mission, environment, industry, and customer needs. To evaluate creativity's contribution, it's essential to understand how the organization functions, what it values, and how it defines success.

11. Leadership

Leadership is the capacity to influence, guide, and support others toward achieving shared goals. True leadership is not defined by popularity, power, or charisma—though some leaders possess these qualities—but by the ability to inspire action, make thoughtful decisions, and foster growth in others.

Effective leaders understand that success is not achieved alone. They take a proactive role in developing their team members, offering encouragement, support, and opportunities

that align individual potential with organizational objectives. Leadership is not just about managing tasks; it is about motivating people with purpose and clarity.

Many misconceptions arise when analysing leadership. Rather than focusing on superficial traits such as showmanship or authority, effective leadership should be viewed through the lens of influence, accountability, and vision.

Strong leaders are found in all areas of society—from corporate environments and government to schools, nonprofits, and local communities. Regardless of context, effective leaders often demonstrate the following traits:

- Confidence and decisiveness
- Clear, consistent communication
- Empathy and emotional intelligence
- Innovative and solution-oriented thinking
- Adaptability and openness to change
- Resilience and persistence
- Calmness under pressure and in crisis

Leadership is not a fixed trait—it is a skill that can be cultivated through experience, feedback, and a willingness to grow.

11. Summary

Module 2 explores the essential soft skills required by hospitality professionals—particularly those involved in human resources, recruitment, and management—to effectively support autistic employees throughout every stage of the Employment Cycle: from interviewing and onboarding, to day-to-day work, professional development, and long-term retention.

Soft skills are personal traits and interpersonal abilities that enhance communication, collaboration, and workplace performance. Unlike hard skills—which are technical and job-specific—soft skills are versatile and universally valuable, especially in service-driven industries like hospitality, where customer interaction and teamwork are central to success..

To create truly inclusive and high-functioning hospitality teams, managers and HR professionals must cultivate soft skills that enable them to understand, support, and empower neurodiverse staff.

Module 2 highlights ten core soft skills identified as essential for supporting autistic employees in the hospitality sector:

- Communication Skills – Conveying information clearly and respectfully
- Active Listening – Fully engaging with and understanding others
- Empathy – Demonstrating understanding and compassion
- Problem Solving – Addressing challenges with creativity and logic
- Time Management – Organizing time effectively to meet shifting priorities
- Task Management – Overseeing tasks from assignment to completion
- Teamwork – Collaborating in a respectful, inclusive manner
- Adaptability – Adjusting to new situations, needs, or roles smoothly
- Creativity – Bringing fresh perspectives to service and operations
- Leadership – Inspiring and guiding others with purpose and awareness

12. References

ARIJIT, BISHAI. 2021. *Adaptability 3rd Sem H SEC-1.* Available from:
https://www.bajkulcollegeonlinestudy.in/2020-2021/Materials%202020-
21/BA%20Hons/English/3rd%20Sem%20H%20SEC-
1%20Adaptability%20Arijit%20Bishai%2010-01-2021.pdf

BANSAL, ROHIT. 2022. *Time Management & Productivity for Effective Time
Management.* Available from:
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/363859295_Time_Management_Productivity_for_
Effective_Time_Management

BRATTON, J AND GOLD, J. 2003. Human Resource Management Theory and Practice,
3rd Edition, New York: Palgrave Mcmillan.

BRITO, SÍLVIO & FERNANDES THOMAZ, JOÃO. 2022. *Creativity.*
10.5772/intechopen.98101.

COBLEY, PAUL. 2008. *Communication: Definitions and Concepts & Quotes.* Available
from: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9781405186407.wbiecc071

CROPLEY, ARTHUR. 2011. Definitions of Creativity. 10.1016/B978-0-12-375038-9.00066-
2.

CUTTING, THOMAS. 2010. *Relationship vs. Task Oriented Management.* Available
from: http://www.pmhut.com/relationship-vs-task-oriented-management

GOLMAN, DANIEL. 2013. *The Focused Leader", Boston. Harvard Business Review.*
Available from: https://hbr.org/2013/12/the-focused-leader

GOLEMAN, DANIEL. 2007. *Emotional Intelligence. 10th ed., Bantam Books, 2007.*
Available from: https://www.danielgoleman.info/

MONTEMURRO, FRANCINE. 2014. *Active Listening, Office of the Ombuds,* Boston
University. Available from: https://www.bumc.bu.edu/facdev-medicine/files/2016/10/Active-
Listening-Handout.pdf

SIMISTER, NIGEL. 2019. *Setting Objectives.* Available from:
https://www.intrac.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Setting-objectives.pdf

VAIN, CLAIRE. 2021. *Different Methods of Communication*. Available from:

https://cpdonline.co.uk/knowledge-base/business/different-communication-methods/

W.C.H. PRENTICE. 2004. *Understanding Leadership*. Available from:

https://hbr.org/2004/01/understanding-leadership