Development and Retention of Autistic Staff in Hospitality

Module 3

Work Environment Management

Author: Specialisterne ApS

Denmark

Module Title	Module 3: Work Environment Management
LEARNING OBJECTIVES	Module 3 aims to: 1. Create a better understanding of how an autism-friendly work environment can be. 2. Develop team management skills that helps to create a more inclusive workplace 3. Provide guidelines for assessing and adapting the Work Environment in an autism-friendly context
LEARNING OUTCOMES	Through Module 3, learners will be able to: 1. Demonstrate ability to assess and adapt the work environment in an autism-friendly context 2. Implement the presented knowledge and tools in the daily work routine 3. Demonstrate ability to design, evaluate and adapt team building activities 4. Demonstrate knowledge of team management mechanisms - how to design, establish and maintain them 5. Demonstrate ability to transfer knowledge to peers and colleagues

1. Introduction

Despite growing awareness of diversity and inclusion, the needs of autistic individuals in the workplace have often been overlooked—not out of malice, but due to a lack of understanding. This has led to the underutilisation of a highly capable and diverse talent pool.

In hospitality settings, where fast pace, sensory stimulation, and social interaction are constant, autistic employees may face invisible but significant barriers. These can include overwhelming sensory environments, unclear communication, and social expectations that don't align with how they engage or process the world. Traditional workspaces and management styles are often built around neurotypical norms, unintentionally excluding those who think and work differently.

This module aims to HR professionals, and managers in creating autism-friendly workplaces—environments that recognise difference not as a limitation, but as a strength. It emphasises a shift from equality to equity: instead of treating all employees the same, we must provide the right support for each individual to thrive.With a focus on the hospitality sector, this guide outlines the practical steps and inclusive strategies needed to create accessible environments, inclusive leadership practices, and respectful team cultures where autistic employees can succeed—on their own terms. When referring to the work environment what is meant is variety of different aspects, including:

- o **Physical environment:** This refers to the physical setting in which work takes place, including the layout of the workspace, lighting, temperature, and noise levels.
- o **Social environment:** This refers to the interactions between individuals in the workplace, including communication styles, teamwork, and leadership styles.
- o **Organisational culture:** This refers to the values, beliefs, and practices that shape the workplace culture, including the company mission, policies, and procedures.
- o **Job tasks and responsibilities:** This refers to the specific tasks and responsibilities that are part of an individual's job, including the level of autonomy and decision-making authority.
- o **Work-life balance:** This refers to the balance between work responsibilities and personal or family life, including flexible work arrangements and time off policies. (Bruyère and Colella 2022, p.270).

2. Defining an Autism Friendly Work Environment

An autism-friendly work environment is one that actively removes barriers—both visible and invisible—that may prevent autistic employees from thriving. Rather than expecting autistic individuals

to adapt to traditional workplace norms, this type of environment is designed to adapt to individual needs, recognising that success and comfort may look different from person to person.

Autism is a spectrum, and experiences vary widely. Still, many autistic people face common challenges at work related to sensory sensitivity, communication differences, and social expectations. Bright lights, background noise, unpredictable routines, and vague communication can all lead to discomfort, stress, or reduced productivity. While these factors may seem minor to neurotypical employees, they can become significant barriers to participation for autistic staff.

A truly inclusive workplace goes beyond equality—it practices equity. Equality means giving everyone the same support. Equity means giving each person the specific support they need to succeed. For autistic employees, this could include quiet break areas, written instructions, flexible schedules, or predictable routines.

Key features in the practice of an autism-friendly workplace includes more focus on:

1. **Sensory accommodations:** The work environment should be designed to minimise sensory overload, such as reducing background noise or providing sensory tools like noise-cancelling headphones or fidget toys.

2. **Clear communication:** Communication should be clear and direct, with an emphasis on written instructions or visual aids when possible.

3. **Flexibility:** Scheduling and work arrangements should be flexible to accommodate the individual needs of employees with autism, such as allowing for breaks when needed or offering work from home options.

4. **Routine:** Changes in schedules can be challenging for individuals with autism due to the importance of routine and predictability for many individuals on the autism spectrum. Some individuals with autism may become anxious or distressed when there are unexpected changes to their schedule or routine and may struggle to adjust to new expectations or activities.

5. **Supportive management:** Managers should be trained in how to support employees with autism, including recognising the signs of sensory overload and knowing how to provide accommodations.

6. **Inclusive culture:** The workplace culture should be inclusive and accepting of neurodiversity, with education and training provided to colleagues to help them understand and support individuals with autism.

Creating an autism-friendly workplace is not just about accessibility—it's about unlocking talent, increasing retention, and cultivating a respectful culture where everyone can do their best work. It benefits not only autistic employees but the entire organisation.

3. Sensory accommodations

In the fast-paced and often noisy world of hospitality, sensory overload can be a serious challenge for autistic employees. For many autistic individuals, sensory overload in the workplace can seriously impact performance and overall well-being. Loud noises, bright lights, strong smells, or crowded spaces may trigger anxiety, physical discomfort, or in severe cases, lead to meltdowns or shutdowns. That's why it's essential for managers to recognise the signs of sensory overload and offer reasonable accommodations.

While sensory sensitivities vary widely, this report focuses on three of the most common ones within the areas of: tactile (touch), auditory (sound) and visual (sight) processing.

3.1 Tactile Inclusion

Tactile sensitivity—an altered response to touch and texture—is a common but often overlooked challenge for many individuals on the autism spectrum. Tactile issues vary widely between individuals. Some are *hyper-responsive*, meaning they are overly sensitive to touch, while others are *hypo-responsive* and may not register physical sensations in a typical way.

Hyper-responsiveness (Over-sensitivity to touch)

A person with hyper-responsiveness may:

- Avoid or feel distressed by light touch
- Be irritated by certain fabrics or clothing tags
- Find normal physical contact—like handshakes—unpleasant or even painful
- React strongly to small injuries, like minor bruises or scratches
- Be resistant to wearing safety equipment or protective clothing due to discomfort

Hypo-responsiveness (Under-sensitivity to touch)

A person with hypo-responsiveness may:

- Frequently touch people or objects, sometimes in ways that seem socially inappropriate
- Seek out different textures or surfaces
- Show unusually high or low sensitivity to pain
- Be less aware of physical risks, increasing the chance of injury

Differences in how individuals process touch can influence not only comfort and concentration for the individual, but also affect workplace interactions, as discomfort with touch or being close to others may be misunderstood by colleagues and lead to confusion or tension.

3.1.1 Practical ways to support Tactile Needs

Employers and managers can make a big difference by understanding and accommodating these needs. Overall, these accommodations can be the first to consider for what an autistic employee might need:

Having open, one-on-one conversations to understand specific sensitivities and tailor accommodations based on the individual's role—such as adjusting uniform requirements or assigning tasks that avoid known discomforts.

Modifying roles or shifts when possible to reduce exposure to high-contact environments (e.g. placing someone in back-of-house tasks rather than front-of-house if preferred).

Providing access to quiet staff areas where employees can take sensory breaks if feeling overwhelmed, especially after busy service periods.

Avoiding unnecessary physical contact during communication (e.g. replacing handshakes with verbal greetings) and ensuring team norms are inclusive of different comfort levels.

Offering alternative uniform options made from softer, breathable, or tag-free materials that still meet brand standards but feel more comfortable for the employee.

3.2 Auditory inclusion

Many autistic individuals experience hypersensitivity to sound, meaning they may find everyday noises—like clinking dishes, loud voices, music, or even air conditioning—distracting, painful, or anxiety-inducing. Others may be under-responsive, having difficulty picking out important sounds from background noise or struggling to interpret spoken instructions in busy spaces.

Auditory Hyper-Responsiveness (Over-Responsive to Sound)

A person who is hyper-responsive may:

- Be easily distracted or overwhelmed by noise
- Dislike noisy appliances such as printers, air conditioners, or loud chatter
- Notice background sounds that others don't even register
- Frequently ask others to stop talking, singing, or making noise
- Create their own sounds or noises to block out other stimuli

Auditory Hypo-Responsiveness (Under-Responsive to Sound)

A person who is hypo-responsive may:

- Not react to verbal cues or even their own name being called
- Make noises or hum repeatedly for self-stimulation
- Appear to ignore sounds others find obvious or disruptive
- Enjoy or seek out loud environments or loud music
- Need repeated verbal directions to understand or remember tasks

3.2.1 Practical ways to support Auditory Needs

In the fast-paced hospitality industry, it's not always possible to eliminate noise—but thoughtful adaptations can make a big difference. Managers can support employees with auditory sensitivities by:

Assigning quieter tasks or workstations when possible; such as office-based responsibilities, inventory checks, or food prep.

Providing visual or written alternatives to verbal instructions; e.g. task lists, checklists, text reminders.

Allowing the use of earplugs or headphones that reduce background noise.

Scheduling sensory breaks in quiet areas so employees can decompress after high-noise periods.

Minimising unnecessary noise in staff areas; such as loud music or overlapping announcements.

3.3 Visual inclusion

Bright or flickering lights, high-contrast patterns, cluttered workspaces, or rapidly changing visual input can overwhelm the senses and make it difficult to focus, navigate, or communicate.

Employees experiencing visual sensitivity may:

- Struggle to focus or complete tasks in highly stimulating spaces
- Be more easily distracted by visual movement in their peripheral vision
- Experience fatigue, headaches, or anxiety in certain lighting conditions

3.3.1 Practical ways to support Visual Needs

To accommodate visual sensitivities, managers can take the following practical steps:

- Provide task lighting or adjustable lighting where possible, especially in offices, prep areas, or staff zones
- Avoid flickering or harsh fluorescent lights, replacing them with softer, more natural lighting if possible
- Design quieter visual spaces, reducing visual clutter in break rooms, bulletin boards, and staff communications
- Use clear, minimal signage for instructions, schedules, and other information
- Allow for sunglasses, hats, or visors where appropriate to reduce glare or visual stress

3.4 Best overall practices for environmental accommodations

Overall, these accommodations can be the first to consider for what an autistic employee might need:

Private place to work: Some autistic employees will appreciate a private place to work where they can control things like light and noise.

Switch out the lights: Many people with autism are sensitive to fluorescent lights. The lights sometimes flicker and create a high-pitched buzsing sound that can trigger people with autism. These fluorescent lights can be switched with natural lighting and or natural spectrum LED lighting. Most schools utilise this lighting, and it can be a struggle for autistic students, exposed for hours each day.

Blinds for the windows: If your employee is next to a window, you can provide blinds so they can control how much light comes through. Light sensitivity can create eyestrain and headaches for those who are sensitive. Consider allowing them to wear sunglasses if blinds are not available.

Music on headphones: Some autistic employees may need extra sensory input. Listening to music on headphones could be a helpful solution.

Noice cancelling devices: Help reduce sensory overload from loud environments and support focus and comfort.

Sensory breaks: Your autistic employee may need small breaks so they can have a break from too many stimuli or seek extra stimuli when necessary.

Sensitivity from other employees: When feasible, other employees may be able to help out their autistic colleagues. For instance, encouraging other employees to avoid eating strong-smelling foods outside of the rest areas could be helpful (Greer 2021, p.20-21).

4. Inclusive Management Skills

An Autism friendly environment is not only about providing physical accommodations—it's also about rethinking leadership practices and creating an environment where autistic individuals can succeed on their own terms, not just survive in a system designed for others.

While sensory and communication needs are important, effective management goes deeper: it involves trust-building, individualised motivation, and making space for different forms of contribution and leadership. In the hospitality industry—where performance is often judged by quick communication, social ease, and multitasking—this shift in mindset is especially critical.

Here are some key differences between managing a team with autistic employees compared to a *traditional* workplace:

Autonomy Over Oversight

Many autistic employees thrive when given clear expectations and the freedom to work independently—without micromanagement or frequent verbal check-ins. Managers used to a more hands-on style may need to adjust their approach, shifting toward outcome-based supervision. Trust and autonomy often lead to greater productivity and lower stress for neurodivergent team members. Of course this does not mean not providing the necessary support needed.

Adapting Communication Styles

Autistic individuals may have communication preferences that differ from conventional workplace norms. Some may prefer written communication over verbal instructions, or need more time to process spoken information. Others may be more direct in their language, or interpret instructions literally.

Effective team management requires recognising and respecting these differences—not as deficits, but as valid forms of expression. Managers should adapt communication strategies accordingly, for example:

- Offering clear, direct instructions in writing
- Avoiding vague or overly figurative language
- Allowing time for responses and processing

Rethinking Feedback Culture

Autistic employees may interpret feedback differently—more literally or more intensely. Vague praise ("good job") or broad criticism ("you need to improve your attitude") can be confusing or demoralising. Instead, feedback should be:

- Specific ("You handled that guest complaint calmly and clearly.")
- Timely (not saved for later or delivered emotionally)
- Framed as support rather than correction

Managers should also avoid assuming that a lack of outward reaction signals disengagement. Autistic employees may process feedback internally or show appreciation in ways that don't align with neurotypical norms.

Flexibility in Roles and Strength-Based Assignment

Autistic team members may excel in specific areas—precision, pattern recognition, task focus—but struggle in others. Effective managers assign roles based not only on job descriptions, but on individual strengths, interests, and stress tolerances. For example:

- A team member with strong attention to detail might thrive in inventory or back-office work rather than front-of-house service.
- Someone with limited social energy might prefer early prep work or end-of-day wrap-ups instead of guest-facing roles during peak hours.

This isn't about limiting someone—it's about leveraging what they do best and respecting what depletes them.

Invisible Labor and Emotional Expectations

Workplaces often reward unspoken social behaviors: small talk, eye contact, smiling on cue. For autistic individuals, this kind of invisible emotional labor can be exhausting or inaccessible. Managers should recognise that emotional expression is not a universal indicator of engagement, competence, or attitude. A quiet, less expressive employee may be deeply invested in their role, but showing it differently. Misreading this can lead to unfair evaluations or missed advancement opportunities.

Rethinking Social Participation

Autistic employees may experience social interaction differently. Some may prefer structured or purposeful interactions rather than spontaneous small talk. Others may choose to engage less frequently in social settings such as team lunches or after-work events—not due to disinterest, but because of different energy levels or social processing styles.

Effective team management involves promoting a culture where reduced participation in social interaction is respected, rather than seen as a lack of engagement or "team spirit." It's important to understand that belonging doesn't always look the same for everyone. A person can feel deeply included and committed to their team without participating in the same ways as others.

5. Team Management Skills & Building Inclusive Teams

Inclusion benefits everyone. When autistic employees feel safe and accepted, they are more likely to contribute ideas, collaborate, and stay engaged. Diverse teams that support different ways of thinking tend to be more innovative, flexible, and effective. Inclusive cultures also improve employee retention, as team members feel respected and valued for who they are—not who they are expected to be.

An inclusive team culture is vital not only for the success of autistic employees, but for the health and effectiveness of the team as a whole. Employers and coworkers play a key role in creating an environment where autistic individuals feel respected, supported, and able to thrive. This also lays the foundation for welcoming future neurodivergent employees.

5.2 Why Training on Inclusion in the Team Matters

Inclusion isn't just about policy—it's about shifting team mindsets. Neurotypical employees often benefit from dedicated training that explains the basics of autism and how neurodivergence may

appear in the workplace. These sessions can be engaging, practical, and deeply impactful if they go beyond surface-level awareness.

Crucially, inclusion doesn't mean treating everyone the same. It means ensuring that all employees—regardless of communication style, sensory profile, or social preferences—have equal access to success and a genuine sense of belonging.

5.2.1 Autism related bullying in workplaces

Research suggest that bullying and harassment are common experiences for individuals with autism in the workplace. However, the exact prevalence of bullying towards autistic employees is difficult to estimate due to the complex and often hidden nature of bullying behaviour.

A 2018 survey by the National Autistic Society in the UK found that 79% of autistic adults surveyed reported experiencing anxiety in the workplace, with 42% reporting that this anxiety was due to social interaction difficulties. Furthermore, 75% of respondents reported experiencing isolation or exclusion at work, while 58% reported experiencing harassment or bullying.

Another study published in the Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders in 2018 found that autistic employees were more likely to experience bullying and harassment compared to non-autistic employees. The study found that 69% of autistic participants reported experiencing workplace bullying and harassment, compared to 52% of non-autistic participants.

The reasons for the high prevalence of bullying towards autistic employees are complex and can be influenced by a range of factors, including a lack of awareness and understanding of autism in the workplace, communication difficulties, social isolation, and workplace culture. It is important for employers and colleagues to take steps to promote inclusivity, respect, and understanding in the workplace and to provide support for employees with autism who may be at risk of bullying or harassment. For example, in Great Britain a study conducted in 2012 shows that about a third of autistic people have experienced in their workplaces bullying and various types of discrimination. As part of this same study, surveying people with 43% of Autism who stopped paid work for various reasons admitted that they had quit or fired as a result of mobbing.

5.3 Training and awareness sessions

Despite growing awareness of neurodiversity, many employers and colleagues still lack a basic understanding of autism—its challenges, as well as its strengths. This knowledge gap can lead to missed hiring opportunities, stereotypes, and workplace environments that unintentionally exclude or isolate

autistic employees (Breeding 2023, pp. 9, 31). Closing this gap begins with education and intentional team-building strategies.

Key topics may include (Greer 2021, p. 23):

- What autism is-and what it isn't
- Why neurodiversity benefits the workplace
- How communication and behavior may differ
- Strategies for respectful interaction
- Inclusive hiring practices
- How to support autistic colleagues in daily work
- How to create psychologically safe, stigma-free environments

Offering education is the first step to reduce misunderstandings and empowers teams to treat each other with empathy, not assumptions.

5.4 Inclusive team building activities

Since autistic people often face social challenges, an autism friendly environment also requires adjusting typical team-building approaches.

Inclusive team-building doesn't have to be complicated—but it should be intentional. Here are some examples of ways to consider:

Icebreaker Activities

Simple, structured icebreakers can help team members get to know one another in a low-pressure way. This is especially valuable for those who find spontaneous social interaction challenging.

Collaborative Problem-Solving

Working together to solve a shared challenge—like a service-related scenario or team puzzle—builds trust, encourages cooperation, and fosters a sense of shared purpose.

Group Brainstorming Sessions

Inclusive brainstorming allows all voices to be heard. Using written or visual formats (e.g. sticky notes or whiteboards) can make participation easier for those who prefer time to process or communicate non-verbally.

Team-Building Games

Structured games, such as hospitality-themed challenges or logic-based activities, can strengthen collaboration without requiring intense social interaction. Opt for games that allow different types of strengths to shine.

Diversity & Inclusion Workshops

Short, engaging training sessions on neurodiversity, communication differences, and inclusive teamwork help build empathy, reduce bias, and create a stronger team culture.

Social activities

When it comes to social bonding activities like after-hours drinks, noisy group games, or spontaneous small talk, they can unintentionally exclude autistic employees. Structuring alternatives that are more accessible, optional, or interest-based is key to ensuring that no one is left out.

Team-building for autistic and neurodivergent employees doesn't mean eliminating fun—it means making fun more accessible. Instead of relying on loud, unpredictable activities like after-work drinks or party games, inclusive teams can bond through structured, interest-based, and low-pressure events.

Try escape rooms, creative workshops, or team challenges with clear goals. Alcohol-free events are also a great to practice—they reduce social pressure and create a more calm environment for everyone in general.

5.4 Best overall practices for inclusive management and teams

Here are ten steps that can be taken to create an inclusive team in a workplace with an autistic individual:

- **Educate the team about autism.**
  Offer practical training to promote understanding, reduce stigma, and encourage empathy.

- **Create clear communication guidelines.** Establish clear guidelines for communication and ensure that all team members understand them. This may include using clear language, avoiding sarcasm or humour that may be misinterpreted, and using visual aids or written instructions when necessary.

- **Establish clear expectations and routines.** Establishing clear expectations and routines can help to reduce anxiety and promote productivity for autistic individuals.
- **Foster a culture of inclusivity.** Encourage team members to embrace differences and to support one another. Celebrate diversity and promote a sense of belonging among all team members.
- **Create opportunities for social interaction.** Provide opportunities for team members to socialise and ge**t to know one another in a structured, supportive environment.**
- **Provide training on effective team management.** Equip team leaders and managers with the skills and knowledge needed to effectively manage a diverse team, including those with autism.
- **Encourage open communication.** Encourage team members to communicate openly and honestly, and to seek support when needed.
- **Promote flexibility and creativity.** Consider flexible work arrangements and provide opportunities for team members to express their creativity and unique strengths.
- **Monitor progress and adjust as needed.** Regularly evaluate the effectiveness of inclusive practices and make adjustments as needed to promote the well-being and productivity of all team members.

6. Summary

The awareness and understanding of autism are essential in the hospitality sector. It is not only a personal gain for the autistic staff but also a big advantage for the company, its employees and its customers. Gaining knowledge of autism can bring awareness to factors that companies may have overseen before, making them evolve and adapt to modern times. Regarding the adaption of autism awareness in environment management especially the sensory needs of autistic staff are important to address. In this matter, workplaces can take steps to provide accommodations and support that can help to promote success and comfort in the workplace, while also promoting safety and compliance with workplace policies and regulations.

It's important to remember that every individual with autism is unique, and some may experience visual hyposensitivity differently than others. Employers and coworkers can help by providing accommodations and support that meet the individual's specific needs and help them to succeed in the workplace.

Don't be afraid of seeking outside support: Consider partnering with a disability or autism support organisation to get additional guidance and support in providing accommodations and supporting individuals with sensory processing issues in the workplace.

7. References

BREEDING, T. 2023. Breaking the Mold: Empowering Autistic Adults in the Workplace [Kindle]. Independently published.

BRUYÈRE, S.M. AND COLELLA A. 2022. Neurodiversity in the Workplace: Interests, Issues, and Opportunities (SIOP Organisational Frontiers Series) [Kindle]. Routledge.

GREER, D.R. 2021. A Guide to Autism in the Workplace [Kindle]. Independently published.

ORGANISATION FOR AUTISM RESEARCH, HIRE AUTISM. 2022. The Autism-Friendly Workplace [online]. Available from: https://www.hireautism.org/resource-center/the-autism-friendly-workplace/ [accessed 28 February 2023]

SHER, B. 2016. Everyday Games for Sensory Processing Disorder: 100 Playful Activities to Empower Children with Sensory Differences [Kindle]. Althea Press.