

Responsible Marketing

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A Talent

# DMA Talent: Autism Employer Guide

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# / Addressing Diversity in the Workplace

The neurodiverse community is underrepresented in most industry sectors across the UK, including the data and marketing industry – the Data & Marketing Association (DMA) want to help change that. There is a vast pool of talented individuals whose skills, expertise and unique insights are not being utilised.

A [poll conducted by the CIPD](#) in 2018 found that just 10% of HR professionals in the UK considered neurodiversity in their organisation's people management practices. Alarming, 72% said neurodiversity was not included. Given around 10% of the UK population is neurodivergent in some way, more needs to be done to improve this situation.

People with autism, a neurodevelopmental condition, experience a significant amount of social exclusion and have very poor rates of employment. According to the [National Autistic Society](#), there are around 700,000 people on the autism spectrum in the UK and just 16% of autistic adults are in full-time, paid employment. Over three quarters (77%) of those who are unemployed say they want to work.

If we want to strive to have the best people in the right roles, it's time that we work together to encourage, support and develop the career opportunities for everyone in our community.

DMA Talent's goal is to attract the next generation of fresh thinkers into the data and marketing industry by raising awareness and showcasing the sector's inspiring and dynamic range of career opportunities. We nurture aspiring data and marketing professionals by providing the roadmap, skills and connections to kick-start their professional journey.

There is growing demand within the data and marketing industry, and the wider professional community, for recruitment and employment initiatives that help people with neurodevelopmental conditions to seek and maintain employment.

Over the past 18 months, DMA Talent's Neurodiversity Initiative has worked with experts, brands and leading industry figures, some with neurodevelopmental conditions themselves, to define best practice and develop a forum where businesses can discuss neurodiversity.

One of the main aims has been to help organisations become more neurodiverse-friendly by offering recommendations and guidance on reasonable adjustments they can make to recruitment procedures and working environments.

Another key motivation of the initiative has been to raise awareness of the low employment rates experienced by neurodiverse individuals and inspire individuals and businesses to find ways to help increase them.

Using expert insights, case studies and best practice, this new guidance will help employers to understand autism and its potential to diversify and expand the pool of talent available to them. We will provide comprehensive guidance and recommendations on reasonable adjustments that employers can make to recruitment processes, the workplace environment, support networks, and most importantly, how to treat employees as individuals.

**Kate Burnett**

General Manager, DMA Talent

# / Definitions and Terminology

## What is Neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity is a term which is essentially used to describe people who think differently to the majority, and is often used in relation to neurodevelopmental conditions including autism, attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia and Tourette syndrome.

A typical diagnosis of a neurodevelopmental condition/s is made by assessing people to see if they match a negative set of criteria, symptoms or difficulties – however the neurodiversity movement instead focuses on strengths and skills. The movement aims to promote and recognise the significant role neurodivergent people already play in society, and help ensure people have equal opportunities to gain and retain meaningful employment.

There is consensus among academics and experts that there have been a number of neurodivergent individuals throughout history that have made remarkable breakthroughs in science, mathematics, art and music. For example, many people believe people such as Albert Einstein and Charles Darwin would likely have been considered to be on the autism spectrum.

In today's society, there is increasing recognition of the unique skills 'people who think differently' possess, especially in relation to problem solving tasks. For example, many autistic people are very logical thinkers and have excellent attention to detail, and many people with ADHD and dyslexia are hugely creative and bring a different perspective when generating ideas or in a design phase. All of which can be a huge asset in the workplace.

The Equality Act 2010 made it a legal requirement for employers to make 'reasonable adjustments' for people with disabilities, an area which neurodiversity falls under. The recommendations within this guide will help employers work towards providing equal opportunities for an often overlooked part of our community.

## What is Autism?

Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition affecting how a person communicates, interacts with and relates to other people. The latest prevalence studies of autism indicate that 1.1% of the population in the UK may be on the autism spectrum, which roughly equates to just over 700,000 people. This estimate is derived from the 1.1% prevalence rate applied to the 2011 UK census figures.

Autism is characterised and diagnosed by a person having lifelong, pervasive difficulties with:

- Social communication and interaction
- Processing non-verbal communication e.g. body language, eye contact, facial expressions
- Understanding and interpreting thoughts, feelings, and intentions of others
- Unstructured social interaction, especially in group environments
- Forming and maintaining reciprocal social relationships
- Having restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests and activities
- Strong preference for routine, consistency and predictability
- Intense, narrow interests (many people have significant knowledge or skills related to their area of interest)

Asperger syndrome is a form of autism, essentially it is someone with autism that has an average or above average IQ. Due to changes in diagnostic criteria, where the sub-classifications of autism were replaced by a single, overarching diagnosis of an 'Autism Spectrum Disorder', Asperger syndrome is no longer used as a diagnostic category. Some medical professionals may still use this term, as certain people will have had a historical diagnosis.

Autism is **not** a learning disability, or a mental health problem.

However, there are higher rates of mental health difficulties in this community, such as anxiety and depression, when compared to the general population. Contributing factors could include experiencing social exclusion, feeling different to other people, being misunderstood, and not feeling represented.

A high percentage of autistic people also experience sensory processing differences. There are eight senses in the body:

- Taste
- Touch
- Sight
- Hearing
- Smell
- Vestibular (balance)
- Proprioception (body positioning)
- Interoception (internal self-monitoring of hunger, thirst, body temperature)

Many autistic people experience hyper (over) or hypo (under) sensitivity, in one or multiple senses. This can contribute to increased levels of anxiety, often the physical environment being a significant factor.

Even though there has been increasing recognition of the value and skills someone with autism can bring to an organisation, more needs to be done to help employers understand what they can do to support their workforce.



“Neurodiverse people are an untapped resource, particularly unemployed and underemployed autistic individuals, and only one in four are currently in employment. The causes are often complex but include a lack of employer information, understanding and experience with autism. Outdated and incorrect perceptions of Autism Spectrum Conditions (ASC) tend to focus on the ‘disability’ rather than ‘ability’, and too often we fail to recognise the strengths and talents of this unique and specialised group, leading to misconceptions about capabilities and employability.”

**Adam O’Loughlin,**  
Head of Policy, National Police Autism Association (NPAA)

# / Seeking an Autism Diagnosis

Despite the recent increase in autism diagnostic rates, it is likely that many adults will not have a formal diagnosis due to a lack of awareness and limited access to assessment services.

Seeking a diagnosis is a personal choice. Some people who have received one often find it hugely beneficial and describe feeling like they understand themselves better, including challenges and strengths. Others may feel like they do not need or want a formal diagnosis.

Many people relate to certain aspects or characteristics of autism, but would not necessarily meet formal diagnostic criteria. In order to meet these criteria, people must show evidence of experiencing a number of specific, pervasive difficulties over the course of their life, which have a profound impact on their functioning.

**Whether someone has a formal diagnosis or not, it is important to provide appropriate support in order for them to perform to the best of their abilities. A person shouldn't need a formal diagnosis to be supported effectively in the workplace.**

Employers should:

- Ensure that staff have the information and tools in place to make informed decisions
- Know who to contact if they would like to access a diagnostic assessment
- Give reassurance that there will be no stigma or discrimination if a positive diagnosis is given
- Encourage open and honest dialogue to agree how best to support staff

If you think someone may be autistic, but don't know how to approach them and think it would be beneficial to discuss, do this sensitively and carefully. Provide factual information rather than just your opinion, ask the person if they can relate to it, and offer them advice on next steps if they wish to be referred for assessment or request additional information.

Be aware that the person could have a negative stereotype or understanding of autism, so present information in a balanced way that doesn't just focus on notable difficulties, but also includes their associated strengths.

Diagnostic and post-diagnostic support services vary in different parts of the UK. If you know someone who requires a referral for autism assessment, signpost them to their GP who should be able to provide local service information and create a referral.





“Having access to a timely, high quality assessment and post-diagnostic support is crucial for many autistic people. This can lead to greater self-understanding, developing strategies to overcome difficulties, help people recognise strengths, and can increase the likelihood of gaining or retaining meaningful employment.”

**Dr Ian Ensum**

Consultant Psychologist & Clinical Lead, Bristol Autism Spectrum Service,  
Avon and Wiltshire Partnership NHS Trust

# / Qualities Associated with Autistic People

For years autism has been hugely misunderstood, often described in a very narrowly defined way as profoundly disabling, rare and a childhood condition. It was accompanied by a huge amount of stigma and stereotype. We now finally recognise that autism is a spectrum condition, with just as much diversity and the same range of intelligence and abilities as everybody else.

Many autistic people use intelligence over social intuition, and have developed strategies to navigate social situations and relationships. However articulate or intelligent someone is, never underestimate how much extra processing they might be doing in a social interaction. Processing non-verbal communication such as eye contact, facial expressions, and body language by rationale can be exhausting and complex.

Autistic people can have numerous qualities that make them valuable colleagues including:

- Strong detail focus
- Logical/analytical thinking
- Problem solving skills
- Ability to concentrate for long periods of time
- Creativity
- Honesty
- Loyalty
- Different perspective
- Visual thinking

While people may share certain characteristics with each other, it is important to recognise that everyone is different.



“Autistic people have been misunderstood and socially excluded for far too long. We must change the way we think about autism, have a lot more respect for the significant role autistic people have in society, and recognise the skills, strengths, honesty, and integrity that this exceptional group of people bring to the workplace and our community.”

**Matthew Trerise**

Autism & Neurodiversity Consultant, Training & Liaison Lead for Bristol Autism Spectrum Service & Co-author of the DMA Talent: Autism Employer Guide

# / Simple Ways to Modify the Recruitment Process

## Job Advertisements

A job advertisement is essential for any organisation trying to recruit. Organisations must be careful not to fall into a common trap where they are essentially asking for a one-size-fits-all employee who is a generalist. Try not to put applicants off by asking for skills and experience that just aren't required or relevant for the actual job role. A person with autism, for example, may have difficulty with open, unstructured discussion in meetings or groups, but they could be ideal for a role that involves deep analysis and problem solving.

Businesses should clearly state that they encourage applications from all candidates with the right experience and qualifications. They should also encourage individuals to request reasonable adjustments that will help them to perform to the best of their abilities and make them feel more comfortable. If you want to be an attractive employer to neurodivergent candidates, make it known that the organisation have neurodiversity policies and training in place, and give assurances of a supportive and inclusive workplace.

It should always come down to how well the applicant can do the job that you are recruiting for. Any accidental, unconscious bias or miscommunication will only limit the talent pool – that could include the most promising candidates.

## Work Trials and Skills Testing

Some employers find that informal interviews combined with a work trial, or skills testing is a better way of assessing a candidate's compatibility than a formal interview. This approach may also help if you think that an autistic person is likely to do well in the job but are unsure about how well they will manage in the workplace environment.

## Interviews – Before, During and After

Making reasonable adjustments during an interview could be essential to allow autistic candidates to portray their skills and competencies to their full potential. This will help to ensure that you are making an informed choice about who to recruit. It's important to realise that asking each applicant exactly the same question in the same way does not always equate to equal opportunity nor does it necessarily allow you to compare candidates effectively.

Interviews rely heavily on social and communication skills. Autistic candidates may struggle to 'sell themselves', even if they have the right skills. In particular, they might find it difficult to:

- Understand body language, facial expressions, and maintain appropriate eye contact
- Know how to start and maintain conversations
- Judge how much information to give – especially if questions are open ended
- Think in abstract ways or consider hypothetical scenarios
- Varying their tone of voice and finding the appropriate level of formality

### Things to consider before the interview:

#### Sensory distractions

- What might be going on in or around your building on the day of the interview that could increase anxiety/act as a distraction? Are there any scheduled fire alarms? Are there any events going on? Do you have building work going on outside? It can be extremely helpful to provide as much information as possible to eliminate surprises that could induce anxiety.
- Encourage the candidate to tell you if there are things that distract them, or any environmental changes required. I.e. for people with sensory differences such as acute hearing, 'do you need the ticking clock removed?'

### Things to consider during the interview:

#### Literal questions and specific examples

- When building rapport, find out the person's interests and avoid 'small talk'
- Avoid general questions i.e. 'can you tell me a bit about yourself?' or 'where do you see yourself in 5 years' time?'
- Avoid hypothetical 'what would you do if?' questions. Instead, ask the candidate to give specific examples of relevant situations they have experienced in the past
- Being aware that the candidate may interpret language literally e.g. asking, 'How did you find your last job?' may result in an answer of 'I looked on the map' or 'I looked in the paper and then sent off an application form'
- Giving the candidate questions in writing as many people are visual processors of information. Some people have difficulty retaining verbal information especially when experiencing anxiety, which is likely at a job interview

#### Clear signals and prompts

- Telling the candidate if they are talking too much, e.g. 'thank you, you've told us enough about that now, and I'd like to ask you another question' – they may find it difficult to know how much information to provide, or pick up on your non-verbal cues if you try and interject
- Verbally prompting the candidate if they have not given sufficient information

## Body language

- Not judging the candidate on eye contact, this is hugely overwhelming and uncomfortable for many people with autism. They may process language more effectively by not maintaining eye contact – remember this doesn't mean they are disinterested or not paying attention!
- Allowing and encouraging people to use any strategies they have in place to manage anxiety

## Interview Supporters

If you do decide to use a formal interview process, consider inviting a 'supporter' to accompany the person. They could act as an intermediary to assist with communication between the interviewer and the candidate. The supporter should not answer on behalf of the person, but may help by rewording any unclear questions for the candidate. This will help them to understand exactly what the interviewer wants, or help the interviewer to communicate effectively with the interviewee.

These considerations and changes will not only stand to benefit the candidate, but will also help employers understand what the candidate has to offer and how their skills could be best used. The anxiety someone may be experiencing could impact on their ability to participate in the interview effectively, but this does not mean they can't do the job itself.

## Preparation for the First Day

Reasonable adjustments for autistic people do not need to be complicated or expensive. Making a few simple changes can improve productivity and reduce anxiety and stress for many employees. Access to Work can help with making reasonable adjustments in the workplace.

Further information on the Access to Work website: <https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work>

**Note:** If specific support is required in the workplace to address issues arising from the individual's condition, it must be under the terms of the Equality Act (2010) and be provided by the employer as a reasonable adjustment. Employers can apply to the government's Access to Work scheme to assist with any costs of this support.

## Advanced Preparation – Prior to the First Day

Implementing as many of these things in advance as possible should help reduce the anxiety someone could experience in the lead up to starting work. This will give them the best chance possible to commence employment effectively.

Prior to employment commencing it is important to deliver high quality training to line managers, colleagues and HR personnel.

### Line managers to provide in advance:

- An opportunity to visit the place where the new starter will be working, before their official first day, to familiarise themselves with the environment
- A timetable for the first day or even first week
- A map of the building/office, including a clear seating plan
- Assign a mentor/buddy or arrange support from a suitable colleague to be the 'go-to' person if the individual has any questions/issues
- Flexible working arrangements (where possible) e.g. if rush hour is a cause for anxiety then arrange flexible working hours

## First Day at Work

On the first day of employment it is important to provide:

- A brief introduction to any employee that they will be working with
- You might consider asking all employees to complete a profile of themselves including name, job title, likes and dislikes, and responsibilities. This also gives people the opportunity to disclose information that will benefit interaction with colleagues e.g. I am hard of hearing in my left ear so please try to direct speech to my right ear
- Directions and orientation around the workplace environment
- A clear explanation of any rules of the workplace (including unwritten social rules i.e. this person responds best to email), preferably in writing with an opportunity to discuss anything that is unclear or confusing

## Sensory Environment

While not everyone experiences sensory differences, many autistic people are acutely sensitive (hyper) or under sensitive (hypo) in one or multiple senses. An employee with autism will be more productive, and experience less work-related anxiety, when they can reduce the negative impact of their physical working environment.

Be aware of sensory differences and adverse sensory environments, e.g. open plan offices that have lots of background noise and lights. Consider using:

- Desk partitions and low lights in certain places
- Telephones that light up for an incoming call instead of ringing out loud
- Noise-cancelling headphones
- Flexible working hours
- Flexible work zones - having a quiet space/project zone to work in may increase productivity of all staff

# / Managing Someone with Autism in the Workplace

## Staff and Structure

Most employees benefit from a structured working environment. Therefore, it would be beneficial to consider:

- Using shared timetables, calendars, and lists as visual reminders
- Breaking down large tasks into small, manageable tasks – with clear deadlines
- Try to limit approaching staff with surprise questions, try to email in advance
- Ensure staff know how often they should take breaks and where they can go to relax

The suggestions above are important to consider because many people with autism have high attention to detail, interpret language literally and will seek to complete tasks to perfection.

## Feedback and Appraisal

- Give direct, constructive and regular feedback. If a problem occurs, it is important that it is addressed at the time - not in an appraisal three months later
- Ensure that ongoing, proactive support from HR is booked in regularly and not used as a last resort

## Delegation and Instructions

- Be clear, concise, specific and include information like how long a task should take and the quality expected in the outcome of a task
- Provide instructions in writing or send via email – many people with autism are visual processors of information and find it difficult to retain verbal information
- Do not set a task during an unrelated social conversation as people with autism will find it difficult to distinguish
- Avoid setting multiple tasks where possible, but if you do, write down a clear order of priority where the tasks are set



## Career Development

It isn't uncommon for autistic people in the workplace to describe feeling like they are being held back for promotion, or underestimated when being considered for taking on increased responsibilities. It is essential to ensure that there is career progression and equal development opportunities for all staff – it can simply be a case of putting together a plan that identifies and targets an individual's strengths.

For example, while many people are very capable of line managing other employees, this does not suit everyone, and some would prefer to avoid line management altogether.

Consider increased responsibility in a more technical or advisory capacity, or even project management. Either way, it is imperative to match salaries for senior technical or managerial roles. This will diversify and encourage specialism across the workforce which could be hugely advantageous to an organisation.

## Assistive Technology - How can it Help?

Assistive technology is any item, piece of equipment, software, or system that is used to increase, maintain, or improve the functional capabilities of an individual/s.

These devices can help people who have difficulty speaking, typing, remembering, seeing, hearing, learning, and walking – to name a few.

Assistive technology can be anything from lo-tech communication boards and wheelchairs, to high-tech specialist computers or smart phone apps.

In many cases, this technology has generally been developed and provided for people with disabilities, but many individuals could benefit from using assistive technology in the workplace at some point in their career, which could even lead to increased productivity and less work-related stress.

# / Support Networks

## Ongoing Staff Support

It is important to provide ongoing support to all staff for their mental and physical wellbeing, ensuring employees feel included in social aspects of the workplace. It can be hugely beneficial to get to know staff, what they enjoy or even dislike about their role, or even their hobbies and interests. This can be a key communication tool for making the workplace more inclusive, increasing staff loyalty, and even increase attendance to work-related social events.

Many autistic people have developed effective strategies to overcome their specific challenges, although it is likely that a person's needs will change over the course of their lifetime. Employers should never assume that something a person experiences or feels is purely related to their autism; anxiety and depression are often overlooked when a person has an autism diagnosis. Both of which can be managed effectively if recognised.

An employee may require additional support if they encounter unprecedented challenges or a change in their lifestyle. It is important to recognise symptoms of increasing struggles with mental health, and signpost staff to appropriate services or their GP. Unexpected changes to personal circumstances or loss to a loved one can happen to anyone so it is essential to have a support network in place for staff to communicate concerns.

## Peer Support

If there are multiple people who identify as neurodiverse in the workplace it is important to encourage and provide resources for peer support systems to be established. Many people find it more beneficial to speak with neurodiverse peers, rather than HR professionals, line managers or colleagues who do not experience the world in the same way.

It can be helpful to staff to have a platform to share strategies and experiences with others. In addition, a neurodiversity network in the workplace can help i.e. an intranet information hub, or even encouraging staff to undertake awareness raising training.

This could be done through:

- Electronic communication i.e. email
- Group meetings
- Attending external events and conferences e.g. The Future is ND events & Diverse Minds Conferences in London

# / Misunderstanding Autism in the Workplace

A man with autism working in a warehouse was sacked on his first day of employment, after his manager asked him to clean the warehouse floor.

When setting the task, the manager said “I want you to clean the floor, and I want to be able to see my face in it”. After four hours the manager returned to check progress and discovered the employee had only cleaned a small section. He was noticeably anxious while he continued to perform the task.

The manager was furious and thought the employee was ‘winding him up’. The manager expected the task to have already been completed and so he told him to stop. After a brief exchange of words, the employee was dismissed immediately due to him being on a probationary period and being seen as incapable of following instructions. The man with autism was hugely confused and distressed by this, as he was just following the literal instructions, exactly as they were given.

The main issue here was the way the task was communicated to the employee. If the manager had been more specific, and less metaphorical, then this situation could have been avoided. Retrospectively, the employee indicated that he thought the instruction seemed strange as it was a concrete floor. However, due to the anxiety he was experiencing on his first day of employment, he did not have the confidence at the time to ask for clearer instructions.

A clear case of how miscommunication can have severe implications, yet could have been easily preventable.



“The complexities of the English language and the use of colloquialisms can place autistic people at a significant disadvantage. Autistic people can find it hard to know how to start or end conversations and may exhibit other behaviours that seem unusual, such as appearing to be isolated or in their own world, avoiding eye contact, or appearing to be anxious, particularly in unexpected or unusual situations.”

“It’s really important to show autistic people understanding and patience, and to be really clear about expectations and duties, as they may experience challenges with social interaction and communication. There’s plenty of evidence to show that even small changes to a workplace or communication style can make a big difference to the working environment, making it more autism-friendly and something that all employees stand to benefit from.”

**Adam O’Loughlin**

Head of Policy, National Police Autism Association (NPAA)

# / Employee Perspective

## How has Autism Awareness Changed?

Ed Downham, Senior ETL Developer at Direct Line Group's Data Team, was diagnosed with autism at a young age. After experiencing a number of challenges in the workplace, he has become an autism awareness advocate for Direct Line Group. He is now a valued member of the neurodiversity strand of their 'Diversity Network Alliance' – tasked with promoting diversity and equal opportunities within the company.

Over 20 years ago, Ed Downham joined Direct Line Group in their Customer Contact Centre. He has witnessed a number of changes in his working life and to public perceptions of autism over the past 20 years, in terms of general awareness and understanding.

Ed has now found his niche in the professional world and both Direct Line Group and Ed have reaped the benefits. He now wants to pass on his experiences to help the next generation of neurodiverse individuals, so they too can understand their strengths to become as passionate and knowledgeable as Ed has in their field of expertise, as well as finding a safe and supportive working environment.

### This is Ed's story

For me, neurodiversity is all about tailoring preferences and environments to the individual, not the collective. Throughout my professional career, I have seen a transition where organisations and, more importantly, people have started to accept that not everyone is the same.

More recently, campaigns like [DMA Talent's Neurodiversity Initiative](#) are helping people to see that what makes us unique from one another is a strength, not a weakness. What differentiates between the two is placing people in the right environment, giving them the support they need to thrive. I am fortunate enough to now be in a position where I can say I have found that, but this most certainly wasn't always the case, and still isn't for many today.

When I first applied to work for Direct Line Group over 20 years ago, I was entered into a four-stage recruitment process for a position in the call centre. As with a lot of recruitment processes back then, even to this day sadly, I strongly believe that many of the tasks asked of us were not relevant to the role and would not help someone like me to thrive. For example, the phone interview asked a series of questions that were rather long-winded and didn't necessarily link to the stated day-to-day activities. Not only is this a challenge for anyone being recruited, it is especially difficult if you have autism. I tend to struggle with conversations where someone isn't being direct and transparent with what they are asking of me.

Another example comes from the next task, the assessment day. We were required to get into groups for this and enter into various discussions – guided by pre-determined questions. Not only were these group exercises not relevant to the role, the questions weren't particularly beneficial to our learning of what would be expected of us if we were to be successful. I asked myself, "What is the point of all of this?"

They then followed up with a spelling test and competency-based interview. I felt that the interview was basically telling me – 'here are our values, do you fit in with us?' It was safe to say that when I received my feedback from the process I knew what they were going to say. In terms of the group task, I was told that I had weaknesses in understanding conversation cues and that I was strongly opinionated, sometimes without listening to others. To this day, I struggle with this because I don't process subliminal signals like others. This isn't me being arrogant or ignorant, I just don't interpret cues as perhaps is expected by societal norms and expectations.

In the interview, I also struggled with small talk, had very little eye contact and couldn't really process facial expressions. It's not that I can't understand emotions or have an interest in others; it is just that I need people to be direct and clear about what they want from me – if I see the purpose of something, I can then get behind it! Back then, no-one would have even thought about whether this was best practice in terms of neurodiversity.

Interestingly, I had some hidden strengths that they picked up on which may now be expected with someone with autism. I scored very highly on the spelling test, for example, as we were expected to remember names of places and find them on a map. Both my memory retention and attention to detail are beneficial with tasks that I am engaged with. I have an ability to see things that others may not because I will not take things for granted in terms of expectations.

I treat everything as something that is alien to me and so fixate on them, as if I had never seen them before. This is great for tasks in analytics and data processing as I will often spot patterns, anomalies and differences that others perhaps may not. This has been hugely beneficial to the Data team at Direct Line Group that I now work in, as I have become a mentor and source of guidance for many members of the team from a technical perspective.

I was offered the role in the contact centre but soon realised that it wasn't for me and have moved across various departments within Direct Line Group – from resource planning to analytics. What may not be common knowledge is that many people with autism are incredibly loyal. The Group showed faith in me back then, and I am now confident that I have paid this back in abundance with my work over the past 20 years.

I am fortunate enough to have found my niche in the professional world – data programming. Direct Line Group have really helped me here and I want to return the favour for future generations, so they don't engage with the same struggles and, at times, difficult periods of life that I had because I wasn't the same as everyone else in ways that were expected of me.

I give full credit to some of the management at Direct Line Group, as they realised that they needed to understand best practice better in terms of awareness and knowledge, and so they attended [DMA Talent's Neurodiversity Initiative's training](#) back in September 2018. There are a number of recommendations that the team have taken away from this training that I agree with. Many organisations would do well to think about some of these suggestions to become more neurodiverse friendly.

In terms of the recruitment process, it is important to ensure all candidates are well briefed before interviews. The recruiter should try to ensure there are no major surprises throughout the process – it can really help to give the interviewee the option to attend the location where the interview will take place in advance, so they feel comfortable when the interview takes place. For roles that do not require group discussion, remove this from the process as these environments can be rather uncomfortable for some neurodiverse people.

It is essential to tailor the candidate tasks to the job at hand, while being conscious of how to get the best from someone. For interviews, on-the-spot questioning isn't necessarily always the most productive way to assess a person's initiative. Someone with an autism spectrum condition (ASC) may benefit from taking a task away and analysing it in greater detail to look at the overall picture- then provide their thoughts at a later date.

There are a number of working practices and conditions that should be considered, with some becoming more common practice. Working from home and flexibility in working hours have really helped me in recent years, as there may be days where I am perfectly capable of doing my job, just not in a busy office.

Something I'd like to see more of, which Matthew Trerise also recommends in his training, is flexible working zones. Working zones may be separated for 'creative' group work and 'quiet' project work, where analytical tasks can be focused on, noise is minimal and things like lighting don't need to be so intrusive. Not everyone operates best in the same conditions and so you can learn a lot about your employee or colleague from observing where they prefer to operate.

Clearer communication between employees is a fundamental change that needs to improve. It can be very helpful for someone with autism, for example, to be clear what you are asking of them – let them know exactly what you need from them and when. Additionally, asking in advance so they aren't approached with challenging questions unexpectedly. Keeping to deadlines, where possible, is also helpful, as someone like me is very habitual and systematic so I really appreciate working to pre-agreed timings.

Clearly, it shouldn't be expected of line managers, senior decision makers and HR teams to be experts on neurodiversity, as there is limited research, best practice and training for this, although this is rapidly changing. That is why it is so beneficial to people with associated conditions of neurodiversity that staff attend training programmes like [DMA Talent's Neurodiversity Initiative](#). They are helping to define best practice around this by working with subject matter experts. There is growing acknowledgement amongst the professional world that it is about catering for the individual, not what is convenient and suitable for the masses. It is now time to act on this.

# / Case Study: Red Brick Road – An Integrated Creative Agency



**“Hiring an autistic employee is one of the best things we have ever done as an organisation”**

Matt Davis, Co-owner & Executive Creative Director at Red Brick Road discusses the huge range of benefits, as well as the initial challenges, that hiring someone with autism presented. His colleague, Chris Cooper, was struggling to kick-start a career due to a lack of opportunities related to his autism. Together, they agreed for Chris to trial a work experience initiative, which was not only mutually rewarding, but Chris hasn't looked back since.

In my opinion, autism has to be one of the most misunderstood and underrepresented conditions out there. Not only is there a lack of understanding about the strengths and weaknesses associated with it, but the individuals it directly affects rarely have the confidence or platform to articulate their experiences and challenges, especially in terms of gaining and retaining employment.

There is a growing misconception that we should treat neurodevelopmental conditions as a collective, when really we should be looking at the individual. There is a well-known saying that I feel perfectly summarises this by Dr. Stephen Shore, “If you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism.”

## What led to Chris joining Red Brick Road?

My personal journey helped to influence this, as my son, Isaac, was diagnosed with autism at a young age, which not only gave me a solid grounding in neurodiversity awareness, it led to me taking initiative within professional aspects of my life. It gave me a mindfulness that perhaps many other business owners may not have had the opportunity to gain, which is that the creative industries of the future will excel by diversifying the talent pool, ensuring we employ the right people for the right roles.

A couple of years back, we were going through a period of expansion at the agency. I thought I could use my connections at the charities Scope and Ambitious about Autism to see if there were any people they were working with who would like work experience in the data and marketing industry.



They suggested Chris Cooper to me. Not only was he very able, but extremely passionate about kick-starting a career where he could flourish. To me, this just made sense.

I think this sort of journey starts with someone in an organisation championing diversity, which can even be someone with a personal connection. There are many people who have been affected by autism in their personal lives, whether that be a relative, friend or past colleague who would stand to benefit from better awareness and understanding.

### **Autism has challenges in the workplace, but there are many practical solutions**

There were a few key measures we implemented ahead of Chris' start date that I would certainly recommend. Each measure really helped to improve the experience for everyone at the agency:

- Chris was paired up with a 'buddy' (future colleague) in the agency and they met ahead of the start date. The buddy would be there to talk about any challenges or concerns in a more casual, informal way.
- All staff attended an in-house autism training workshop, which I think is essential for any organisation regardless if a new employee may be autistic. It really helped introduce staff buy-in and tolerance to one another, which are essential for making diversity projects a success.
- 'Quiet' and 'Creative' working zones – this is something that I think every business must introduce as everyone has their preference and work better in certain environments. Chris preferred to work in a quieter zone where noise and lighting are minimal.
- Tone of voice - be direct with autistic staff but compassionate – logical questions are the best way forward as metaphors tend to cause further confusion.

When Chris started, he did have difficulties with his social skills and integration, but not only did he approach us stating that he felt he needed to improve this, he proactively worked with us to find solutions to his challenges with socialising.

People like Chris can appear to almost learn through algorithms and patterns of behaviour. So by first observing staff and their conversations, he found it easier to find common ground and integrate. The autism workshop helped his colleagues to understand his way of communicating as being direct and honest, but rather than finding it insulting, we all found this refreshing. Chris was informed directly that staff would be tolerant and understanding so he really need not worry, and so that previous sense of social isolation soon deteriorated.

## Chris has been a huge asset to Red Brick Road

Chris has become very sociable, essentially the 'social glue' that ties different divisions together. Chris's day-to-day work transcends across our Finance and Creative teams and so he has really helped to enhance communication between these departments. In addition, Chris is incredibly punctual, loyal, focused, and efficient. His work on internal communications and finance transactions certainly demonstrates excellent accuracy and efficiency. He also has a highly creative approach to his work, often recommending solutions that others may not have thought about.

On a personal note, he has genuinely contributed to the general well-being of the organisation. His employment has helped introduce a way of thinking that encourages compassion and a willingness to give one another more time. On a side note, Chris has also been a revelation on our Friday 4pm bar socials and is quite the bar man.

To summarise, I believe that businesses need to view the benefits of encouraging autism awareness in terms of a hybrid approach. It will inspire employee compassion, introduce positive cultural changes, and can help develop commercial gains for the business.

Hiring an autistic employee is one of the best things we have ever done as an organisation, and perhaps Chris sums up best why companies should be more proactive:

"For me, being seen as unemployed and disabled affected my mental health. It made me feel useless in society but at the same time I knew I had something genuine to offer, I just didn't know where I could display my strengths. Every person has their own way of dealing with society's expectations but it can be so helpful to show compassion to their problems, but most importantly, help them to showcase their talents and work on their weaknesses.

As an autistic person who has recently become employed, it's made me believe that I can have a normal life. Yes I have things to work on, like developing my social skills, but who can say they are the finished article?"

# / Notes on Authors

**Matthew Trerise**

Autism & Neurodiversity Consultant, Training & Liaison Lead  
for Bristol Autism Spectrum Service

Matthew Trerise has supported people with autism for over fifteen years in a wide range of settings ranging from residential care homes and hospitals, to the more general community, helping them to obtain and maintain employment. Since 2009, when the service was first commissioned, he has been the Training & Liaison Lead for an NHS specialist autism diagnostic service in Bristol for adults. Offering specialist training and consultation to professionals working across the care pathway, and taking a leading role in developing post- diagnostic support services for adults with autism. He has advised many employers, including HMRC, and Avon & Somerset Police, on changes they should make to be more autism and neurodiverse friendly in the workplace.

**Kate Burnett**

General Manager, DMA Talent

Kate's mission, alongside the DMA Talent team, is to inspire young people to join the growing data and marketing industry by increasing awareness and creating clear career pathways. She is passionate about educating and enabling the next generation of marketing talent with the skills they need to succeed.

**James Davis**

Insights & PR Manager, Data & Marketing Association

**Special Mentions****Dr Ian Ensum**

Consultant Psychologist & Clinical Lead, Bristol Autism Spectrum Service,  
Avon and Wiltshire Partnership NHS Trust

**Adam O'Loughlin**

Head of Policy, National Police Autism Association (NPAA)

**National Autistic Society****Matt Davis**

Executive Creative Director, Red Brick Road

**Chris Cooper**

Account Assistant and Creative, Red Brick Road

**Wayne Deakin**

Executive Creative Director, Huge (EMEA)

**Ed Downham**

Senior ETL Developer, Direct Line Group

# / Further Information & Reading

To find out more information about this guide or neurodiversity, visit:

- DMA Talent's Neurodiversity Initiative: [www.dma.org.uk/article/dma-talent-neurodiversity-initiative-1](http://www.dma.org.uk/article/dma-talent-neurodiversity-initiative-1)
- Matthew Trerise Autism Training & Consultancy: [www.matthewtrerise.com](http://www.matthewtrerise.com)
- National Autistic Society: [www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk)  
[www.autism.org.uk/professionals/employers](http://www.autism.org.uk/professionals/employers)
- HOK, a design and planning firm, recently produced a report offering insights and guidance about neurodiversity in the workplace to gain a competitive advantage: [www.hok.com/ideas/publications/hok-designing-a-neurodiverse-workplace](http://www.hok.com/ideas/publications/hok-designing-a-neurodiverse-workplace)
- Matt Davis publishes a blog discussing his personal experiences: [www.mysonisaac.net](http://www.mysonisaac.net)
- CIPD 2018 study: [www.cipd.co.uk/about/media/press/150218-neurodiversity](http://www.cipd.co.uk/about/media/press/150218-neurodiversity)
- Red Brick Road: [www.redbrickroad.com](http://www.redbrickroad.com)
- Mad World Summit: [www.madworldsummit.com](http://www.madworldsummit.com)
- Access to Work: [www.gov.uk/access-to-work](http://www.gov.uk/access-to-work)

# / About the DMA

The Data & Marketing Association (DMA) comprises the DMA, Institute of Data & Marketing (IDM) and DMA Talent.

We seek to guide and inspire industry leaders; to advance careers; and to nurture the next generation of aspiring marketers.

We champion the way things should be done, through a rich fusion of technology, diverse talent, creativity, and insight – underpinned by our [customer-focussed principles](#).

We set the standards marketers must meet in order to thrive, representing over 1,000 members drawn from the UK's data and marketing landscape.

By working responsibly, sustainably and creatively, together we will drive the data and marketing industry forward to meet the needs of people today and tomorrow.

[www.dma.org.uk](http://www.dma.org.uk)

## About DMA Talent

DMA Talent champions young people as the future of our industry.

Our goal is to attract a new generation of fresh thinkers by raising awareness and showcasing the sector's inspiring and dynamic range of career opportunities.

We nurture aspiring marketers by providing the roadmap, skills and connections to kick-start their professional journey, and by instilling our customer-first principles, we drive our industry forward in a responsible and sustainable way.

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[dma.org.uk/talent](https://dma.org.uk/talent)

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