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AUTISTIC EMPLOYEES: WORKPLACE BARRIERS AND SOLUTIONS FOR POSITIVE EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES

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Abstract

Introduction: *While advancements in neurodiversity initiatives in the workplace are notable, a persistent gap remains in effectively addressing the high unemployment and turnover rates among individuals with autism.* ***Objective:*** *This literature review focuses on the main challenges faced by autistic employees in the workplace and solutions either proposed or enacted.* ***Methods:*** *Multiple databases were searched within the date range of January 1st, 2010 and May 1st, 2025 using the keywords listed. This initial search yielded 886 publications. Following a screening process, 187 publications met the inclusion criteria for further analysis.* ***Results:*** *Communication issues were the most common barrier to workplace success cited by the autistic employee, coworkers, and management. Educating coworkers and management about autism was associated with reducing this barrier and others associated with it. A strong support circle consisting of HRM, job coaches, and a direct manager with autistic employee experience were able to decrease turnover and increase morale. The direct manager is especially important in ensuring a harmonious workplace and preventing burnout in the autistic employee. The work environment, consisting of both workflow and physical factors, could also be improved to ensure success. Bullying was best handled with a zero-tolerance policy which many organizations already have but nothing specific to autistic or neurodivergent employees who are more prone to such behavior. Masking was the most common technique autistic employees used to fit in but was found to be both exhausting and a contributor to burnout if used at high levels. Disclosure of autistic status, especially in hopes of obtaining accommodations, was found to have mixed results.* ***Conclusion:*** *An organization that prepares a work environment for an autistic employee before their employment has a far better chance of success. This included education of the staff, ensuring the direct manager has additional education and skills regarding autism, and altering the workflow and physical environment of the workplace to better suit the autistic employee. Evaluating current leadership and their devotion to diversity and inclusion deserves evaluation, as those in charge ultimately determine the success or failure of these policies.*

Keywords: *Autism, autism spectrum disorder, employment, education, manager, workplace, neurodivergence.*

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INTRODUCTION

The National Institute of Mental Health defines Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) as "a neurological and developmental disorder that affects how people communicate, learn, behave, and interact with others." (2024). The fifth edition of the American Psychiatric Association's (APA) Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) elaborates, noting those with ASD have deficits in social-emotional reciprocity, nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction, and developing, maintaining and understanding relationships (APA, 2013). According to the Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring (ADDM) Network, the prevalence of ASD has increased from 1 in 150 children in 2000 to 1 in 31 children in 2022 (Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs, 2025). Rubenstein et al. (2023) reported that the 25- to 34-year-old age group saw the largest increase at 195%, a trend further supported by Grosvenor et al. (2024) who found a 450% increase in diagnosis rates for a similar timeframe and age group. The extreme rise in these numbers can be partially attributed to a new "lost generation" of adults being diagnosed with ASD, many of whom having less overt symptoms throughout their lives (Lai & Baron-Cohen, 2015). Overall, 10-15% of the population are neurodivergent (i.e., variations in human brain functioning that are outside the norm, including conditions like ASD, ADHD, and dyslexia) and 2-3% have ASD (National Autistic Society, 2025; Curnow et al., 2024).

As the number of diagnoses increases, an estimated 707,000 to 1,116,000 US youth with ASD will enter adulthood over the next decade, an influx of motivated, employable individuals seeking independence, financial stability, and improved self-esteem (Morath, 2019; Baio et al., 2018; Shattuck, 2019). Unfortunately, for both entry-level and skilled ASD employees (i.e., those holding post-secondary degrees and/or certifications or licensure in specific occupations), unemployment remains high, a barrier to creating a sense of purpose, meaning, and identity (Hendricks, 2010). Nearly 42% of young adults with ASD never worked during their early 20s (Roux et al., 2015), less than 1/3 enrolled in college (Wei et al., 2013), and, for those holding a college degree, up to 85% are unemployed (Smith, 2025). These poor employment statistics affect not only employable adults with ASD and their families, but organizations and society as well (Nicholas et al., 2019). With unemployment, financial well-being, quality of life, and mental health can be impacted negatively, leading to social isolation and a lack of cognitive stimulation (Pellicano, Hall, & Cai, 2023; Davies et al., 2023; Hendricks). For families, the potential lifetime cost can reach $2.4 million, leading to increased reliance on government funding, while society's share for total support services exceeds $236 billion annually (Leigh & Du, 2015; Buescher et al., 2014). These figures underscore the potential for decreased government expenditure if individuals with ASD were employed (Buescher et al., 2014; Roux et al., 2013; Mavranezouli, 2013). Employers who opt against hiring individuals with ASD risk lost productivity and forgo the chance to employ dedicated workers who, when compared to neurotypical employees, more consistently maintain their hours and contribute to lower employee turnover, a significant cost savings (Jacob et al., 2015; Boushey & Glynn, 2012).

There is much work ahead for increasing diversity and inclusion in the workplace (Dalessandro & Lovell, 2024) and employment of neurodivergent adults is a prominent part of this endeavor. Autism, neither a learning disability nor mental illness, is a stigmatized diagnostic label with myths, misconceptions, and stereotypes prevailing regarding empathy and theory of mind (Davidson, Doherty, Hayden, 2024; Happé & Frith, 2020). The challenges employers face in selecting job candidates with ASD and the subsequent poor employment outcomes for many of those hired are complex but preconceived biases and pervasive myths have frequently been implicated in prior research (Ameri et al., 2018; Flower, Dickens, & Hedley, 2021). Diener et al. (2020) found that hiring managers often prioritize personal characteristics like being "easy to work with" and fitting team culture over technical knowledge. This preference poses a challenge for autistic candidates who possess strong technical skills but may lack social skills. Job descriptions listing generic teamwork and social communication skills, particularly when these are not essential to the role, can be discouraging for autistic job seekers (Davies et al.). For those that get an interview, the opportunity for employment often ends here due to these very obstacles (Chen et al., 2015; Norris et al., 2024). Flowers et al. found that employers were four times more likely to choose the nonautistic job candidate

over the autistic candidate and rated the autistic candidate significantly lower on a First Impression Scale, a process that can take as little as 10 seconds and can be near impossible to change (Flowers, Dickens, & Hadley, 2021; Sasson et al., 2017). Other studies with similar interview processes found that ASD candidates scored lower on both verbal and nonverbal behaviors when compared to their nonautistic counterparts because of a lack of social skills, or soft skills, a significant, if not the most important, barrier during job candidate evaluation (Norris et al., Chen et. al.). These include starting and taking turns in conversations, making eye contact, understanding body language, gestures or facial expressions, regulating tone of voice, and understanding boundaries and personal space (Autism Speaks, 2025). This holds true even for college graduates or skilled tradespersons on the higher functioning end of the spectrum who lead independent lives and graduate from academic institutions but may also be awkward in their social interactions and have difficulty developing friendships (Fong et al., 2021). Fearing discrimination and ignorance of the interviewers about ASD, many rarely disclose their diagnosis, which can worsen their chances of being hired (Whelpley et al., 2021; Romualdez et al., 2021). Some researchers and advocacy groups have recommended disclosure at the time of interview, as it may help their chances if the interviewer is aware, but caution is advised due to mixed results (Flowers, Dickens, & Hadley; Norris et al., 2023; National Autistic Society, 2025).

Hiring an autistic candidate can be highly beneficial to an organization, as it can provide access to diverse perspectives and skills, including exceptionally high levels of intelligence in some individuals, thereby contributing to innovation, creativity, and productivity (Krumm et al., 2015; Vogus & Taylor, 2018). Attributes such as reliability, lower levels of absenteeism, trustworthiness, attention to detail, higher degrees of accuracy on visual tasks, advantageous long-term memory, greater work ethic, and the ability to perform repetitive jobs in isolation have all been traits found more in the ASD employee compared to their neurotypical counterpart (Hendricks; Baldwin, Costley, & Warren, 2014). A 2017 study by Scott et al. revealed that coworkers rated autistic employees significantly higher than their non-ASD coworkers in key areas: attention to detail (55% vs. 19%) and work ethic (70.6% vs. 10%). Further, hiring individuals with ASD led to increased awareness within organizations that took the initiative to learn about the condition, which in turn improved morale and fostered companywide innovations. These autism employment initiatives also boost company diversity, providing a competitive edge over rivals (Hedley et al., 2017; Scott; Wright & Ulrich, 2017). Regarding work ethic and ethical decision making, autistic employees are more inclined to voice concerns about wrongdoing despite potential retaliation (Hartman et al., 2023), are less vulnerable to cognitive biases (Rozenkrantz, D'Mello, & Gabrieli, 2021; Kuzmanovic, Rigoux, & Vogeley, 2019; Birmingham et al., 2015), and are less likely to engage in moral disengagement to justify inappropriate behavior (Hartman & Hartman, 2024). Autistic employees tend to make moral judgments about negative outcomes caused by a coworker based on rational, bias-free processing of information rather than emotion or assigning blame (Morath; Hartman & Hartman). Finally, there are tax incentives the IRS offers businesses for employing protected class employees, such as the Disabled Access Credit incentive which offers a credit of up to $10,000 per year for small businesses providing employment to people with disabilities, and a work opportunity tax credit of up to $9,600 for every employee hired with a disability (IRS, 2019).

A change in the way society views those with ASD regarding employment is greatly needed. The issue gained the attention of the United Nations and in 2015 a call to action was declared, stating much progress has been made but more needs to be done regarding "greater access and work opportunities for persons with autism" (United Nations). An increasing number of organizations have indeed been actively recruiting and retaining autistic individuals, and many researchers and stakeholders have suggested examination of those that have been successful (Vogue & Taylor, 2018). Unfortunately, scant research has been conducted on those that have been hired and how organizations new to the opportunity should manage autistic employees (Johnson & Joshi, 2016; Hedley et al., 2016; Chen et al.). Further, even less literature has been devoted to those with advanced degrees or skilled trades training beyond being hired; most literature found is devoted to transition-age youth who have not completed training or those in entry-level positions (Raymaker et al., 2022). Autistic employees still face many more barriers after being hired, especially in organizations with no experience in managing them (Chen et. al.). The stigma associated with disabilities in general can set the tone for the autistic new-hire from the first day of employment and rapidly lead to

poor outcomes (Sarrett, 2017). In addition, the new-hire can internalize the stigma, thus having a long-lasting negative impact on both identity and confidence to self-advocate (Mantzalas et al., 2022).

This narrative review seeks to find and analyze literature pertaining to challenges faced by the autistic person after they have been hired. Once the most common challenges have been identified, solutions that are either theorized or have a proven track record of success will be reviewed. This paper should be useful to employers, especially direct managers and HRM professionals within for-profit, nonprofit, and government organizations.

METHODS

A comprehensive search strategy was developed and executed across the electronic databases PubMed, ProQuest Research Library, and Cochrane Library. Boolean search operators were utilized with the following search terms: "Autism," "autism spectrum disorder," "employment," "workplace," and "neurodivergence." The search was limited to articles published between January 1, 2010, and May 1, 2025. The level of evidence for journal articles and publications where data was analyzed ranged from level II to level VII. The search yielded 886 papers and following a preliminary screening of titles and abstracts, 187 papers were identified as potentially relevant to the scope of this review. In addition, relevant articles not initially captured were identified through a review of the reference sections of included articles. This review incorporated information from a variety of sources to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic, including gray literature, conference and organization websites, and respected news outlets, which can offer diverse perspectives.

RESULTS

After a successful interview and job offer, the challenges for autistic employees often continue. Research suggests that navigating the workplace can be significantly more difficult for autistic employees compared to their non-autistic colleagues. This ongoing "employment obstacle course" may explain the notable difference in average employment length: approximately 2 years for autistic employees versus 4.2 years for non-autistic employees (Wei et al., 2018; U.S. Department of Labor, 2018).

The literature selected for review highlights specific difficulties contributing to poor employment outcomes. These challenges have been categorized into distinct sections, though some overlap exists. The results conclude with proposed interventions and accommodations designed to improve workplace experiences for autistic individuals.

Communication

Many of the selected studies listed communication issues as one of, if not the, core issue by the autistic employee, management, and neurotypical coworkers. Misunderstandings would often lead to underestimation of abilities because of negative first impressions (Heasman & Gillespie, 2017; Sasson et al.). Interpreting unspoken social rules, inability to “read between the lines,” challenges with understanding directions, struggling with lack of clarity in other people’s language, and high incidences of miscommunication were often reported (Jacob et al.; Harmuth et al., 2018; Hayward, McVilly, & Stokes, 2020; Remington & Pellicano, 2019). The “reading between the lines” issues often pertained to interpreting other people’s beliefs, motivations, and emotions (Brewer, Young, & Barnett, 2017). Autistic employees had trouble deciphering neurotypical norms and could unintentionally aggravate their coworkers by not understanding these unspoken hints (Pinchevski & Peters, 2015). Making friends, fitting into workplace culture, conforming to social niceties, and managing complex social interactions were all noted as especially challenging, often resulting in social isolation in the work environment when these situations turn out poorly (Hayward et al.; Baldwin, Costly, & Warren). This outcome is puzzling given that Pfeiffer et al. (2018) reported autistic study participants did not object to work-related social interaction. According to Milton (2012), a

"double empathy" issue occurs: autistic people can have trouble navigating neurotypical social complexities, just as neurotypical people can misunderstand autistic ways of relating to others. Negative engagement often leads to blaming autistic individuals for their social challenges, demanding personal change rather than a systemic, structural response (Bury et al., 2021), and dehumanization when neurotypical workers fail to understand or recognize autistic traits (Cage, Monaco, & Newell, 2019). Autistic employees grappling with social integration may request accommodations (discussed later), yet employers frequently prioritize physical workspace adjustments instead of addressing core issues like clarifying social expectations, improving communication, or helping with workplace norms, ultimately sidestepping the main problem (Pfeiffer et al.). These negative situations lead to anxiety and stress for autistic employees, potentially causing depression, burnout, and decreased productivity if prolonged (Mazurek, 2013; Hedley et al., 2019). Moreover, challenges with social interaction can lead to termination or resignation, as autistic employees more often depart employment due to behavioral and social issues rather than poor work ethic or lack of ability (Bury et al., 2019; Solomon, 2020; Wilczynski, Trammell, & Clarke, 2013).

While one might assume certain sectors would be immune to these situations, the analysis found several articles stating otherwise, particularly in the medical profession. Shaw et al. (2021) found that over 70% of surveyed autistic physicians reported communication difficulties with peers, supervisors, and management. These challenges were particularly pronounced in fast-paced, unstructured, and unpredictable clinical environments (i.e., emergency departments, urgent care clinics, primary care clinics) which were prone to misunderstandings (Doherty, Johnson, & Buckley, 2021). This phenomenon is further exemplified by findings from Smith et al. (2025), where one physician stated, "I struggle with recognizing body language and non-verbal communication, particularly in large groups," and another said, "I don't have problems in consultations, it's the office politics that I struggle with!" Smith's research also revealed that written communication from autistic participants could be misconstrued as impolite, and many faced challenges with phone calls, leading to their behaviors being perceived as "weird" or "difficult," despite their communicative intent being entirely contrary.

Environment

The workplace significantly shapes an individual's work experience through its complex interplay of social, attitudinal, and environmental factors (Thorpe et al., 2024). Neurotypical managers and colleagues often overlook many critical aspects within these categories, which can chip away at an autistic employee's well-being. This oversight is highlighted by Scott's 2018 scoping review of factors impacting employment, which found that not one of the 32 intervention-based studies addressed environmental factors as the primary target for intervention. Managers who prioritize social skills often create a double mismatch for autistic employees, neglecting both their environmental needs and their actual skill levels (Diener et al.). Regarding physical environment, autistic employees can experience sensory confusion, ranging from hypersensitivity to overwhelming stimuli like fluorescent lights, high-foot traffic, temperature extremes, cluttered workspaces, and excessive noise, to hyposensitivity, where relevant stimuli might go unnoticed (Pfeiffer et al.; Kirchner & Dziobek, 2014; Waisman-Nitzan & Schreuer, 2019). For workflow, many autistic employees prefer rigid routines, consistent schedules, and autonomy (Bury et al., 2019; Gal et al., 2015; Pfeiffer et al.), with difficulties in task-shifting often impeding their assimilation into organizational procedures requiring multitasking, high social interaction, and teamwork (Waisman-Nitzan, Gal, & Schreuer).

Stigma and Bullying

Despite federal and state prohibitions against it, a disturbing number of studies have uncovered instances of bullying and harassment targeting autistic employees (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, n.d.). For all employees, such behavior leads to negative workplace outcomes like toxic environments, psychological distress, poor productivity, high turnover, and reduced profits (Mirza, 2019; Rasool et al., 2021). However, these issues are

exacerbated for disabled people, who already navigate significant systemic barriers in the workplace, including limited access to development opportunities and subjection to offensive behavior (Foster & Scott, 2015). For autistic people specifically, they are at heightened risk of bullying with estimates at four times as likely to be targets compared to neurotypical people (Rai et al., 2018; Lorenc et al., 2016; Sterzing et al., 2012). Many negative stereotypes and preconceptions are associated with the "invisible" disability, leading to a lack of support, understanding and acceptance (Johnson & Joshi, 2014; Romualdez, Walker & Remington, 2021; Solomon, 2020). A survey by the National Autistic Society (2016) found that 48% of respondents reported experiencing bullying or harassment at work and 51% reported other discrimination or unfair treatment. Jeanneret et al. (2022) found 51% of autistic respondents had higher rates of psychological distress, with some reporting work colleagues being negative to the point of harmful. Leaders and those with social power in the workplace can foster negative stereotypes about autism, causing a difficult-to-reverse loss of status for stigmatized employees (Han et al., 2022). This stigma and discrimination ultimately damages the autistic employee's well-being and can deter them from disclosing their diagnosis (discussed later) for fear of worsening the situation, thus blocking them from access to much needed interventions and accommodations (Thompson-Hodgetts et al., 2020).

Masking and Burnout

Most participants in the studies analyzed expressed a strong desire to be employed but many feared "outing" their autistic traits would cause significant doubt and anxiety about success in the workplace due to negative perceptions of autism they had experienced previously (Mantzalas et al.; Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019). Many resorted to camouflaging, or masking, where autistic adults try to pass as non-autistic in a neurotypical world as a protective strategy to avoid consequences of stigma, social exclusion, and negative impressions they would make if they were their true selves (Hull et al., 2017; Cage & Troxell-Whitman). In 2024, Curnow et al. and the National Autism Implementation Team found that nearly 75% of autistic people surveyed reported masking all or some of the time to avoid being perceived as visibly autistic. They masked to connect with colleagues, appear more relatable, form friendships, advance their careers, and avoid the burden of educating colleagues about the neurodivergent experience (Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023). While masking often helps autistic individuals gain access to job opportunities and social inclusion, it's consistently described as exhausting, with long-term effects negatively impacting mental health and well-being (Mantzalas et al.). Despite being in environments that encouraged facilitation of self-acceptance and reduced cognitive load, there was still less likelihood of unmasking if they believed it would lead to being excluded, discrimination, or stigma (Mantzalas et al.; Evans, et al.). Higher levels of masking were associated with past experiences of being shamed and teased for autistic traits, as well as broader emotional and physical abuse (Evans, Krumrei-Mancuso, & Rouse, 2024). Consequently, high-masking employees who lack a safe space to express their true identity often experience greater anxiety due to the persistent attention to detail and significant time invested in deciphering the neurotypical world, unlike low maskers who have more opportunities to unmask and report less anxiety (Cage & Troxell-Whitman). This masking can also create guilt for the autistic employee, as they feel they are presenting a false persona to colleagues, which then negatively affects their sense of identity and ability to develop genuine connections with others (Pryke-Hobbes et al.). This creates a no-win situation: while long-term masking can lead to lower self-esteem, reduced authentic living, higher self-alienation, decreased participation with the autistic community, depression, and even suicidality, unmasking after a prolonged period can result in support needs being unrecognized or disbelieved (Cassidy et al., 2020; Hull et al., 2021; Evans et al.; Mantzalas et al.). Ultimately, this increased mental effort to socially function at the neurotypical level inevitably leads to fatigue, exhaustion, and burnout (Moore, Kinnear, & Freeman, 2020; Mantzalas et al.). Autistic burnout, a syndrome resulting from chronic life stress and a mismatch of expectations and abilities without adequate supports, leads to pervasive, long-term (typically over three months) exhaustion, speech difficulties, loss of skills, impaired executive functioning, and reduced tolerance to stimuli (Raymaker et al., 2020; Mantzalas et al.).

Disclosure

At some point in their employment, the autistic employee will consider disclosing their autism diagnosis to colleagues and management. The reasons vary, the results mixed, and this difficult decision with no clear and correct choice often leads to more difficult decisions (Whelpley et al., 2020). Ohl et al. (2017) found that 63% of autistic employees surveyed had disclosed to their employer, while the National Autistic Society's 2016 survey reported a slightly lower number at 58%. Choosing not to disclose mostly centered around fear of the unknown beliefs colleagues and managers may already have about autism and the overarching intolerance of difference and accompanying discrimination (Sullivan, 2021; Morris, Begel, & Wiedermann, 2015; Sarrett). This concern is valid, as a survey by Atherton et al. (2022) revealed perceptions of autistic individuals as unempathetic and problematic—biases many autistic people have previously encountered when disclosing their stigmatized identity (Johnson & Joshi; McLeod, Meanwell, & Hawbaker, 2019). Another unintended consequence is that, following disclosure, autistic employees may need to exceed the performance of their neurotypical colleagues to demonstrate their job adequacy (Bury, 2019).

As mentioned, disclosure can have mixed results that may be neither overwhelmingly positive or negative and may not lead to the desired outcome (Martin, 2017; Sabat et al., 2020). Lindsay et al. (2021) reported that among those who disclosed, 27% received no acknowledgment or accommodations, while only 32% received requests for clarification regarding their accommodation needs. The ability to disclose can be particularly challenging in workplaces unaccustomed to autistic employees and in environments marked by higher levels of stigma and discrimination from managers and coworkers (Lindsay et al.). Consequently, some autistic employees, when backed into a proverbial corner, disclose later in employment only to mitigate past or ongoing negative experiences like stigma and bullying (Romualdez et al., 2021a; 2021b).

Reasons to disclose cited by the autistic employee included increased understanding (and reduced misunderstandings), acceptance, accommodations, improved mental health, legal protections, and a more favorable impression (Sasson & Morrison, 2017; Romualdez et al., 2021a). More than half of the respondents to a 2023 cross-sectional study of autistic physicians indicated that just being able to be open about their diagnosis in the workplace was a reasonable adjustment itself (Shaw et al.). Additionally, Romualdez et al. (2021b), Pryke-Hobbes et al. and Raymaker et al. found that for some, disclosure represented an allegiance to the autistic community and a commitment to clearing a path for other autistic individuals to take. Managers were asked about ways disclosure would be helpful and some felt knowledge of diagnosis could lead to greater understanding, better relationships in the workplace, and help mitigate social conflicts (Whelpley et al.).

Many positive outcomes were discovered regarding disclosure. Ohl et al. found that autistic people that disclosed were three times as likely to be employed long-term compared to those who did not and numerous other studies found that the positive employment outcomes occurred more often if the employer and colleagues were knowledgeable about autism beforehand (McMahon, Henry, & Linthicum, 2021; Sasson & Morrison). Overall, improved well-being, increased support from others, and positive organizational changes were frequently noted after disclosure, especially when prior education on the subject was provided for coworkers (Romualdez, 2021a,b).

Interventions and Accommodations

A main reason found for disclosure is for obtaining accommodations (Romualdez et al.). Accommodations in the workplace can be defined as any change in the physical environment or the workflow process and can include adjustment of supervisory methods and job coaching (Jordan, 2025). The US Office of Disability Employment Policy (n.d.) lists a wide variety of suggested accommodations, such as adjusting communication based on the employee's strengths and limitations, having a manager help the employee with time management and other executive functioning skills, providing a workspace apart from other employees, and providing support via a job coach or mentor. Accommodations can be difficult to obtain and, even if implemented, may prove ineffective, often

leading to burnout (Mantzalas et al.). This is further complicated by disabled workers having to navigate additional bureaucratic hurdles to secure acceptable adjustments, which increases their burden in an already challenging situation (Sang, Calvard, & Remnant, 2022) and may even create internalized stigma, leading the autistic employee to feel unworthy of accommodations (Mantzalas et al.). For those that disclosed and made requests for change, more than one-third were not successful in having them implemented, while others noted it was merely a dissatisfying one-off event that was brief in existence and eventually forgotten (Romualdez et al.; Davies et al., 2022; Curnow et al.). Pryke-Hobbes et al. found that many organizations claimed to support their autistic employees, but their actions clearly did not align with their words. Simple requests, such as clarification about expectations and social rules, were rarely offered or were refused in workplaces with underlying misperceptions and poor knowledge about ASD (Diener et al.), as many managers of autistic employees would simply not make the conscious effort to understand or help (Whelpley et al.).

Much past research on interventions and accommodations was conducted without any input from autistic employees, which goes against recent findings that emphasize the necessity of co-producing such interventions with neurodivergent individuals who have permanent advisory roles—either within the organization or with external collaborators—to ensure they represent neurodivergent perspectives and lead to meaningful change (Thorpe et al.; Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019; Milton et al., 2017). Interventions with the goal of changing the workplace environment and culture through comprehensive intervention packages rather than expecting the autistic employee to conform has led to more positive outcomes (Thorpe et al.; Nicholls, 2025; Smith et al., 2019; Wehman et al., 2018). Before this can occur, major restructuring may be in order, starting with leadership. As found with neurotypical employees, so too do autistic employees long for feeling valued, professional growth, financial security, healthy work-life balance, sense of workplace community, and an accepting, non-toxic workplace (Raymaker et al.). Those in positions of power may be the very reason effective change towards diversity has not occurred. They can take tokenistic steps to appear in compliance but in reality, are either oblivious to the situation or have contributed heavily to the promotion of ableism and shaping the work environment based on their own wants and needs over the organization's values and vision (Eisner, 2024; Smith et al.). The behavior of leadership tends to have a trickle-down effect on subordinates, thus broadening the reach of a toxic and dysfunctional workplace (Saquib & Arif, 2017). Initial steps for change should include serious thought on replacement of leaders who have a record of not supporting accommodations and diversity, for there is little hope for change without these measures (Smith et al.; Satiani & Satiani, 2022).

Education

A major intervention that was found to have overwhelmingly positive outcomes was the education of employees and management about ASD (Coleman & Adams, 2018). A systemic lack of knowledge about autism traits and their various presentations often lead to negative experiences not only in employment but also healthcare and schooling for autistic adults (Mantzalas et al., Diener et al.). Multiple studies concluded that educating the workforce about ASD can lead to a more supportive environment, reducing stigma and negative first impressions (Shaw et al., 2023; Sasson et al., 2017a; Jones, DeBrabander, & Sasson, 2021; Khalifa et al., 2020). Training should begin with managers, as an autistic-friendly working culture starts with those charged with providing support and consistent team leadership (Smith et al.; Lindsay et al.; Burton, Carss, & Twumasi, 2022). Managers should have a core understanding of how to respond to disclosure, provide information regarding legal protection for the autistic employee, make the onboarding process employee-specific, be flexible about accommodations, encourage self-advocacy, ensure regular evaluation of accommodation effectiveness, and understand and work with communication differences (Curnow et al.; Jacob et al.; Bury et al., 2021). As stated earlier, communication is a major factor in the success or failure of the autistic employee. It should be open, clear and direct, with no assumptions about shared knowledge and understanding of social expectations at work (Curnow et al.; Jacob et al.; Shaw et al.; Diener et al.). Variety in communication is optimal, such as email, texting, and virtual meetings with

closed-captioning (Smith et al.; Curnow et al.). There can be a variety of unconventional communication preferences not previously encountered by neurotypical workers, such as no direct eye contact, tics (i.e., eye blinking, throat clearing), and "stimming", where the autistic individual may engage in repetitive actions to regulate emotions, such as rocking, pacing, or humming (Curnow et al.). By providing an understanding and inclusive environment, the aim is for the autistic employee feeling less of a need to mask, a coping mechanism that has negative consequences when overused (Pryke-Hobbes et al.). Workplace cultures that allowed them to be openly autistic and normalized their differences were key to success (Raymaker et al.).

Education can also be provided for the autistic employee to address social interactions and expectations. An example is the Assistive Soft Skills and Employment Training (ASSET) program that covers six core work-related social skills, or soft skills: communication, attitude and enthusiasm, teamwork, networking, critical thinking, and professionalism. (Connor et al., 2020). Work-related soft skill training can focus on intrapersonal factors specific to autistic individuals that may impair their workflow, thus improving long-term vocational outcomes, social functioning, self-confidence, and adherence to training, as well as broader impacts, including improved sense of belonging and greater employability (Lee et al., 2024; Sung et al., 2019; Seaman & Cannella-Malone, 2016; Grob et al., 2019; Herrick et al., 2022). Overall, the purpose of training and education for both the autistic employee and their colleagues is not only to provide a more harmonious work environment but also to create a change in organizational culture (Diener et al.; Nicholls; Raymaker et al.).

Work Environment

Much of the research on social interventions has historically focused more on changing the autistic individual than on modifying the workplace itself, an environment that impedes work possibilities if not set-up for proper accommodations (Curnow et al.; Bury et al., 2021; Waisman-Nitzan et al.; Black et al., 2020;). With significant input from neurodivergent collaborators, more recent studies have examined diverse aspects of the workplace, aiming to achieve social harmony and efficient workflows. Social overstimulation, a frequent distraction for autistic employees, was decreased in a variety of ways, such as physical separation from coworkers with cubicles or single-occupancy offices, rather than open floor plans with no assigned desks (Thorpe). Scheduled breaktimes in quiet spaces were modified to allow enough time to rebalance (Curnow et al.; Thorpe et al.; Smith et al.). Working independently, self-management of time, and working uninterrupted all aided in executive function (Smith et al.; Hayward, McVilly, & Stokes; Hayward et al.; Pfeiffer et al.). By reducing social demands, shifting the focus from individual characteristics to changing social expectations, and increasing social support, good fit was achieved within the workplace ecological system (Diener et al.). Other changes promoting good fit were fashioning job tasks to fit their skills and being flexible with workflows, as a standardized approach is not always needed (Raymaker et al.; Gal et al.; Bury et al., 2019; Hendricks) but keeping in mind that change can be difficult for the autistic employee, as predictability and continuity are often sought (Smith et al.; Curnow et al.). In addition to the workflow process and social environment, the physical environment may need modification. Remembering names and titles can be difficult for the neurodivergent in general so name badges or staff photo boards within departments were found to be helpful (Curnow et al.). Noise-cancelling headphones, blue light filters for computer screens, dimmable lights, blinds or screens, mindfulness of scents, and many other minor accommodations all require minimal investment (Romualdez et al.; Curnow et al.; Smith et al.; Pfeiffer et al.; Hayward; Waisman-Nitzan, Gal, & Schreuer; US Department of Labor, 2023). Finally, if assigned work can still be accomplished, working from home and telecommuting is an excellent option, as it tends to decrease social contact and distraction (Thorpe et al.; Hayward et al.).

Mentor

Besides support circles containing HRM and direct managers, part of providing a harmonious work environment involves mentors (Curnow et al.). As one medical professional stated in Shaw's et al. (2022) study on autistic role modelling in medical education, "witnessing colleagues with whom we can identify and be able to learn from their successes and struggles may make the difference between leaving a career we dreamed of, or pursuing it, more aware of our strengths, our vulnerabilities and the right to advocate for accommodations." Mentors can offer feedback, expectations, interpretation of social situations, and ongoing friendship (Raymaker et al.; Curnow et al.). SAP, a software company, developed a program for autistic employees that not only included training about ASD for colleagues and provided a multifaceted support team including the manager, members of HRM and an onsite job coach, but also an employee who has volunteered to be a workplace "buddy" (Anderson, Butt, & Sarsony, 2021). Numerous organizations have followed suit, including Microsoft, JP Morgan, Dell, and Goldman Sachs (Cohan, 2018). Finally, employee resource groups, voluntary, employee-led groups operating outside the immediate work environment but still part of the organization, aim to foster a diverse workplace aligned with the organizations they serve and are typically led by employees who share a common characteristic (Curnow et al.).

DISCUSSION

This narrative review set out to examine obstacles both entry-level and skilled autistic employees are confronted with in the workplace and current solutions that have been both proposed and/or installed with success. Communication was consistently the highest hurdle, followed by multiple factors within the workplace environment (i.e., social, workflow, and physical). Burnout, the inevitable end-result of a workplace that contained bullying, no accommodations, and high masking requirements was touched on, before concluding with strategies the autistic employee used to overcome the hurdles, such as disclosure and requests for accommodations. Considering the plethora of factors involved after hiring the autistic employee, organizations worldwide could easily make the mistake of failing to provide the key elements required for a harmonious work environment for all (Day et al., 2025; Rule & Rosner-Laskorzyńska, 2025). Indeed, when diversity and inclusion are the goal, the task requires far more than a single episode of announcing an inclusive-themed mission statement or creating an annual module all employees must complete. Commitment and continual evaluation of pertinent programs and rules was found to be crucial for success if an organization is serious about successful integration of neurodivergent employees (Ali et al., 2024).

The majority of studies, either acknowledged or implicitly, revolved around a single theme of an autistic employee attempting to assimilate into a work environment created and managed by a neurotypical workforce (Thorpe et al.). This seemed to be the heart of the matter, for all other challenges were somehow related to it. Starting with communication, the onboarding of an autistic employee into an unprepared neurotypical-designed workplace can seem similar to the construction of the Tower of Babel. Despite shared goals, socialization, information processing, and differences in communication styles can quickly make the workplace a maze of confusion that results in the autistic employee's termination or resignation before they have been able to prove their worth (Solomon; Wilczynski, Trammell, & Clarke). Education of coworkers about ASD was found to be crucial in decreasing these communication difficulties (Oates & Bean, 2023), preferably before an autistic employee has been hired. Education aligned with preparation of the social, workflow, and physical environment improved employment longevity (Thorpe et al.). Successful workplaces had managers with additional ASD training and experience with neurodivergent employees, allowing them to better spot communication breakdowns and impending burnout. (LaCarte & Husein, 2023; Mantzalas, Richdale, & Dissanayake, 2023). Ongoing success required monitoring output, frequent "check-ins' with the employee, and periodic reevaluation of the workflow and those involved in its continued harmony (Workplace Strategies for Mental Health, 2024). In fact, while social support circles consisting of mentors, job coaches, and HRM representatives were emphasized, ultimately it was the direct manager that was

repeatedly singled out as the first point of contact for any issues that may arise (Mahar, Bhasin, & O'Connell, 2023). Multiple studies concluded that autistic employees that felt supported by their managers were far more successful when that support was by way of meaningful interventions, accommodations, and friendship (Whelpley et al.; Smith et al.; Lindsey et al.). A manager who cultivated a healthy workplace using open communication and elements of emotional intelligence earned a reputation for trustworthiness, thereby alleviating the fear of disclosure for others and demonstrating that masking was either unnecessary or not needed most of the time (Curnow; Hull et al.; Praslova, 2024). Finally, while contemporary research is shifting towards workplace education and acceptance of ASD over expecting autistic employees to assimilate, it is still recommended that resources for soft skill development remain available to neurodivergent individuals both at pre-employment and post-hire stages so long as education remains bidirectional and does not push the autistic employee into masking more (Lee et al.; Schuck & Fung, 2024).

Besides the education component of the workplace environment, there is the matter of physical and workflow environment. For physical, many studies confirmed the investment into tangible items (i.e., separate office, screens, dimmable lights) was minimal (Pfeiffer et al.; U.S. Department of Labor) and seems to fall on the willingness of management to initiate and maintain them. Although fixes were simplistic in nature, the literature often stated that many organizations fell short here, despite there being numerous sources of information to utilize (Davies et al.). For workflow, it is often more efficient to incorporate the neurodivergent employee's direct input and preferences, moving beyond a solely neurotypical perspective in design. Multiple sources confirm that while rigid routines, consistent schedules, and autonomy are strongly preferred by most autistic employees, multitasking and unpredictable demands—common in neurotypical-designed workplaces—are counterproductive to positive outcomes (Bury et al.; Gal et al.; Pfeiffer et al.; Waisman-Nitzan, Gal, & Schreuer). As stated earlier, open communication with a direct manager is crucial for cultivating an environment where autistic employees can truly thrive.

Disclosure was reported as having mixed results but it seems this is a reflection of the environment, direct manager, and culture of the workplace (Romualdez et al.; McMahon, Henry, & Linthicum). Not only can coworkers and managers with no experience or education about ASD inadvertently make disclosure unappealing, but, unfortunately, bullying (discussed below) and stigma must also be factored in, as these were additional barriers that somehow still exist today in the workplace and can thus prevent disclosure for fear of worsening an already difficult situation. These predicaments were linked to higher masking levels which ultimately causes a state of chronic self-surveillance that not only impacts individual well-being but limits their full potential by having to divert energy away from productive tasks to camouflaging their true selves. To avoid this, an effective manager in conjunction with an organization that is committed to educating its employees about neurodivergence and has clear policies and procedures on how to disclose will ultimately reap the benefits of lower turnover, higher morale, and increased deliverables (Khan et al., 2023; Kalmanovich-Cohen & Stanton, 2025).

The literature predictably confirms the widespread presence of anti-bullying policies across organizations, designed to protect all employees. However, many of these same sources make a crucial distinction: autistic employees are significantly more vulnerable to victimization than neurotypical coworkers in a variety of ways (Morris, Southey & Pilatzke, 2025; Rai et al.; Lorenc et al.; Sterzing et al.). Perhaps the one-size-fits-all policies are not sufficient, for despite growing awareness, recent surveys reveal autistic employees still face peer bullying and endure the stigma of ASD. A mandatory zero-tolerance policy for bullying of neurodivergent employees is imperative, requiring swift action to prevent escalating harm to the individual and to safeguard the workplace's morale, productivity, and financial stability (Trundle et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2024; Hollis, 2015; Fowler, Brown, & Kvilhaug, 2023). As with the other barriers to positive outcomes, being proactive rather than reactive is far more beneficial – eliminate any possible issues before they can become a hinderance (Mantzalas, Richdale, & Dissanayake). Again, a social support circle is very helpful, but the direct manager is the "first responder" to recognizing conflict and should have a major stake in ensuring a safe workplace.

LIMITATIONS

The initial intent of this narrative review was to focus on the autistic employee in a healthcare environment but the amount of studies within this sector were severely lacking. Of the literature found, many revolved around physicians specifically (Autistic Doctors International, n.d.). Very little, if any, were found regarding ancillary staff and other professionals such as pharmacists, nurse practitioners, physician associates, registered nurses, and physical or occupational therapists. Academia was another area lacking such studies. This is disappointing, as data involving the success or failure of skilled employees in sectors thought to be more accepting of diversity would be highly useful. For some of the bullying studies, there was difficulty discerning whether the autistic employee was targeted by coworkers that knew of their status, or if the bullying occurred due to atypical characteristics which perpetrators were not aware were due to ASD. Regarding skill level, much of the literature focused on entry-level workers and those new to employment (i.e., high school graduates) who were diagnosed with variable levels of ASD rather than high functioning or level 1 ASD, and whose work environment would be significantly different from that of a skilled worker. In addition, research focusing on the lost generation (i.e., those diagnosed in adulthood) was also limited and this population seemed to be lumped in with those diagnosed earlier in life, with those that usually had more familiarity with the multitude of resources available for ASD. Financial impact to organizations for accommodations and development of neurotypical programs was another area lacking in data, such as physical environment accommodation costs, especially in older structures. Data on costs incurred to develop a new program on neurodiversity for variable-sized organizations was scant (i.e., small businesses versus international corporations). Finally, the cost to the organization for the turnover of neurodiverse employees revealed no significant data regarding failed neurodiversity programs and whether this may be a reason for apprehensiveness in hiring a neurodiverse individual presently or in the future. This led to the question of whether it was stigma and bias that prevented the hiring of those with ASD, or the costs incurred from poor fit of previous autistic employees, an outcome that may not have necessarily been the organization's own doing.

CONCLUSION

This narrative review focused on obstacles the autistic employee encounters during their employment. It also analyzed current methods of accommodating the employee so to provide a psychologically safe work environment. Overall, it was an educated workforce in an inclusive and diverse organization that proved critical to the autistic employee's success. With an ethical and effective manager in place, backed by a strong support circle, who was willing to make adjustments with the input of the autistic employee, positive outcomes were more common. Using open communication and fostering a harmonious work environment, the need for masking and incidents of bullying were either decreased significantly or eliminated. Having clear policies and procedures on disclosure also proved fruitful by way of lower turnover and a more productive workforce. These findings fall in line with other studies that underscored the critical role of proactive organizational strategies in creating an inclusive workplace that not only met ethical objectives but was strategic in retaining talent and cultivating a healthy organizational culture. Limitations were encountered, such as data on sector-based focused studies (healthcare and academia being the glaring standouts), financial losses related to poor or failed neurodiversity policies, more detailed cost-benefit analysis of physical environment accommodations, and focused studies on skilled workers. Ultimately, the literature confirmed that leadership must be effective for culture change within the organization to occur, and this can sometimes require drastic measures, for the neurodiverse employee will not thrive in an uneducated environment firmly rooted in bias and stigma.

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