

Business Recruitment

Why autism can be a superpower

Neurodivergent women can bring a range of vital and unique skills to businesses, **Jane Hamilton** writes

The latest corporate mantra is to “bring our authentic selves to work” and encouraging one group to do this could see organisational productivity surge by 30 per cent.

Until recently, autistic women have remained largely hidden in corporate life. Their ability to “mask” and fit in with neurotypical norms often comes at the expense of their talents. Experts argue that autistic women bring deep focus, high attention to detail, pattern recognition, original thinking and commitment to integrity that enhances high-performing workplaces, but masking leaves many close to burn-out.

However, growing awareness and rising diagnoses are encouraging companies to restructure work to reap the rewards of neurodiversity inclusion.

Currently, only one in three autistic people is in work in the UK, yet organisations that actively recruit neurodiverse staff and embed supportive practices report raised productivity, with innovative ideas 75 per cent more likely to progress from concept to product.

“Supporting neurodivergent women isn’t about ‘fixing’ us, it’s about fixing the systems that have never been built to let us thrive,” says Mahlia Amatina, author of *Dear Manager: How to Support Your Autistic Employees*.

“What’s good for autistic people is beneficial for all employees. Productivity improves, creativity flourishes, teams become more resilient and organisations retain talented people.”

World Autism Awareness Day fell yesterday and Amatina is calling on firms to evolve cultures and processes, including designing recruitment, onboarding and management systems that recognise diverse ways of thinking.

A 2022 *Agility in Mind* study found that while 99 per cent of FTSE 100 firms had inclusive mission statements, only 4 per cent had neurodiversity initiatives in place. And the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development suggests that only 19 per cent of employers have neuroinclusive HR policies.

Traditionally, four men were diagnosed for every woman, but modern studies suggest a 3:1 ratio, with four in five women diagnosed only in adulthood. Helen Needham, a trustee of the charity Autism Forward and Capco management consultant, is vocal about structured support and mentoring for autistic women.

She said: “Without that support, a lot of energy goes into understanding and managing the environment, rather than demonstrating capability. In environments where progression is influenced by visibility and relationships, that can have a real impact.”



‘We can identify unseen problems’

Case study

Sophie Donne, a senior account executive at the communications agency Work & Class was diagnosed with autism in her twenties.

Now 27, Donne from Maidstone in Kent, said: “There’s a lot of stigma

from people who believe neurodiversity is being over-diagnosed.

“When the telescope was invented, there weren’t more stars in the sky, we could simply identify them. Now we are better at identifying how autistic traits present in marginalised communities, such as women and ethnic minorities.

“It’s important not to let anyone tell you can’t do it, or you don’t deserve support. Autistic women are capable, talented and should be celebrated for their strengths. Our brains work differently and that’s an incredible thing. It allows us to see alternative perspectives, think creatively, and identify problems where others might not.”

Top tips for becoming more inclusive

Auti-Ms is a charity supporting autistic women. Here is its advice for employers to become more inclusive: **Broaden understanding:** Recognise that autism can present differently in women, often in less visible ways such as masking or internalised stress.

Offer options: Provide alternatives to face-to-face or high-pressure communication, such as written instructions or asynchronous updates, which reduce anxiety

and support clearer understanding. **Be clear:** Information about changes to meetings, dates, rooms, routines or expectations should be flagged well in advance as a priority. **Friendly environments:** Adjust lighting, noise levels and workspace layouts where possible, or allow remote/hybrid work to help reduce sensory overload. **Train managers:** Equip leaders with knowledge about gender differences and how to

recognise and support autistic women. **Encourage disclosure:** Foster a culture where employees feel safe to disclose their needs, while ensuring support is available without formal diagnosis. **Focus on strengths:** Recognise individual skills, such as attention to detail, creativity, and problem-solving, and align roles or tasks to help autistic women thrive. Find out more at: girlsareautistictoo.org.uk

Needham launched Capco’s highly successful neurodiversity network and the company also has a counsellor to support staff. She adds: “Things really change when we start talking about what we have to offer, rather than what we are lacking. One of my own strengths is how I approach complex situations. One of the partners I work with once described it as being able to ‘see around corners’ — spotting things others don’t immediately see.”

So what are the most valuable traits autistic women bring to the workplace? Natalie Pascoe-Watson, an autism expert, says: “If everyone processed information the same way, new opportunities and different ways of doing things may not exist. New and creative ways of thinking from neurodivergent colleagues drives innovation. It’s a superpower for the employee, business and for the economy as a whole.”

Six from the best

A record £190 million has been donated to Cambridge University to build the Rokos School of Government in the West Innovation district. As operations director at the build-to-rent specialist Present Made, **Barbora Szabova** is building the adjacent Eddington district. Here’s her take on building your career.



- 1 Kindness is not a soft skill:** In business, projects end, but memories don’t. People remember how you made them feel long after a deal finishes. Kindness builds trust and shapes your reputation.
- 2 Embrace who you are and find your people:** Not every environment will suit you and that’s OK. Join organisations where your values align and where you can contribute with confidence.
- 3 Relationships are the real currency:** Markets shift quickly, but trust moves slowly. Invest in people early and treat every interaction as long-term.
- 4 Listen more than you talk:** Early in your career, it’s easy to equate visibility with how much you speak. With experience, you realise the strongest leaders listen first. Understanding the room often reveals the commercial reality beneath the surface.
- 5 Reputation compounds over time:** Careers aren’t shaped by standout moments but by small, consistent actions: doing what you said you would do and maintaining professionalism.
- 6 Treat your calendar like an asset:** If you don’t protect time to think, you end up reacting rather than leading.

Appointment of the week

Anglo-Austrian Society seeks committed chair

The Anglo-Austrian Society is seeking a new chair. Founded in 1944 by a group of Austrian refugees and British supporters committed to the creation of a free and democratic Austria, over the past 80 years it has developed to foster cross-cultural links and academic exchanges. Today membership is spread across the UK and Europe, with a programme of events, cultural gatherings and strategic grants.

The appointee will join a group of trustees to steer the society through key initiatives related to expanding membership and activities, strategic grant-making and stewarding resources. The role provides an opportunity to engage at senior level with Anglo-Austrian relations.

Ideal candidates will have a track record of senior leadership, ideally with experience of charitable governance. They will be likely to have a personal commitment to Austria that will give them credibility for stakeholders.

The role is unremunerated and expected to take around three days a month.

Apply by April 22 at appointments.thetimes.com

Working week

Secret of work happiness

British workers may like to grumble, but 88 per cent can name at least one thing they like about their job. Friendships with colleagues is the top contributor to workplace happiness, followed by seeing the impact of their work. Recognition, purposeful work and job satisfaction make up the rest of the top five, but salary is ranked seventh, the HR software firm Ciphra found. It said: “Generally, people are happiest when they feel connected.”

Are trainers a work taboo?

The great trainer debate is splitting the nation — with 70 per cent of staff saying that wearing the sports shoes to external meetings is inappropriate and 45 per cent adamant they should not be worn to work at all. The study by Clearpay shows Gen Z and millennials are most enthusiastic with 61 per cent for trainers at work, compared with 35 per cent of baby boomers. Overall, office workers are spending £483 a year on work attire.

Apprenticeships working

Leaders of small and medium-sized companies are placing increasing value on apprenticeships to produce work-ready employees. Research from Employment Hero suggests 46 per cent of these businesses now prize apprenticeships and degrees equally, while 37 per cent say they place greater worth on apprenticeships. Just 11 per cent view the “earn as you learn schemes” as less valuable than a degree.

Staff want help with bills

With the Iran war threatening to add an estimated £288 to household energy bills, two in five staff want more employer support. Employer contributions to energy costs is now one of the most in-demand workplace benefits, according to the specialist firm Zest. But only 27 per cent of workers currently receive this support. Zest said: “Leveraging benefits allows employers to offer personalised packages.”