

INSIDE THE AUTISTIC WORKFORCE

A National Survey of Autistic Employees
on Their Workplace Experience and
What Employers Need to Know



NEXT
FOR **AUTISM**

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A National Survey of Autistic Employees on Their Workplace Experience – and What Employers Need to Know

For autistic adults, equitable access to meaningful employment is a gateway to independence, purpose, and opportunity. For employers, retaining and nurturing autistic talent is not just the right thing to do. It is a competitive advantage.

The autism employment conversation has long centered on access: opening doors, expanding job training, launching hiring initiatives, and helping employers recognize the value of neurodiverse teams.

NOW IT IS TIME TO ASK: WHAT HAPPENS AFTER THE HIRE?

The people best positioned to answer are the ones living it. We sought out autistic adults who are currently or recently employed, representing a broad range of communication styles, support needs, education levels, industries, and career stages, to uncover what helps them fully contribute, grow, and build meaningful, lasting careers.

Their answers challenge assumptions about disclosure, accommodations, performance, and retention that employers have rarely been asked to examine. They show that the conditions driving success for autistic employees are neither costly nor complex. In many cases, they come down to everyday workplace practices, especially managers who know how to communicate clearly, build trust, and respond to individual needs. This report makes those conditions clear, giving employers a stronger blueprint for building workplaces where autistic employees can feel supported, valued, and able to be themselves.

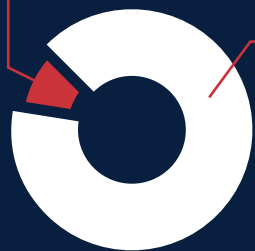
ABOUT THIS SURVEY

Completed in 2026, this mixed methods study was developed and led by NEXT for AUTISM, in partnership with Sago, a global research firm, and funded by the Anita Bhatia Foundation for Tomorrow. The instrument was developed with autistic and neurodivergent staff, advisors, and subject matter experts to ensure the questions and analysis reflected authentic workplace realities.

Respondents included a broad cross-section of the autism spectrum.

RESPONDENT PROFILE

9% recently employed & actively job searching



86% currently employed

- 417 U.S. autistic adults, ages 21–60 (Quant)
- 26 U.S. autistic adults, ages 21-59 (Qual)
- Reflect a wide range of communication styles and support needs; notably, 33% of respondents report using AAC or other assistive communication tools
- 40% identify as AuDHD (co-occurring autism and ADHD)
- Broad range of industries, roles, career stages, and diagnostic histories, including many diagnosed in adulthood

Their roles span a breadth of the workforce: **operations manager, occupational therapist, bartender, data scientist, graphic designer, paramedic, teacher, dog groomer, foreman, senior financial analyst, speech therapist, McDonald's crew member, IT manager, sales associate, director of motorsports, overnight restocker, kitchen manager, landscaping business owner.**

NOTE: Percentages used throughout the report have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

ENGAGEMENT, AT A COST

A majority of the autistic employees surveyed report workplace fit and feel fairly compensated. They are contributing across industries, building careers, and finding environments where their skills are recognized.

Workplace Experience

(percentage rating each area 4 or 5 out of 5)

73% feel supported and respected

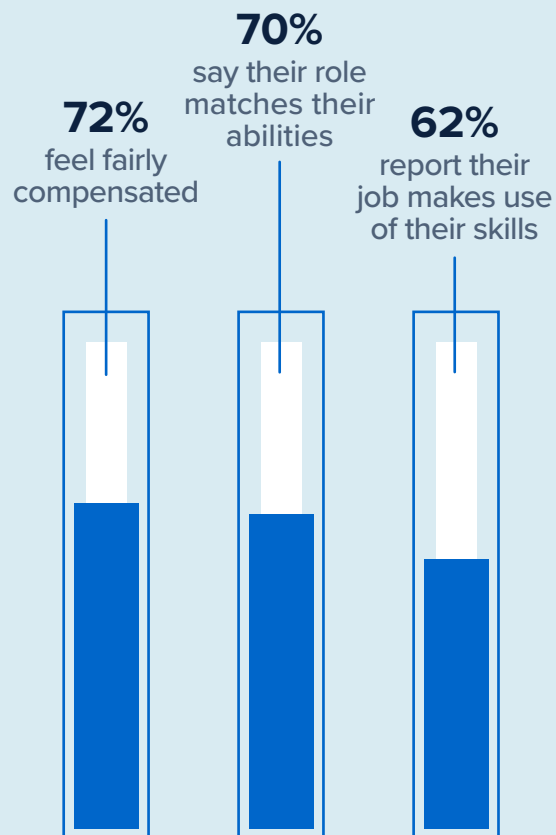
65% rate workplace inclusion positively

66% report supportive coworkers

68% report meaningful autonomy

However, even those who reported strong job satisfaction did not arrive there easily. These numbers reflect where people landed after years of trial, adaptation, and in many cases significant personal cost.

Job Fit

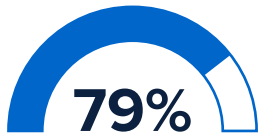


A CLOSER LOOK

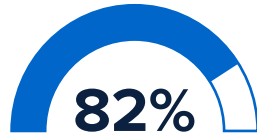
This survey focused on autistic adults who are currently or recently employed in order to understand what helps make work sustainable. It does not represent the full autistic labor force, including many autistic adults who remain unemployed or underemployed.

Key Challenges Employees Face at Work

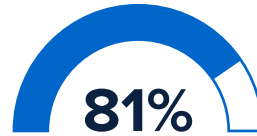
It is important to remember that high performance and high strain can, and often do, coexist.



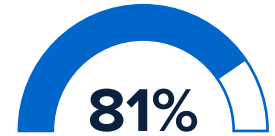
79% say masking and the resulting emotional exhaustion is challenging, with 50% finding it very, or extremely, challenging



82% report sensory overload as challenging, with 51% rating it very, or extremely, challenging



81% report report communication overload as challenging, with 51% rating it very, or extremely, challenging



81% say that navigating workplace social dynamics is challenging, with 49% saying it is very, or extremely, challenging

Masking: Suppressing natural responses, scripting conversations, managing sensory overload without letting it show

Strong performance does not always mean the environment is working. For many respondents, it comes at a heavy personal cost. Masking — suppressing natural responses, scripting conversations, managing sensory overload without letting it show — uses the same mental energy as doing the actual job.

About half of respondents report masking most of the time. That means the focus, precision, and problem-solving that made them a strong hire are competing with self-protection every single day. The engagement is real. So is the cost behind it. When that burden lifts, these employees are able to use their capabilities to the fullest.

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A positive workplace culture recognizes that people are individuals with varying needs to be effective and productive.

— SURVEY RESPONDENT



THE MANAGER EFFECT

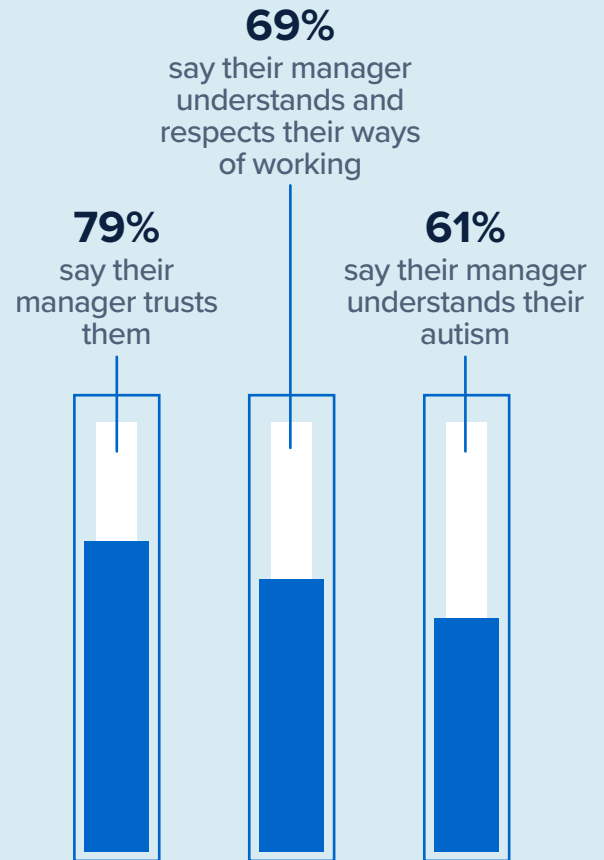
Organizations often focus on HR policies, employee resource groups (ERGs), and broad inclusion statements. But when autistic employees were asked what most shaped their day-to-day experience, **one factor stood above everything else: their direct manager.**

The manager relationship is not peripheral. It is structural, determining whether employees feel safe, whether they can communicate how they work best, and whether the strengths an organization hired them for are ever fully realized.

The behaviors autistic employees associate with effective managers are not specialized: empathy, active listening, clear communication, willingness to accommodate, consistent follow-through. These are the fundamentals of competent leadership.

WHEN TRUST IS MUTUAL, EVERYONE GETS MORE

Trust and Understanding Are Key



THE MANAGER GAINS

Stronger retention

Employees who feel safe and understood stay longer, saving the cost and disruption of turnover.

Full access to talent

Understands how their employee thinks, communicates, and contributes, and can channel that effectively.

Better work, better results

When employees can communicate how they work best, managers can match people to the right work, and the output shows it.

THE EMPLOYEE GAINS

Psychological safety

The freedom to stop masking and start contributing authentically, which is where real output lives.

Reduced masking load

When trust is present, the invisible second job gets lighter. Energy goes to work and life, not self-protection.

Room to bring their strengths

Hyperfocus, pattern recognition, deep analytical thinking these only show up fully when people feel safe enough to use them.

For autistic employees, good management is not a bonus. It is often the difference between stability and chronic strain, alleviating some of the invisible burden carried, and serving as a crucial support toward sustainable and successful employment.

A CLOSER LOOK

73% of the respondents reported disclosing – this is an unusually high number. Industry estimates typically place disclosure rates between 30% and 50%, so this warrants careful interpretation. This survey sample may overrepresent autistic employees already in supportive environments, inflating the rate. What we can say with confidence: when disclosure rates are low in your organization, the problem is almost certainly environmental, not individual.

THE ACCOMMODATION GAP

Even when support systems exist, many employees are not accessing them. The barrier is almost never resistance, it is the organizations that have not made support visible or easy to access.

An accommodation policy is only useful if employees know it exists, understand what is possible, and trust that asking won't make them a target. When those conditions are absent, employees manage challenges privately, often long past the point where support could have made a difference.

The most common accommodations among those who do receive support are also the most straightforward: flexible hours and breaks, leave options like medical leave, sick days, and options to work at home that help manage energy and prevent burnout. These are not specialized interventions. They are basic work design elements that benefit everyone. Support should not be a last resort. It should be built into how organizations hire, onboard, and manage from day one.



The Hidden Gap in Workplace Support

Many employees don't know what support exists – or how to access it.

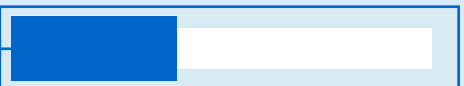
40%

are unfamiliar with accommodations available without disclosing



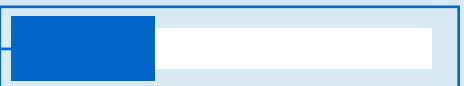
36%

are unfamiliar with the range of workplace accommodations available once hired



31%

are unfamiliar with legal rights to reasonable accommodations





I felt safe disclosing my ASD to my manager when they consistently practiced active listening in our one-on-ones. Whenever I spoke about work challenges, they didn't interrupt, asked follow-up questions to understand better, and never dismissed my concerns.

— SURVEY RESPONDENT

DISCLOSURE FOLLOWS SAFETY

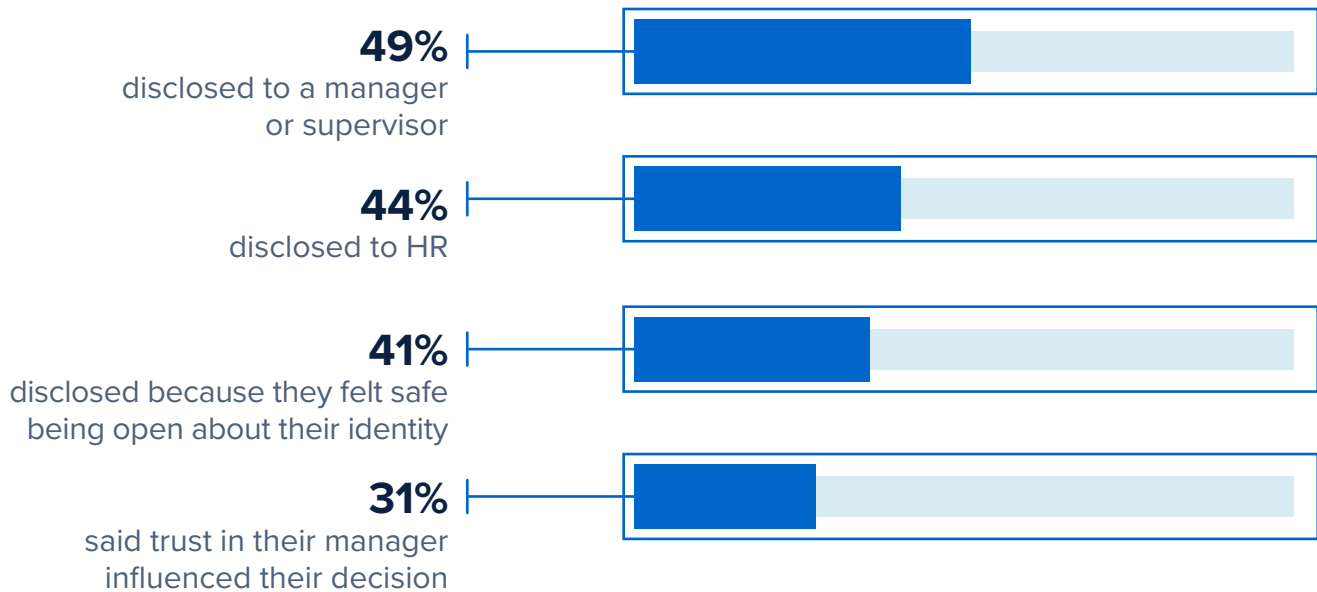
Nearly three-quarters (73%) of autistic employees surveyed disclosed their diagnosis to someone at work, and who they told first matters.

Employees are not going through formal HR channels first. They are trusting the person they work with every day. The manager relationship

is not just a retention factor; it is the front line of disclosure, and everything that follows from it.

Disclosure is a gateway to accommodations and to something equally important, the ability to show up to work as yourself. Employees who don't feel safe to disclose can't access either, creating a cycle where the people who need the most support are the least likely to receive it.

Employees Disclose Their Diagnosis Where They Feel Safe—Often to Managers

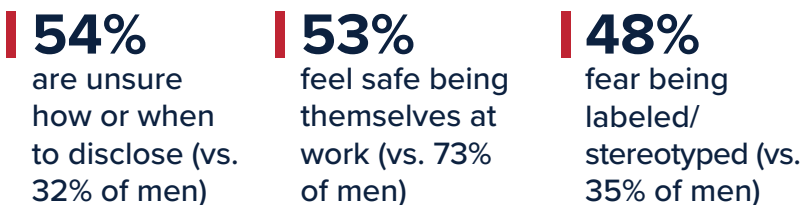


ONE SIZE FITS NOBODY

Workplace experience varies significantly across gender, diagnosis timing, generation, and co-occurring conditions. Employers who treat autistic staff as a single group risk missing where pressure is greatest and where retention risk is most concentrated.

Women Are Carrying More and Getting Less

Autistic women face a workplace environment that is consistently less responsive to how they communicate and what they need:

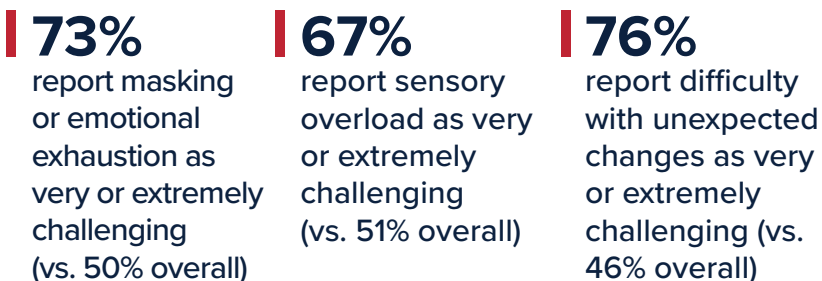


These differences reflect employees navigating both autistic workplace barriers and gendered expectations simultaneously. The result is higher masking, more uncertainty, and less access to support.

Late Diagnosis Means Learning the Rules Midstream

Adults diagnosed later in life report some of the most difficult workplace experiences. Many are navigating expectations in real time, reinterpreting years of prior experience without a framework workplaces and institutions failed to provide.

For Recently Diagnosed Adults (within 2 years)



Generational Differences

Onboarding experiences follow a similar pattern, with satisfaction varying by generation and younger employees reporting less positive experiences as they apply to and join an organization.



of Gen X report positive day-to-day workplace experiences



of Millennials report positive day-to-day workplace experiences

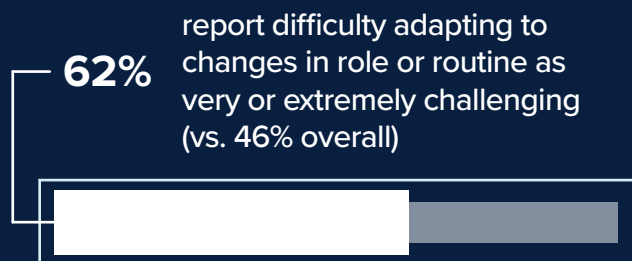
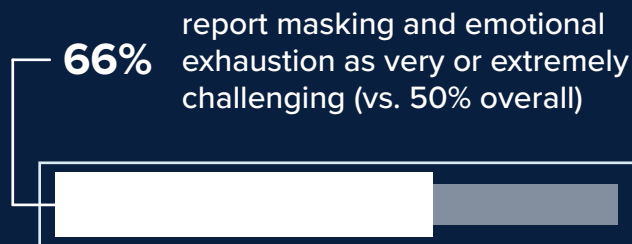
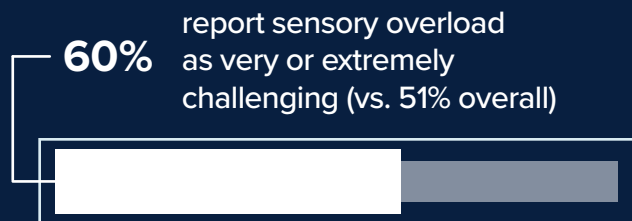


of Gen Z report positive day-to-day workplace experiences

These differences may reflect accumulated coping strategies, seniority, or the fact that younger autistic workers have higher expectations for inclusion and are less willing to quietly absorb what earlier generations had no choice but to endure.

AuDHD: COMPOUNDING STRAIN

Forty percent of respondents identify as having autism and ADHD (AuDHD.) This group reported consistently higher strain across every category:



At 40% of this sample, AuDHD employees may represent the single largest subgroup in the autistic workforce. One-size-fits-all approaches leave them behind.

AUDHD

AuDHD is not a formal diagnosis, and is often used by those with co-occurring diagnoses of **autism** and **ADHD**. When autism and ADHD co-occur, they don't just stack. They interact neurologically, amplifying certain traits, creating new ones, and sometimes making each profile look different than it would on its own. AuDHD is its own way of being wired.



WHEN WORKPLACES FALL SHORT, PEOPLE BUILD THEIR OWN SUPPORT

When workplace support is limited or difficult to access, autistic employees find it elsewhere. Nearly 7 in 10 respondents report relying on support outside of work to help them succeed at work.

These supports include **therapists, mentors, family members, online communities, and social media.**

Together, they form a parallel infrastructure that helps employees process difficult experiences, navigate workplace norms, and ultimately sustain employment.

While this can signal resourcefulness by the autistic employee, it better reflects the gap employers have left unfilled and not a trait to be admired and left in place.



Social Media as Informal Infrastructure

Respondents report turning to social media for workplace information and support at rates comparable to therapists and professional support providers. That suggests many autistic employees are learning how to navigate managers, request support, and interpret workplace expectations through informal channels rather than through the workplace itself.

AI Is Already Part of Access

39% of respondents report using AI tools like ChatGPT in their job search, primarily for resumes, applications, and interview preparation. Accessibility is already evolving. Many autistic job seekers are using new tools to bridge gaps in traditional systems.

DESIGNED TO WORK

The business case for building a neuroinclusive workplace beyond hiring is not abstract. The workforce is shifting in ways employers cannot afford to ignore.

1 in 31 children have been identified with autism.¹ Over half of Gen Z identifies as neurodivergent.² The talent pool that employers are competing for is increasingly autistic and neurodivergent.

Workplaces that get this right make better use of talent they already have. They reduce the strain caused by masking, miscommunication, and unclear expectations. They help employees contribute more fully, managers lead more effectively, and teams work better. Companies that figure this out will have an advantage.



1 IN 31

children have been identified with autism.¹



A CLOSER LOOK

The path forward that follows is clear and practical, but that is not the same as simple. Many organizations have policies that gesture toward these ideas without ever building the conditions that make them possible. These recommendations are grounded directly in what autistic employees said made the difference.

A CLEARER PATH FORWARD

Start with managers. The single most impactful investment an organization can make is not a new program or policy. It is making sure the person with the most daily influence over an employee's experience knows how to lead. Train managers to give clear feedback, adapt how they communicate, and run meetings that work for different processing styles.

Make support visible from day one, and offer it to everyone. List available accommodations in offer letters, onboarding materials, and manager guides. Better yet, make it standard practice to ask every new hire what helps them do their best work. When that conversation happens broadly, no one is singled out, stigma drops, and needs get addressed before they become retention risks. The burden of navigation should be on the organization, not the individual.

Ask who is carrying the most. Women, AuDHD employees, and recently diagnosed adults report measurably higher barriers across nearly every dimension of work. If your retention and engagement data is not disaggregated by gender, diagnosis timing, and co-occurring conditions, you are averaging over real differences. People carrying the most are often the first to quietly leave.

Treat autistic feedback as operational intelligence.

Add a feedback channel, a survey, a focus group, or standing conversation. Then treat the answers as data about what is and is not working in your organization. Autistic employees who are succeeding can tell you exactly what made that possible. Ask them.

Stop outsourcing the support. Nearly 7 in 10 autistic employees in this study are relying on outside resources, therapists, online communities, informal networks, just to function at work. Mental health benefits, executive function coaching, and flexible leave are not niche accommodations. They are the kinds of supports that help any employee manage complexity and show up consistently. If they are not part of the benefit package your organization offers, your employees are already seeking them out on their own time and at their own expense.

Build the basics in. Clear expectations, written communication, predictable structures, flexibility in how and where work gets done, these are not extras. They are the conditions under which more people can do their best work without absorbing unnecessary strain. Every employee benefits when these are in place.

The blueprint was never missing. We simply had not asked the people holding it. This report shows that the things autistic employees need to do well at work are often the same things that make work better for everyone: clarity, support, flexibility, and managers who know how to lead. When employers build those things in, they create workplaces where more people can succeed and give themselves a real advantage.



ABOUT NEXT FOR AUTISM

NEXT for AUTISM transforms the national landscape of services for people with autism by strategically designing, launching, and supporting innovative programs. We believe that individuals with autism deserve to live fulfilling, productive lives, supported by excellent services and connected to their communities. We continually ask, what's next for people on the autism spectrum? Learn more at NEXTforAUTISM.org.

Resources and Supports

- [Resources for autistic employees](#)
- [Resources for employers](#)

Survey Methodology

The findings are based on a 20-minute online national survey conducted by NEXT for Autism in partnership with Sago among 417 U.S. adults ages 21 to 60 who self-identify as autistic or have a formal diagnosis, including Autism Spectrum Disorder, Asperger's syndrome or pervasive developmental disorder. Participants were recruited through an online research panel and were either currently employed, recently employed, or had searched for a job within the past two years. Because the survey was conducted using a non-probability sample, no margin of sampling error is reported.

Note: Unless otherwise indicated, all data points are from the NEXT for AUTISM survey.

Additional sources:

- 1: *The 2015 National Autism Indicators Report (Roux et al., Drexel)*
- 2: *ZenBusiness Commissioned Survey (Pollfish, 2023)*