

# INSIDE THE AUTISTIC WORKFORCE

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



## OVERVIEW

For autistic adults, equitable access to meaningful employment is a gateway to independence, purpose, and opportunity.

**For employers, retaining autistic talent is a business advantage.**

But for more than a decade, the autism employment conversation has focused on access – opening doors to increased hiring. This research shifts the focus to what happens after an autistic adult is hired.

Developed by NEXT for AUTISM in partnership with Sago and funded by the Anita Bhatia Foundation for Tomorrow, this 2026 survey captures the experiences of 417 currently and recently employed autistic adults across the U.S. Respondents reflect a wide range of communication styles and support needs, including 33% who use assistive communication tools. The group also includes a significant portion (40%) who identify as AuDHD (co-occurring autism and ADHD), and spans a broad mix of industries, roles, career stages, and diagnostic histories, including many diagnosed in adulthood.

Their answers show that the conditions helping autistic employees contribute, perform, and stay are often not complex or costly, but rooted in everyday workplace practices. Most notably: managers who communicate clearly, build trust, and respond to individual needs — practices that make work better for everyone.

## THE MANAGER EFFECT

**One factor stood above all others in shaping the day-to-day experiences of the workers with autism: the direct manager.**

79% say their manager trusts them, and 69% say their manager understands and respects how they work.

The data shows that employees are turning to managers – not HR – as their primary point of trust. 49% report disclosing their autism to a manager or supervisor, compared to 44% who disclose to HR.

This relationship shapes more than day-to-day interactions. It influences whether employees feel safe communicating how they work, accessing support, and contributing fully.

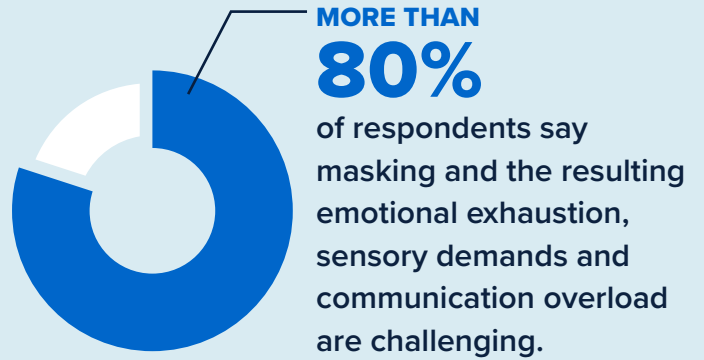
41% say they disclosed because they felt safe, and 31% say trust in their manager influenced their decision.

This is driven by everyday leadership behaviors – not specialized training. When managers communicate clearly, build trust, and follow through consistently, employees are more likely to share what they need to succeed at work.

## KEY FINDINGS

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. 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.

But strong outcomes do not always mean the environment is working. High performance and high strain coexist.

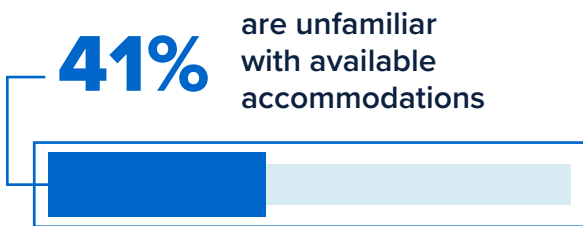


For many, sustained employment depends on personal adaptation – placing the burden on the employee rather than creating a workplace where all can succeed.

## THE ACCOMMODATION GAP

Even when support systems exist, many employees are not accessing them – not because of resistance, but because that support is not visible or easy to access.

**The most common accommodations respondents use are simple – adjustments to hours, breaks, or workloads that help manage energy and prevent burnout.** These are not specialized interventions, but basic work practices that benefit everyone.



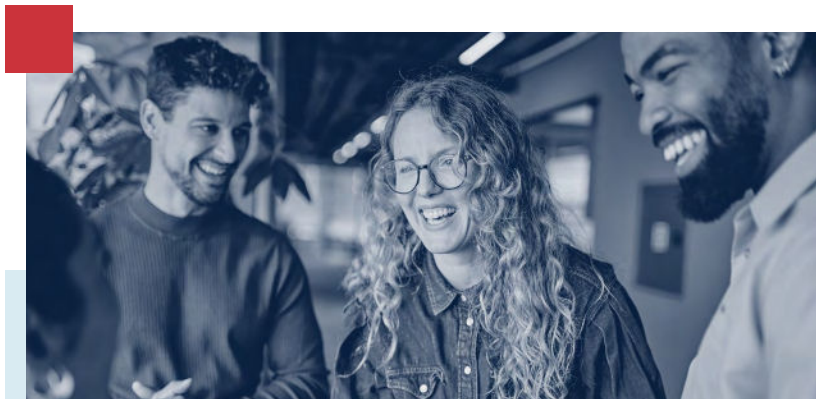
## ONE SIZE FITS NOBODY

**Workplace experiences vary across gender, diagnosis timing, and co-occurring conditions.**

These differences are not evenly distributed – some groups are disproportionately impacted in how they experience and navigate the workplace.

- Women report lower comfort with disclosure and fewer supports.
- AuDHD employees (40% of respondents) experience higher levels of strain across all measures.
- Late-diagnosed adults report greater difficulty navigating workplace expectations.

These differences underscore the importance of moving beyond one-size-fits-all approaches.



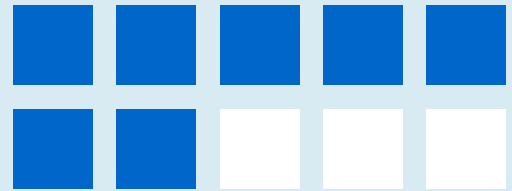
## WHEN WORKPLACES FALL SHORT, PEOPLE BUILD THEIR OWN SUPPORT

When workplace support is limited or difficult to access, autistic employees find it elsewhere.

Nearly 7 in 10 respondents rely on therapists, mentors, family, and online communities to navigate workplace challenges and sustain employment. These supports form a parallel system filling unintentional gaps left by the workplace – while internal resources like HR are among the least utilized.

**Notably, employees are turning to social media for guidance at nearly the same rate as therapists and medical professionals – learning how to navigate managers and workplace expectations outside formal channels.**

At the same time, accessibility is evolving – 39% report using AI tools like ChatGPT in their job search to bridge gaps in traditional systems.



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**7 IN 10**

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## DESIGNED TO WORK

The workforce is shifting, and the talent pool is increasingly neurodivergent. Organizations that get this right make better use of the talent they already have – reducing strain, improving communication, and enabling stronger performance across teams.

The path forward is clear – and grounded in what autistic employees say actually works.



## BEYOND HIRING: A PATH TO SUCCESS

- **Start with managers.** Equip managers to lead effectively day-to-day, giving clear feedback, adapting communication styles, and orchestrating meetings that work for different processing styles.
- **Make support visible from day one.** Normalize access by embedding accommodations into hiring and onboarding, and asking every employee what helps them do their best work.
- **Focus on those facing the greatest barriers.** Disaggregate data and design support for those most at risk of disengagement or attrition.
- **Treat employee feedback as operational insight.** Build structured ways to gather input—and act on it as data about what is and isn't working.
- **Bring support in-house.** Many employees rely on external resources to function at work; core supports should be part of the benefits package.

Build the basics into how work gets done. Clear expectations, written communication, flexibility, and predictable structures enable more people to succeed.

**The blueprint was never missing. The conditions that help autistic employees succeed are the same conditions that make workplaces work better for everyone.**



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](https://NEXTforAUTISM.org).