

Making the workplace more inclusive: Optimizing professional development for autistic employees.

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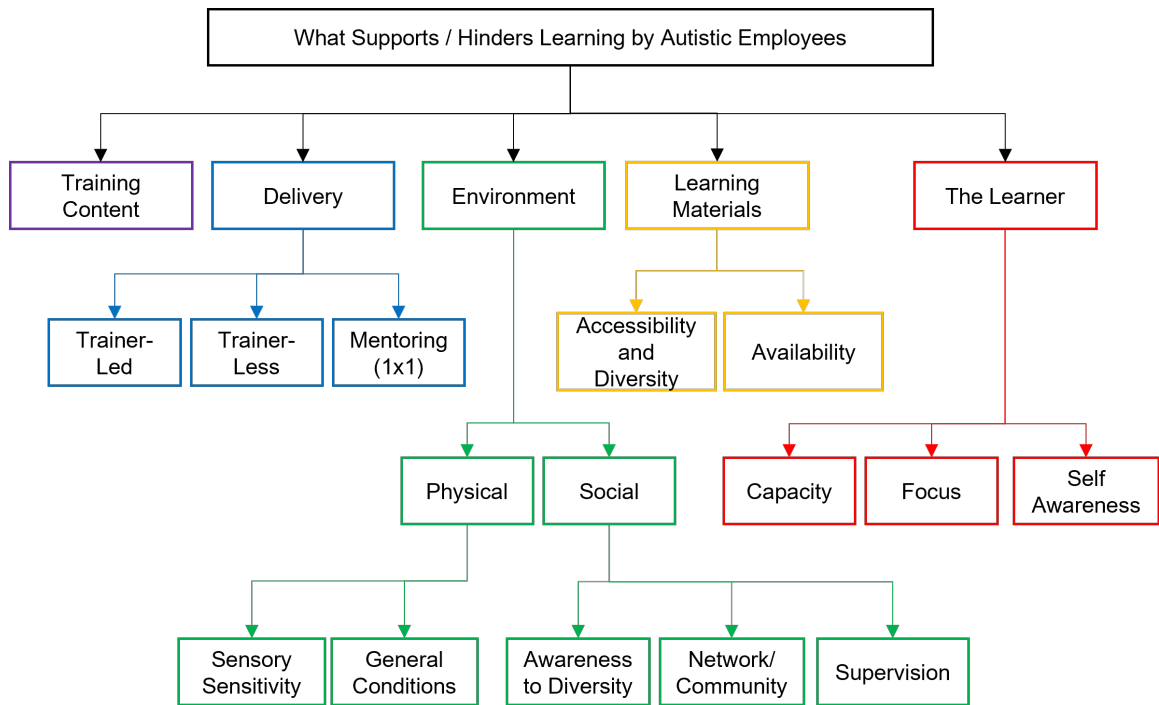
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This research explores learning in the workplace for employees with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in the context of the Israeli high-tech industry. Although it is set in a specific context, it has a wider applicability for employees with ASD.

The global workplace environment has been undergoing a major transformation in the last few decades, with computers taking over and outperforming various tasks performed by humans for generations. Human roles have been shifting and will continue to shift (World Economic Forum, 2016), although there are still many areas where humans outperform computers, such as social intelligence, emotional intelligence, collaboration, communication skills, and creativity. The importance of these abilities is likely to increase and become more critical to success, retention, and the creation of effective work environments (Deming, 2017; Jarrahi, 2018; World Economic Forum, 2016; Frey & Osborne, 2017). However, individuals with autism have deficits exactly in these areas as they display differences from neurotypically developed persons in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts; and also display restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

On the other hand, individuals with ASD present various unique strengths in different areas in the context of employability. This includes good memory, total openness and absolute honesty, even if this lack of tact works sometimes against the self-interest of the autistic employee, meticulous accuracy and exceptional detail orientation, love of learning and ability to focus for long periods of time, systematic information processing, and ability to process large amount of data, tendency for high creativity and out-of-the-box thinking, highly developed sense of justice and fairness, long focus, especially when the task in hand is repetitive and ‘Sisyphean’ or complex in nature, loyalty and lower turnover risk, diligent and a strong strong work ethic (Alsop, 2016; Nitzan-Weisman et al., 2019; Scott et al., 2019; Wong et al., 2018; Wright, 2016; Kirchner et al., 2016; Faragher et al., 2018; Goldfarb, 2018; Parmar, 2017). In order to fully access the strengths of these individuals, it is important that in the area of workplace learning they are not left behind other employees and that learning, and development are made as accessible as possible – taking their neurological differences into account. This is the core of this research; the exploration of which factors facilitate and hinder workplace learning by employees with ASD.

This study employed an inductive, qualitative approach. Semi structured interviews were conducted with 15 individuals. 10 autistic employees in the Israeli high-tech industry, and 5 professionals who work with autistic adults, and support them in employability contexts. Questions were based on a prior literature review and data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis.



The analysis identified the following emerging themes:

Content: Here, relevance, applicability and engaging delivery of training content were identified as important aspects.

“What in it for me” – important to understand in order to increase the motivation for learning.” Respondent A02N

“Autists will not be motivated to learn if they are not interested in the subject.” Respondent S02A

Delivery. This theme dealt with the training delivery methods and includes three sub-topics: Trainer-led delivery, with a suggestion that that the trainer's personality, delivery skills and class management as essential contributors for successful training; self-learning where mixed experiences were reported; and mentoring, with wide agreement that this

setting supports learning for individuals with ASD well. Autistic learners agreed that structured and clear delivery is key:

“I need the trainer to be very enthusiastic about the materials and the course. The trainer should stay focused, and not talk about irrelevant things.” Respondent A06E

“Not to jump from topic to topic, stay structured and clear.”
Respondent S02A

Environment. This theme discusses the environment in which the training is conducted. Here a number of aspects relating to the physical, sensory environment were identified as facilitators or obstacles to the learning of individuals with ASD; but there was also consent that the social environment plays a large role. This includes an awareness of diversity by others such as the trainers and fellow employees; inclusion into networks/communities; and supervision, in the form of additional support (usually out of class time).

“A community of learners is very helpful, you get great tips, but in the end you have to do your project [yourself].” Respondent A08G

“The trainer should conduct an opening familiarization game, so the autistic individuals take part in an activity that everyone else does and create some level of familiarization. Support networking, because it is critical for the future of people, because the workplace/roles change all the time.” Respondent A03Y

Learning Materials. This theme focuses on the artefacts that are given to the learner. It is found that accessibility and diversity of training materials) are very important to support learning, and that the availability of training materials out of the training/class time is helpful.

The learner. Here comments on learners with ASD themselves have been aggregated. The learner’s ability and motivation/willingness to learn needs to be supported; the learner’s

ability to focus/concentrate during training or needs is supported in term of class management, physical aids or others; and finally self-awareness – if the learner is aware of his/her condition and support needs and is able to share this with others, it usually leads to direct communication and better support.

Employees with ASD constitute one of many diverse groups in workplace environments, and even within the group are very individual. However, they do bring a specific set of strengths to the workplace but also face a range of common challenges. In themselves, none of the identified support needs are resource intensive or difficult to address, but for the individuals concerned, they can make a substantial difference in the effectiveness of work place development.

944 words

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