

[Working With Autism And ADHD](#)

As more people with autism and ADHD begin to advocate for themselves at work, some employers are changing their workplaces.

[Lisa Rabasca Roepe](#) 02.17.17 5:52 AM

When Sam Briefer, 23, was hired by Ernst & Young last year, he had two concerns: that he wouldn't make friends with his coworkers, and that his office environment would distract him from his work.

These sound like the concerns of any new hire, but for Briefer, they went beyond typical new-hire jitters because he has autism. He was hired after graduating from college as part of the company's pilot program to recruit employees who have been diagnosed with autism. The company plans to expand this program, says Lori Golden, diverse abilities strategy leader at Ernst & Young.

Briefer says all of his concerns were unfounded, in part because of the support Ernst & Young provides. He says he is friendly with his coworkers and has socialized with them a few times after work. He's allowed to listen to music using headphones because it helps him to concentrate on his tasks and, when an assignment to schedule multiple Skype meetings for his team became a bit overwhelming for him, Briefer's manager and job coach helped him to find the solution of delegating and asking coworkers for help.

The key to working with employees with autism, says Briefer, is for managers to listen to their needs. "Let the employee explain their learning style, how they like to work in certain environments, and how they would best cope," says Briefer.

Self-Advocacy Is More Common

The practice of listening to the employee's preferences has worked well for human resources manager Kelly Burns, who recalls the time an intern told her and a manager that he had Asperger syndrome. "He told us he was working with a coach to help him prepare for life in the workplace," says Burns, who is now an HR manager at Summit Consulting LLC. "He came to us with suggestions about working and interacting with others, and that really took the pressure off his manager." Burns says he even let them know that he might not always laugh at their jokes, and that we shouldn't take that to mean he wasn't an engaged or happy employee.

There is an increasing awareness in the workplace for certain conditions that are being diagnosed and how these conditions can be considered a disability, says attorney Susan Warner. "We are seeing more requests for accommodations in general," says Vanessa Matsis-McCready, assistant general counsel and human resources manager for [Engage PEO](#), a company that offers HR solutions for small- to mid-sized companies.

Sensitivity Training Helps Colleagues

While employers are accustomed to providing ergonomic workstations for employees with repetitive motion disorders or flexible hours for an employee returning to work after surgery, Matsis-McCready says, employers are just beginning to get comfortable accommodating employees for other disabilities. "The best thing for an employer to do when they need to make an accommodation is to start an open dialogue with the employee about what they need," Warner says.

For employees diagnosed with ADHD or autism, the widespread adoption of open floor plans in the workplace has made it more difficult for them to focus on their work, Matsis-McCready says. Employees with ADHD or autism might need to work in a quiet area with fewer distractions, she says, but their colleagues shouldn't assume they don't want to be part of a team or work collaboratively. There are other ways to accommodate an employee with ADHD, Matsis-McCready says, including providing noise-canceling headphones or allowing them to work a flexible schedule that is outside normal business hours, where they come into work a few hours earlier or later than other employees so they have quiet time to complete their work without distractions.

Burns says accommodations for an employee diagnosed with autism include:

- Being specific, clear, and concise with directions.
- Anticipating a lack of emotional response and not interpreting it to mean that person isn't engaged in their work or with the team.
- Limiting your team's use of sarcasm and hyperbole.
- Looking for opportunities for team building outside the office besides happy hour and team sports.

Companies Benefit From Another Perspective

In addition to Ernst & Young, other large companies are developing programs to recruit and retain employees with autism. For instance, SAP has a goal of hiring 650 employees with autism by 2020. So far, the company has hired 116 individuals with autism who range in age from 22 to 59, are located in 17 locations in nine different countries, and spread across 100 teams, says Jose Velasco, head of SAP's [Autism at Work program](#) in the U.S. To help them succeed, SAP provides six weeks of pre-employment training, and once they are hired, they are supported by their manager, who has been given autism awareness training; an office mentor, who has volunteered to help and is from another work team; and a job and life skills coach, Velasco says. SAP and Ernst & Young are informally working with Microsoft and Hewlett-Packard to share best practices for hiring and retaining more employees with autism.

SAP and Ernst & Young have found that hiring employees with autism bring benefits. They provide a different perspective to problem solving and the creative process, Velasco says. Working with an employee diagnosed with autism can help you become a more effective communicator and manager, says Jamell Mitchell, an associate director at Ernst & Young who manages Briefer and several other employees with autism. "I have found myself pausing and saying, 'I'm not as clear as I can be,'" he says, "and then taking the time to recraft a communication so it's clear and I am hitting the key points."

<https://www.fastcompany.com/3068177/the-future-of-work/working-with-autism-and-adhd>