

Making Employment Fit: Accommodations and Other Dirty Words

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Introduction

Many autistics desire to work in a typical job. However, many later find that the demands placed on them are extreme, contribute to depression, and are not sustainable. For others, they find they can't even manage to get past the first steps of the job search process. Workplaces and the processes they use were developed with neurotypicals (NTs) in mind (at least in theory). What may work for an NT won't necessarily work for an autistic. Autistics often need to use different tactics during the job search just to get their "foot in the door", while later they will need to request and realize workplace changes to be able to sustain employment.

A Warning

There is no magic formula which will allow everyone to fit in every possible job. It is not a moral failing to have a disability which is incompatible with traditional full-time employment. However, it is possible for many to find creative ways of handling the workplace. If you are not one of those people, I have no desire to change you into one of those. My desire is to help those who desire full time work find ways of best achieving it, not to make people feel guilty or inferior.

In addition, the specific examples I use in this document will not work for everyone. In fact, most will need to be modified to work well. There is no step-by-step guide, nor is it possible to create one, that handles all employment issues. It is my hope that you will be able to see creative ways of dealing with your own work struggles, using my specific examples as encouragement that solutions are often possible. Taking the suggestions and methods as-is will not work – you have to make them fit your specific situation.

A Powerful Accommodation: The Right Job

Your job is more important than any other single accommodation. Two positions, with exactly the same job description, in the same industry, in very similar organizations may provide very different work experiences. A horrible manager is hell to work for, whether you are autistic or NT! Some companies go out of their way to help employees be as productive as possible, while others insist that any accommodation is a privilege and that you are in need of discipline merely as a result of asking for accommodation.

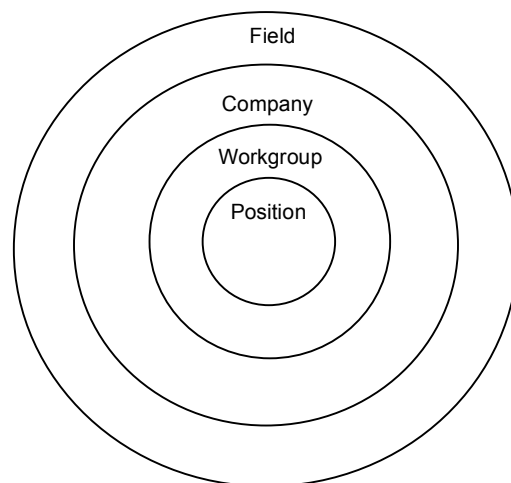
Even NTs have a hard time finding good jobs. Unfortunately, any given job probably won't fit the vast majority of people. And some jobs are hell for anyone. But good jobs

do exist, and there are some things that you can do to maximize your chances of finding one of these elusive jobs. But then, once you find the good job, you must pass through the gauntlet of the interview! Fear not – there are ways through this ordeal!

Locating potentially “Good” Jobs

While looking for a job, there are several factors to consider. First, how picky can you afford to be? Reality dictates that sometimes food is more important than most other short-term considerations. Obviously, people who already have work and are just looking to “move up” can be more selective than those who don’t currently have a way of providing for their own financial needs. You must balance pragmatism with your ideals. Some people, based on circumstances, may not have the flexibility that others enjoy during their job search. However, others don’t recognize the flexibility that they have and thus miss opportunities. As you determine the level of flexibility you have, make sure that you stay focused on improving your current situation. Don’t be led into the trap of accepting a wholly unsuitable position, which will lead you to depression or worse, simply because you don’t like something about your current situation – consider your needs, both short and long term, and pick only options that are truly better than your current situation.

As you go through this process, consider the various attributes of the job. Which ones are important to you? Which ones can you compromise on? Which ones do you not care about? Look at all aspects of the job, such as the field it is in, the type of company you will work for, the composition of the workgroup, and the exact position you will fill.



It’s useful to think of the position, workgroup, company, and field as concentric circles. As you move outward from position towards the overall field, the influence each of these has in making a given situation better or worse lessens. By far, the most important consideration for satisfaction within a position is the workgroup, followed by the company as a whole. However, with autistics, choosing fields which hold little interest or companies with extremely “traditional” views of employees can lead to misery. So, even these “less influential” areas need to be considered.

What Field is Best?

A field is a way of classifying a large number of jobs. It's less specific than an "occupation" is, but it is specific enough to have an idea of what the work would look like. For instance, a field might be "aviation operations" while an occupation would be a "pilot". Often, it isn't possible to work in your ideal occupation – but typically it is possible to find related work in the same field. This is especially true if you lack the education, intrinsic skill, or experience that your ideal occupation requires. For instance, you might desire to be an airline pilot. However, if you do not yet have a pilot's license and have not gathered the necessary flight experience, you will have a great deal of trouble getting a job as an airline pilot. However, there are many jobs in aviation, some of which may eventually lead to a job as a pilot, while yet others may be just as interesting to you as being a pilot would be.

One of the most important things, when choosing a field, is to consider how well it works with your perseverations. Autistics almost always do better in fields they are interested in. You are going to persevere – that is a nearly universal trait of autistics. The question to ask yourself is, "Are my perseverations going to make me a better employee in the eyes of my boss, or are they going to keep me from doing what my boss wants?" A job in a field you truly love – something you would do for free if you weren't being paid for it – requires significantly less changes and accommodations for your autism than working in a field you hate (or even are merely uninterested in) would require.

Be creative when looking at your perseverations. You might feel that your perseverations couldn't possibly leverage to find a good field for you. And you may be right. But look closely and deeply – we do best when we work in an area we love. Also look at how multiple perseverations might apply to a single field – if you are interested in both complex machines and shopping malls, you might look at a job involved with the construction of malls or the management of a mall's utility (HVAC, power, water, etc) systems.

Where you have multiple perseverations that don't lead to a common field, consider which ones you are best at. It's possible to persevere yet have little actual ability in a field. However, one of the benefits of looking broadly at fields instead of specifically at positions is that there very well may be related positions that would use skills you have. For instance, your interest might be music, but you may lack the ability to play an instrument or sing – yet you might be excellent at giving entertaining tidbits and know the words to thousands of songs by heart, in which case a DJ position may be ideal!

Different fields value different traits. Some fields value beauty, others value intelligence, others value social skills, other value results. Someone who can't excel in demonstrating the values of the field is going to have a hard time at work. However, if, for example, the field values the ability to do a repetitive task for long hours, and that happens to be something you have no problem doing, you may be an exceptional worker in that environment.

Finally, the amount of growth in the field is important. Fast growing fields tolerate more deviation from the norm in potential employees. Many computer people are finding this to be true – during the dot com boom times, anyone with any experience programming could get a job at many different companies – your social skills, for instance, were largely irrelevant, as they needed a programmer; having a programmer who didn't make eye contact was preferable to not having a programmer! Today, however, that growth has slowed significantly, and these very same jobs are requiring substantial social skills and “normal” looking behavior (although the computer field is still one of the faster growing fields – autistics in some other fields have been hit much harder by the bad economy).

What Kind of Company is Best?

There is a lot of debate on what kind of company is best. Large or small? Old or new? What about companies that make a point about accommodating disabled people? Or companies that consider themselves the best in the industry? While all of these are important considerations, the workgroup inside the company has more influence than the company itself, so it should be remembered that even bad companies can be good places to work for – if you are in the right workgroup. Of course, the opposite is true as well. However, despite the importance of finding a good workgroup, the type of company will have significant influence on your working experience.

Both large and small companies can be good companies to work for. There are stereotypes surround both types, but in reality the stereotypes often break down. There is a perception, for instance, that small companies are less likely to offer accommodations. However, while small companies may be less likely to undertake costly structural changes for physical access, they may be very willing to accommodate “oddness” in the workplace. Large companies typically do know the law, however sometimes we want accommodations that the company doesn't have a legal obligation to provide – in those cases, sometimes ignorance of the law (on the part of the company) can actually be an advantage – they may think the law requires them to provide the accommodation when it does not! Size of a company is a very small factor in your workplace experience.

Companies who believe they have a “tradition” to uphold are often very tough for autistics. “Tradition” doesn't mean “old”, rather it means, “We have a set way of doing certain things.” Even young companies can have harmful “traditions”. These types of traditions are often very strictly enforced, sometimes directly through formal policies (dress codes, for instance), sometimes through informal means (such as not promoting women to key positions, despite having written policies saying you treat people equally). Often having strict formal rules implies the possibility of strict informal rules. These informal rules can be very difficult for us to master. In some companies, however, the workgroup still has enough power to bend the rules within their own groups, so there may be hope even in the most traditional of companies. Another exception to the rule that “companies that value tradition are bad for autistics” is when the tradition is one of hiring, promoting, and rewarding people based on their accomplishments and abilities.

For instance, in some universities, the tradition of “odd” professors is firmly established and many autistics thrive in such places. Other companies pride themselves on ignoring tradition and being “progressive” and “doing things differently.” It’s important to find out if this is the company’s true belief, or if it is just part of a PR campaign. Where the company truly is progressive, it can be a wonderfully accepting place to work. However, even progressive companies can have unhealthy workgroups – do not assume all workgroups are identical!

What Kind of Workgroup is Best?

There are two primary considerations in evaluating individual workgroups. First, your supervisor must be compatible with you. Second, how the group sees itself is important. Even within wonderful organizations, bad bosses abound and harmful workgroups exist – and sometimes good workgroups manage to exist in horrid companies.

Your primary concern should be your supervisor – she is the person who can effect the most change in your work environment, for good or for bad. Does the workgroup’s supervisor value the things you value? Does she value the things you are good at? Or does she expect someone to accept a position and become “indistinguishable from their peers?” Is your supervisor going to require you to violate your ethical convictions, or do you share the same convictions? Does your potential supervisor expect to be in the same position in 2 months, or are they as sick of the company as you will be if you worked there?

In addition to the supervisor, the group dynamic is important. Is the group’s work style compatible with yours? Do they enjoy working together, or does everyone prefer to get their work assignments, retreat to their private offices, and return a week later with the finished product? Another consideration is how they see themselves relative to the rest of the company. Are they a cog in the machine – or are they proud of the way they do accounts payable, knowing that the very survival of civilization depends upon them (a place like that, if the attitude has the proper amount of humor mixed in, can be a lot of fun)? Does their opinion of themselves match that of the rest of the company? If they think they do wonderful things, but the company as a whole respects cockroaches more than this workgroup, it probably won’t be a pleasant place to work. Of course a good supervisor can buffer away that type of problem, but what happens when the supervisor gets fed up herself and quits?

One thing to remember is that a good work environment respects differences, even when those differences fall inside the range of “normal”. In a positive work environment, even NTs find work more enjoyable. Find out how satisfied the other employees are. What is the workgroup’s turnover rate – that is, how many people last 2 months here? 2 years? 20 years? Even most NTs know a good thing when they see it, and they tend to stick around at a good job.

What Position is Best?

The position you fill has direct bearing on your status in the organization. It's also important that the position be compatible with you, one that won't bore you, and where you can engage in perseverations and be rewarded, not punished. Finally, it is always helpful to have a position where you can prove your worth to the company in a quantitative way.

Status may not seem important to some autistics – they aren't seeking social standing (although some do seek this! Stereotypes about autistic social drive are often wrong). However, these same autistics may benefit from some of the benefits of status – for instance, having an office with a door so they don't have to listen to Alan's radio or Bob's gossip or even Betty smacking her lips all day. Jobs where many people perform the exact same job function, such as a call center or fast food restaurant, are often positions with relatively little status. If someone quits, they might barely notice the loss – and thus, you will have a harder time getting the changes to the workplace that you need to work your best. The ultimate question to ask is, "If I take this job, will I be considered a valuable employee worth investing money and effort into, or will I be seen as someone who is easily replaceable?" Note that there are jobs where many people perform the same function, and all employees are valued. And there may be a job that fits your interests perfectly, where you have a wonderful boss, and the workgroup is completely compatible with you – in which case you would probably be wise to take the position.

Autism often comes with other conditions. Some of us deal with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, where we may become bored with repetitive tasks. Yet others may have Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and thrive on certain fixed routines. Many of us deal with neither, but still need a job that fits our interests. Will the variety of work be too much, or too little for you – or even "just right?" At work, when you persevere, are you going to be doing something the employer wants to pay you for, or are you going to be, in her eyes, "wasting time?" Obviously, taking a job which allows you to persevere and get paid for it is a nearly ideal situation for us!

Finally, in evaluating the position, decide whether or not it will allow you to objectively report your performance. If you can tell your boss that you saved the company over \$500,000 last month, she probably won't want to get rid of you – regardless of your "annoying habits." She'll probably even be willing to spend time and effort making sure you have the changes in the workplace you need to continue doing that level of work. On the other hand, if your work is "artistically beautiful" but you can't quantify what that means to the company, it will be a lot easier for them to let you go or deny accommodation requests.

Interviewing and Getting the Job

An interview is stressful and difficult for anyone. Many NTs struggle with interviews, going to 20, 30, or even 50 interviews to get a single position. Of course autistics are at a disadvantage during the interview process, which is designed not to test your ability to

work, but to test how good you make the interviewer feel at the end of the interview. Lots of books have been written on interviews, and most of their advice applies to autistics as well as NTs. I won't duplicate that advice here, but rather focus on the things an autistic can do to have a more successful interview, such as when to disclose, how much "NT emulation" to perform, bringing concrete proof of competency, and some "general" interview tips that are particularly relevant to autistics. It's also important to know what questions to ask them during an interview, to figure out whether or not you want to work there.

The first thing an autistic needs to decide is when they want to disclose their autism (some may even choose to not disclose it at all). Will it work for you or against you? Is the interviewer going to think you are going to miss a lot of work or start shooting coworkers? Is it relevant at this stage? Remember that you don't want to focus on weaknesses during the interview, nor do you want to ask for accommodations until you know they want to give you the job – you don't want to give them reason not to hire you before then. Telling them, "I don't work well with people," for instance, isn't going to make it easy to get a job! However, if the employer is going to think something is "wrong" with you based on your autism, and providing her a label will reassure her, then go ahead and do that – but know there can be both benefits and downsides to early disclosure.

Another consideration is the amount of "acting" or "NT emulation" you are willing to perform. It's typical at an interview to go a little further than you would for the actual job. For instance, if the job requires a nice shirt and decent pants, but no tie, you probably should go ahead and wear a tie to the interview. For the same reason, you should do slightly more NT emulation during the interview than you would for the actual job. But, be careful not to do too much! If you perfectly emulate an NT, your future boss may expect you to be able to do that for 40 hours a week!

One of the things an applicant can do which will impress a future boss is to bring concrete examples of your ability to do the job. A programmer might bring a manual from a system he wrote, along with a subroutine or two of code. An artist might bring samples of his work. A construction foreman might bring a set of photographs taken at various phases during the construction of a large project he worked on. If you have received certificates, positive evaluations, or other work-related recognition, bring them as well. If your last boss thought you were an "outstanding team player" on your evaluation, it will make an interviewer think twice about assuming you can't get along with people. Someone without actual work experience in the position might bring copies of their transcripts (if they are good!) or a small project they did on their own time. This will reassure the employer that your differences don't keep you from doing work! It also reassures her – she fears that she will spend a lot of time and money hiring someone who is not qualified for the job.

During the interview, you also have the chance to ask questions of your potential employer. Don't ask about things that can be figured out later, like salary and benefits – you can ask about them after you get an offer for the job but before you accept it. Ask

real questions, that you want to know even before you get an offer. Ask about the company culture. Find out what your potential teammates' personalities are like (ask their boss to describe them). Find out what gives opinions weight in the company – is it experience, skill, social ability, or something else? What will your day look like – will it be non-stop phone calls or will it be quiet and relatively calm? How do they evaluate employees – what are the important things that an employee will have or do when he asks for a raise? Find out what the work site is like. Basically, ask the questions that you need to ask to know what the job would be like!

How Do You Fix Your Current Job?

Once you are in a job, there are two steps to making the job work better for you. First, ask yourself what could be done to make the job better – now is the time to be creative and think of everything: the things you can change, the things your boss can change, and the things your coworkers can change. These are your potential “accommodations.” Of course developing your wish list is only part of the process – you also have to present these changes in a way which helps you achieve your goals.

Developing Your Wish List

As you develop your wish list, be creative! Don't just look at things like wheelchair ramps or Braille signage (although if these are helpful to you, don't leave them out either). Look at the unique needs you have, and the unique solutions which would answer those needs.

Once you have a list, categorize your needs into categories such as “must have” and “would be nice if...” Add any intermediary categories you need, such as little changes that might not mean much by themselves but together could be very helpful. You will use this to decide which needs are most important to you and also where you are willing to compromise.

Some Ideas for Accommodations

No one accommodation will work for everyone. In fact, one accommodation that helps one autistic person may actually hinder another autistic. For instance, some autistics need things to start on-time, while others need flexibility in their schedules. Both are valid accommodations, but neither is perfect for everyone.

I personally have (or had in the past) the following accommodations at work. Some of these were paid for by my employer, some were paid for by myself, others cost nothing. Some required approval by my boss, others were things I could do on my own. Some of these were accommodations I didn't ask for, but were provided to all employees routinely. After all, sometimes a given accommodation can help nearly everyone.

- A private, semi-quiet office
- Headphone-earplugs (see above!)

- Exercise ball instead of a chair
- Informal social translator and person-recognizer
- Use of speech devices (including use of an old PC saved from becoming surplus)
- Instant messaging within workgroup
- Extensive use of email in workgroup
- Limited (2 days/week) telecommuting
- Stimtoys strategically placed in my office and in common areas
- Formal job modification (not being expected to compare people to their photo-ID cards)
- Flexible hours
- Being asked by project manager for status reports and hours worked rather than expecting me to remember to submit them
- Permission to leave meetings which do not have agendas
- Use of a pencil instead of a pen
- Large whiteboard in office
- Blanket in office
- Key coworkers trained to recognize start of overload
- High quality computer monitor (no flicker)
- Ability to close door and “send calls” straight to voicemail
- Hotel room for long nights on the job

Some other ideas (note that I haven't tried to get any of these, and some may be very difficult to get in most organizations):

- Different way of being assigned work
- Modification to employee evaluation system
- Personal assistant (bill paying, errands, shopping, etc)
- Being excused from mandatory social gatherings
- Using a different medium for intra-office communication
- Building modifications for physical accessibility
- Removal of interruptions (intercom, radio, etc)
- Help with paperwork
- Additional vacation, sick-time, or unpaid leave
- Part-time instead of full-time
- Rigid hours (instead of flexible hours)
- Alternative meal arrangements
- Replacing lighting
- Different door chime or bell
- Strict anti-harassment policy
- Team assignment changes
- Major office renovation (give everyone offices!)
- Easy-to-access fridge
- Nametags at meetings
- Assistance finding offices, buildings, etc
- Training key employees on response to overload, seizures, meltdowns, etc.
- Assignment of a work partner

- Removal of “dotted-line” management
- Reduced travel
- More or less formal job description
- Assignment to a less distracting area
- “Traditional” accommodations such as job coach
- Understanding of travel delays (public transit)
- Contracting instead of employment

Hard to Get Accommodations

Some accommodations are very difficult to get for most people. Private offices and telecommuting are some of the hardest accommodations to receive. There are several reasons for this. These accommodations are seen more as “status symbols” than accommodations. Thus, unless you have “earned” the appropriate status, there will often be pushback on these accommodations. However, there are some ways of requesting these accommodations which may help you receive them.

If you are requesting a private office, consider being flexible with your request. First, are there other alternatives that would work – for instance, flexible hours, earplugs, enforced quiet in the office, or a different cubicle or workspace? If not, is there an office no one wants – maybe an old closet or room that has no windows? Will that meet your needs? If a private office is too much to ask, is there another person or two who you can work with who you could share an office with?

If you are requesting telecommuting, flexibility is also important. Few employers want to give full-time telecommuting to their employees. They are scared that they won’t know if you are goofing off or not. There are also some very serious concerns – how are you going to get quick questions answered? How about meetings? And you need to be honest with yourself, too. Will you actually work at home? Is work your only social outlet (and, do you care)? One tactic may be to suggest a trial period of telecommuting, to find out if it will work for you.

Why Are Accommodations Hard to Get?

“Accommodation” is a dirty word to many employers. To them, it means expensive special privileges that cost productivity and end up resulting in lawsuits. They fear that the first employee to get accommodations won’t be the last, and that eventually everyone will want accommodations. And many have went through a lot of work putting in physical accessibility features, and see someone requesting them to accommodate yet other disabilities as ungrateful – after all, look at all the money they already spent on those disabled people, and you can’t expect them to accommodate all disabilities... Of course the response is that you don’t expect that, you just expect them to accommodate the specific areas that their own employees need!

Often, people don’t get accommodations for other reasons besides just their boss’s attitude. If you don’t ask for an accommodation, you probably won’t get it! If you go to

your boss and you demand one very specific accommodation and refuse to listen to her counter-offers, you may get neither – your boss may be offended, even if you have a legal right to the accommodation you want. Sometimes pragmatism demands compromise. Asking for accommodations that are commonly seen as a privilege or status symbol is not as likely to succeed. Nor are accommodations that require a large amount of money to implement. Finally, many people don't ask for an accommodation until after they've had disability-related performance or discipline issues in their job. The time to ask is not after a problem has occurred (you look like you are making excuses) but well before the problem can occur.

The Law – and HR

The American's with Disabilities Act (ADA) and laws in other countries often require employers to accommodate your disability. Regardless, employers can find ways to fire "troublesome" employees. An employee who threatens to sue is often a "troublesome" employee to an employer – after all, they violated an unwritten social rule, the one that says, "You won't threaten to sue your employer." Often, it is more pragmatic to simply find another place to work, rather than suing. However, there are times to invoke the legal system – especially when you don't feel the need to stay (and thus won't directly endure retaliation) but you feel an ethical obligation to do something, so that other disabled people will have a better experience than you did.

Involving HR without going "through channels" (which typically means going to your boss first) can invoke similar retaliation. While there is the temptation to threaten a boss with HR, the reality is that HR works more for your boss than they do for you. They are not on your side, they are on your management's side.

What About Coworkers?

Coworkers are often uncomfortable when they see an unfamiliar disability or accommodation. They don't know how to react. They fear doing something "stupid" or saying the wrong thing to you. After all, disability etiquette is complex and sometimes contradictory – and they might not know any of the etiquette for dealing with your particular disability. Reassure your coworkers that you aren't going to be upset if they make minor mistakes with etiquette. At the same time, let them know what you expect of them. Help them understand the terminology around your disability, and show them that you aren't uncomfortable with it. Because people might be initially uncomfortable, it is especially important that you intentionally interact, to show that you are still human and that they can get over their discomfort.

But I don't Have a Diagnosis...

For people without an official diagnosis, requesting accommodations is more complex. Many organizations have formal procedures for requesting accommodations, often requiring medical documentation. The best way to handle these situations is to ask your boss if she can help you solve some problems directly without involving formal

procedures. If asked directly about your medical records, respond that you prefer not to discuss those records with people other than your doctor, family, and close friends. Don't lie about your status, but don't volunteer your non-diagnosis either! Be sure of yourself and your disability – and ask for accommodations based on your need, not autism as a whole. For instance, “I have problems answering the telephone” rather than “I think I might have autism, but I'm not sure...” Through all of this, emphasize that these are changes that will help you do your job – don't try to pull the disability card, unless you are willing to potentially go through the formal channels.

General Strategies

When asking for accommodations, it is important to know what you want. Think about how and why you are asking before you approach someone else for help with an accommodation. Be sure of yourself. You know what your problem is, and you shouldn't budge on that. As for the solution, that is a place where compromise often pays off, but also think about what amount of compromise you are willing to accept. Before you ask, rehearse the possible responses to your request. How will you respond for these likely responses?

Consider how you will describe your disability. “Autism” or “Asperger's” isn't useful by itself. Often it doesn't need to be mentioned at all. “Autism” doesn't describe your needs or possible accommodations – even to a person knowledgeable about autism. After all, there are a tremendous variety of autistics, all with different sensitivities. Instead, mention the problems you have directly, along with a solution if possible. For instance, “I have trouble with telephone calls, so I would like to be able to communicate with you via email whenever possible” rather than “I'm autistic...” If you mention autism directly, use it to describe your exact needs. For instance: “I am autistic. That means that telephone calls can be very difficult for me...”

When you actually ask, use whatever form of communication works best for you. If you will just stumble over your words in a face-to-face meeting, use email or a written letter. As you ask, consider the use of keywords such as “disabled” that may trigger the response you want. Sometimes insecure managers who don't know the law will hear a word like that and think, “I don't know if I'm required to do this or not. But maybe I better or I'll get sued.” Unlike directly mentioning the law and lawsuits, this doesn't seem to violate a social rule and is unlikely to provoke retaliation (yes, NTs have some strange rules!) – keywords such as “law,” “lawsuit,” “legal requirement,” and “ADA” which reference the law or legal processes directly should be avoided!

Specific Strategies

There are many strategies and tactics used for getting accommodations. I've listed some of the one's I've used, although I'm sure there are others that may work better for other people. Be creative and enlist the help of others if you need help deciding how to get the accommodations you need.

The Direct Approach

When you think there is a high chance you will get what you want, or when a “no” answer will not significantly harm you, the best approach is often the direct one. In this approach, you mention your need, one or two solutions, and then try to work with your boss to figure out how to solve the problem.

If you want to do this in-person, schedule time with your boss in advance. “I need 20 minutes of your time to discuss a personnel issue.” Once you present your request, allow your boss time to respond. Let her know that she can respond in a day or two, so she doesn’t feel like you have put her “on the spot.” Even NTs need time to think of responses sometimes.

During the discussion with your boss, don’t make demands. Don’t threaten. Simply present your needs and ask for your boss to work with you. Be honest and clear, and ask your boss to do the same.

What Nobody Else Wants

Sometimes one person’s trash is another’s treasure. Can you exchange work with someone, and both benefit? Does Bob hate his dark corner and being away from the rest of the office – maybe you can trade his cube for your noisy one! Or maybe there is an empty office that no one but you wants. Sometimes you have something everyone but you desires. Maybe they will even be willing to take it in trade for something they have that you want. Asking for things no one wants, or giving up things someone else wants, is often seen as a “win-win” by management. They can make you happy by giving you the very thing that everyone else will be happy they don’t have.

Bait & Switch

This technique is useful when you think your boss would be slightly hesitant to give the accommodation you desire. In this technique, you ask for more accommodation than you need. For instance, you ask to work at home when you really just want a quiet office. When your request is denied, offer a “compromise” of taking a quiet office instead. It might even be appropriate to mention your performance at this point! Of course you might not get either telecommuting or an office, but you aren’t any worse off than before. Be careful to not do this too often, though, or your boss might catch onto your tactic!

I Just Want to be More Productive

This is useful when your boss doesn’t think the accommodation you want actually would address an actual disability, or when your boss is resistant towards accommodations in general. Rather than asking for an accommodation, suggest that you have an idea which would improve your performance and help the company.

Change it for Everyone

Sometimes, it is easier to change the whole company than to change just your personal environment. This can be especially true when the company values uniformity and the change you are requesting would make everyone more productive. Enlist the support of your coworkers, and, together approach your boss. Explain the cost and benefits of the change to your boss, bringing evidence if you can.

Do It Yourself

For some accommodations, you don't need your boss's permission or money. In those cases, it is easiest to do it yourself.

If your boss denies an accommodation on the basis of money, and you can afford the amount it would cost, consider offering to cover the cost. While there are ethical issues involved in this (you are enabling him to forsake his responsibility to provide a productive workplace), sometimes the benefits outweigh the cost.

Closing

These strategies and techniques will not work for everyone. Successful autistics are creative in looking at workplace environments and asking for accommodation. They are also persistent. You may not get to telecommute this year, but might in a few years when you ask again. Be realistic when you ask, sometimes your preferred accommodation just won't happen in a given environment. However, if these strategies don't work for you, that is not a moral failing! They will work for some people, but not all. And that's not your fault. Ultimately, you are the best judge of the strategies that will work best for you.