

Chapter 14

Understanding and Using Soft Skills for Autistic People

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ABSTRACT

Soft skills like communication, teamwork, adaptability, emotional intelligence, and problem-solving are increasingly valued in workplaces. For individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), these skills are essential for navigating social, workplace, and dynamic environments. However, they are often overlooked in education and professional training, leaving neurodiverse individuals at a disadvantage. This article examines the barriers to developing these subjective skills and the traditional focus on technical abilities. Using insights from research, case studies, and qualitative analysis, it highlights effective strategies such as structured role-play, peer-mediated interventions, and visual supports, which create low-stress learning environments. Soft skills development benefits both individuals and organizations, enhancing confidence, inclusion, collaboration, and empathy. By integrating personalized approaches, we can ensure tech-savviness is complemented by human cooperation, fostering industries with inclusive, empathetic, and effective leadership.

INTRODUCTION

Soft skills are general competencies that enable individuals to communicate effectively, cooperate and collaborate with others, and adjust to circumstances in personal contact and the workplace. These skills may include, but are not limited

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to, communication, teamwork, problem-solving, adaptability, and emotional intelligence. While technical skills apply to specific tasks such as software development and machinery repair, soft skills deal with how others interact and act. These are valuable skills in any job and industry (Mitchell et al., 2010; Robles, 2012).

For autistic people who likely face some degree of difficulty with socialization and transitioning, this is practically another prerequisite for setting them up for success and growth in their everyday lives. These challenges can make connecting with coworkers or navigating workplace environments more complex. However, soft skills can help mitigate them and teach effective coping mechanisms. As autistic people develop their communication and adaptability skills, they can successfully develop strong relationships, adapt to sudden changes, and find more joy in their jobs and everyday lives. These improvements help the individuals, but they also help foster more inclusive workplaces that can benefit from the unique characteristics that neurodiverse employees exhibit (Hendricks, 2010; Zhang & Wheeler, 2011).

Soft skills have gained more attention as automation and technological innovations transform job and skill requirements. They are increasingly sought after (Bughin et al., 2018), as these skills are essential for teamwork, leadership, and problem-solving (Ferris et al., 2008). When it comes to neurodiverse employees such as those with autism, training programs that emphasize soft skills result in job satisfaction, increased productivity, and ease of adjustment to job changes (Lindsey et al., 2018).

Challenges in Developing Soft Skills for Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

For individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), the acquisition of soft skills is particularly challenging. Although soft skills are crucial, they are typically neglected both during traditional education and while undergoing vocational programs, resulting in severe shortages of preparedness for the requirements of jobs. The root cause of many of these challenges stems from multiple interrelated factors that must be addressed and the effort to be made.

First, unlike technical or “hard” skills, soft skills are typically not prioritized in educational curricula. The traditional education framework prioritizes finite competencies — literacy, maths, technical knowledge — as these can be measured (Robles, 2012), often at the cost of the interpersonal and emotional skills that matter so much in the workplace. Many individuals, including those on the autism spectrum, are consequently underprepared for the interpersonal requirements of today's workplaces. Hendricks (2010) stated that this unstructured training shows the need for a suitable square curriculum in the teaching system that includes developing soft skills.

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