

Autistic women at work

A qualitative study on inclusion and prejudice

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Background

- Autistic women often engage in camouflaging
- Camouflaging → misinterpretations at work
- Persistent stereotypes about autism at work
- Limited employer understanding

Objective

Explore perceptions & experiences of working autistic women

Methods

Design: exploratory qualitative research

Data collection

- Online questionnaire (pre-tested through two exploratory interviews with autistic women)
- Target group: autistic women in (un)paid employment

Participants

- Formal ASD diagnosis
- Age 18–58
- $N = 20$ valid responses

Analysis

- Software: ATLAS.ti
- Inductive open and axial coding, until data saturation

Recruitment

- Female Autism Network of the Netherlands (FANN)
- Possible overrepresentation of digitally connected autistic women

Results

Work environment & strategies

- Occupations often perceived as suitable for autistic people
- Importance of clear tasks, structure & predictable routines
- Coping strategies: fixed workdays, remote work & to-do lists
- Openness about autism helped to communicate needs and strengths effectively.

Perceived strengths

- Attention to detail, analytical thinking, creativity, empathy, reliability & strong focus
- These traits are viewed as assets for quality & precision

Challenges

- Sensory overload, fatigue from social interaction, difficulties with sudden changes & need for extra processing time
- Reflecting environments that are not yet fully adapted to neurodiverse needs rather than inherent deficits

Prejudice was a recurring issue

- Common misconceptions:
 - “Autistic people lack empathy”
 - “Autistic people are inflexible”
 - “Autistic people belong in IT”
- Disbelief from colleagues after disclosure
- Fewer stereotypes in mental-health organizations & autism-friendly workplaces

Autism at work: strengths flourish when workplaces understand neurodiversity



Conclusions

- Autism is compatible with professional success
- Key workplace factors = structure + understanding + open communication
- Barriers = stigma + misunderstanding + lack of accommodations
- Implications for employers: promote openness + provide autism awareness training + use clear communication