

Navigating Job Interviews for Applicants on the Autism Spectrum: Tips, Accommodations, and Strategies

Introduction:

Job interviews can be overwhelming and challenging, especially for individuals on the autism spectrum. This article aims to provide insights and guidance to neurodivergent job applicants.

Disclosure and Accommodations:

- Consider if and when to disclose their autism diagnosis during the interview process. The decision to disclose is personal and should be based on individual beliefs, needs, and comfort levels.
- If accommodations are required, it is recommended to disclose early in the process. While disclosure is not mandatory if no accommodations are needed, early communication can ensure a smoother interview experience.
- People on the autism spectrum may benefit from specific accommodations, such as requesting fewer interviewers, conducting the first interview by phone, or receiving interview questions in advance.
- Accommodations should be discussed with the employer in advance to ensure a comfortable and fair interview environment.

Self-Knowledge and Preparation:

- It can be helpful to have a good understanding of your strengths, weaknesses, and learning and working styles.
- Comparing your qualifications to the job requirements helps determine suitability and can improve confidence during the interview.
- Assess your comfort levels working in different environments and with different levels of social interaction.
- For example, a horticulturist considering a university lab position involving greenhouse tours should consider the essential functions of the role to alleviate concerns.

Preparing for the Interview:

- Role-playing interview situations with a trusted person can help build social skills and confidence.
- Familiarizing oneself with common interview questions and practicing written responses contributes to interview readiness.
- Practice should cover all aspects of the interview process, including greetings, eye contact, and social interaction. Seek feedback from a trusted individual who can provide an honest critique.
- Request information about the interview panel or individuals involved, to know who to expect on the interview day.
- Explain that you require more time to process questions and struggle with being put on the spot, and ask if you can have the questions beforehand to prepare thoughtful answers.
- If you function better at specific times, such as mornings or afternoons, ask if it's possible to schedule the interview accordingly, providing a reasonable adjustment for your needs.
- For in-person interviews, plan to be at the interview location ahead of time to make a positive impression and avoid being late.

Phone and Video Call Interviews:

- Even though it's a phone interview, dressing appropriately can help you get into the right mindset. Treat the interview like an in-person meeting.
- Since the interviewer can't see you during phone interviews, speak slowly and enunciate your words to ensure that your message is conveyed effectively.
- Even though the interviewer can't see you, smiling can positively impact your tone of voice and make you sound more pleasant and engaged.
- Find a quiet location to avoid interruptions and distractions. Try to avoid shuffling papers or other activities that could be picked up by the microphone.
- For video interviews, test equipment beforehand, have a clutter-free background, close unnecessary programs on your computer, and maintain a professional user profile with an appropriate username and photo.

- Try to maintain eye contact with the camera. This has the same effect over a video call as eye contact in person. Avoid excessive movement or distractions during video calls.
- Using headphones may enhance clarity and reduce background noise during both phone and video interviews.
- Try to have a backup device in case of technical difficulties.

Requesting Reasonable Adjustments for Virtual Interviews:

- Ask for information about the video calling platform being used and if subtitles/closed captions are available, to ensure accessibility. If necessary, ask if there is an alternative platform that would suit you better.
- If needed, specify that interviewers use a simple background to reduce visual sensory input, explaining the need for this adjustment.

Introduction & Body Language:

- Engage in small talk, don't expect to dive right into the interview. Be prepared to engage in light conversation and have something to say or ask in advance. Observation of the interviewer's surroundings can provide conversation starters.
- Start by offering a firm handshake. If you're uncertain about this, practice with a friend.
- Smile, and make eye contact as you introduce yourself, saying something like, "Hi, my name is _____. Thank you for seeing me."
- In-person, wait for the interviewer to sit down first before taking your seat, unless instructed otherwise.
- Sit up straight, slouching can be interpreted as too casual or disinterested.
- Ideally, make eye contact with your interviewer. If making direct eye contact is too uncomfortable, you can look at your interviewer's eyebrows instead for the same effect.
- Addressing any of your body language that could be considered atypical can show self-awareness.
- Offer a friendly smile. Remember to keep your smile on the moderate side. A wide grin can be too much for a professional interview setting.

Communication, and Responding to Questions:

- When faced with challenging questions, employ stalling tactics (“*That’s a great question; let me think about it.* ”) to take a moment to gather your thoughts.
- If possible, adopt a positive and enthusiastic tone when speaking.
- Consider the STAR method to keep your answers brief, especially if you’re passionate about a topic and could talk about it forever. Here’s how it works:
 - **Situation** - Provide context and explain the situation.
 - **Task** - Explain what your role was in the situation.
 - **Action** - What steps did you take to address the situation
 - **Result** - What was the final outcome?

Each section should be a sentence or two, taking 30 seconds to a minute.

- If unsure, clarify the level of detail expected by asking questions for clarity during the interview.
- Don't hesitate to ask the interviewer to repeat a question if you didn't fully grasp it.
- Pause after answering to allow the interviewer to guide the conversation or ask follow-up questions.
- If you find yourself going off-topic, acknowledge it, apologize, and stop the digression.

During the Interview:

- Incorporate personal skills relevant to the job role into your answers.
- Frame past experiences in a positive light, avoiding blame or negative implications.
- If addressing a negative aspect, balance it with a positive statement highlighting your overall strengths.
- Focus on your overall punctuality and work ethic rather than a few exceptions.
- Avoid criticizing past employers or supervisors, focusing on positive workplace attributes instead.

Concluding the Interview:

- Wait for the interviewer to indicate the end of the interview, and express your gratitude for the opportunity.
- Demonstrating continued interest in the position and asking thoughtful questions about the role or company can leave a lasting impression.

- Ending the interview with a smile and a handshake serves as a final gesture of professionalism.

Additional Tips:

- Use a professional email address (firstname.lastname@emaildomain) and create a signature line with your full name and contact information.
- Conduct some research on the organization, its values, and the position being applied for.
- Practice summarizing why you are a suitable candidate for the job and prepare for common interview questions.
- Bring writing materials to the interview to take notes and show preparedness.

References

1. <https://askjan.org/publications/consultants-corner/vol10iss01.cfm>
 - Job Accommodation Network: Tips about interviewing, disability disclosure, accommodations, and tips for exercising restraint in their responses.
2. <https://adulthoodautismcenter.org/blog/adults-with-autism-what-to-say-in-a-job-interview/>
 - Disclosing autism, sample questions, tips for in-person interviews (body language, speech, etc), interview material prep.
3. <https://www.randstad.ca/job-seeker/career-resources/job-interviews/tips-for-job-interviews-if-you-re-on-the-autism-spectrum/>
 - The STAR method is a tried and true method for answering questions in a brief and to-the-point way.
 - Working with a recruiter.
 - Body language and tone.
4. <https://www.hireautism.org/resource-center/preparing-for-an-interview/>
 - Some overlap, but good tips for phone and video call interviews.

- Punctuality.
 - How to talk about former employers.
5. <https://www.autismspeaks.org/tool-kit-excerpt/job-interview>
 - Body language, back-and-forth speech patterns.
 - Specific advice about attire.
 6. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36794473/>
 - Not advice, but a research paper on autistic individuals' experiences camouflaging and masking during job interviews.
 7. <https://enna.org/how-to-prepare-for-a-virtual-interview-for-autistic-job-seekers/>
 - Tips on requesting accommodations for the interview.
 8. <https://the-art-of-autism.com/35-interview-tips-for-those-on-the-spectrum/>
 - Emails: Use a professional signature line. Include your full name, contact information, and state where you are located.
 - Don't mention personal information.
 - Practice one clear response that summarizes why you are a beneficial candidate for the job.
 - List specific adjectives that describe you as a worker (e.g., efficient, quick learner, reliable).
 - If unsure what was said, ask the interviewer to repeat the question.
 - For more think time, ask the interviewer to repeat the question, or say, "I need a minute of think time. Thank you."

- If you find yourself going on and on, stop mid-sentence, and say, “Sometimes I elaborate when I am (nervous, in a novice situation, when I am explaining something). My apologies.” And then stop.
- And others.

9. <https://abilitylifesolutions.com/successful-job-interview/>