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The Importance of Resources and Interventions for Mid-Career Autistic Professionals: Preventing Burnout, Masking, and Associated Risks

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the impact of micro-accommodations on self-regulation and quality of life among autistic adults, emphasizing societal benefits such as increased workplace inclusivity and reduced stigma. Through quantitative analysis, correlation studies, and thematic qualitative exploration, the study identifies accommodations that participants value most, offering insights for fostering supportive, individualized environments. Key findings demonstrate that accommodations, including noise-canceling headphones, structured routines, and clear written instructions, significantly enhance self-regulation and daily functioning. These findings underline the potential for broader societal benefits, such as improving neurodiversity inclusion in workplaces and social settings, and emphasize the need for ongoing research to refine tools supporting autistic individuals.

1 | Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) affects approximately 1 in 44 children in the United States, and an estimated 2.21% of adults are on the spectrum, with challenges often persisting throughout their lives. Alarming, only 14% of autistic adults in the U.S. hold full-time employment, and nearly 85% of college-educated autistic individuals are unemployed or underemployed, underscoring significant barriers to workplace inclusion. ASD presents specific challenges in self-regulation and sensory sensitivity, which can substantially impact the quality of life; studies indicate that autistic individuals report lower levels of life satisfaction and higher rates of anxiety and depression compared to neurotypical peers (Cassidy et al. 2022; Higgins et al. 2021; Kerns et al. 2018; Raymaker et al. 2020).

Micro-accommodations—small, personalized adjustments to one's environment or routine—have emerged as essential tools in addressing these challenges, offering tangible improvements

in daily functioning and emotional well-being. This study evaluates the effectiveness of various micro-accommodations in enhancing self-regulation by analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data. Notably, workplace studies show that tailored accommodations, such as noise-canceling headphones or flexible schedules, not only benefit autistic individuals but also foster greater workplace inclusivity, enhancing team productivity and morale (Austin and Pisano 2017).

Demographic analyses further reveal that individuals from varied socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds face compounded challenges, underscoring the importance of inclusive and intersectional approaches in support strategies (Higgins et al. 2021).

2 | Masking and Its Detrimental Effects

One of the most pervasive coping strategies employed by autistic professionals is masking—a process of concealing or

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camouflaging their autistic traits to fit into neurotypical social and workplace environments. This act of masking, while allowing autistic individuals to maintain employment and relationships, comes at a significant psychological and physical cost. Prolonged masking has been linked to what is commonly referred to as “autistic burnout,” a condition marked by extreme mental and physical fatigue, emotional withdrawal, and a profound reduction in daily functioning (Raymaker et al. 2020). Mid-career autistic professionals, who may have been masking for years or even decades, are particularly vulnerable to burnout. This article underscores the critical importance of providing targeted resources and interventions that address these challenges, emphasizing the positive impact such measures can have not only on individual well-being but also on overall workplace culture and societal inclusion.

Masking, often referred to as “camouflaging,” is a common strategy that autistic individuals employ to navigate social and professional environments that do not accommodate neurodiversity. Masking typically involves the conscious suppression of autistic behaviors, such as stimming (self-regulating physical movements) or avoiding eye contact, while simultaneously mimicking neurotypical social behaviors.

Although masking may enable autistic professionals to succeed in neurotypical environments, the psychological and physical toll of maintaining this façade can be profound (Hull et al. 2017).

The long-term effects of masking are not only exhausting but also detrimental to mental health. Masking depletes emotional resources and can lead to the phenomenon known as autistic burnout, a condition characterized by severe fatigue, cognitive decline, withdrawal, and an inability to perform daily tasks (Higgins et al. 2021). Burnout can manifest through chronic stress, sensory overload, anxiety, depression, and the loss of previously developed skills. For mid-career professionals, these symptoms can have far-reaching consequences, affecting not only job performance but also career progression, personal relationships, and overall quality of life.

Beyond the professional ramifications, the impact of burnout extends to the individual’s sense of identity and well-being. Many autistic professionals experience feelings of isolation, alienation, and the burden of constantly adapting to environments that are not built for their needs. This strain can result in significant mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation.

3 | Autistic Burnout and Suicide Risk

The connection between autistic burnout and an increased risk of suicide is a growing area of concern. Autistic individuals, particularly those who frequently engage in masking, are disproportionately affected by mental health challenges, including heightened rates of depression and anxiety (Cassidy et al. 2018). Burnout exacerbates these issues, leading many autistic individuals to experience a profound sense of hopelessness. Research indicates that 66% of autistic adults have contemplated suicide, with many attributing their struggles to the relentless pressures of masking and burnout (Cassidy et al. 2022). The

emotional toll of constantly hiding one’s true self, coupled with the overwhelming physical fatigue that results from masking, often leads individuals to feel trapped, unsupported, and misunderstood.

This critical mental health risk highlights the need for early interventions that provide autistic professionals with sustainable coping mechanisms, access to mental health support, and environments where they are not compelled to mask their authentic selves. Addressing these issues is not just a matter of improving workplace conditions—it is, quite literally, a matter of saving lives.

The findings underscore that accommodations such as structured routines, sensory aids, and clear communication tools can significantly benefit autistic adults by supporting self-regulation and daily functioning. Intersectionality is crucial in understanding how race, gender, and socioeconomic status may compound these challenges. For instance, women and individuals from marginalized racial groups often face additional stigma and may feel compelled to mask autistic traits, such as avoiding stimming or mimicking neurotypical behaviors to fit social norms. Recognizing these diverse experiences is essential to creating inclusive support frameworks.

4 | The Importance of Resources and Interventions

Targeted resources and interventions designed specifically for mid-career autistic professionals are vital in preventing burnout and promoting long-term well-being. These resources are multifaceted, addressing both professional needs and personal well-being to ensure individuals can thrive in their careers without compromising their mental health. Interventions such as noise-canceling headphones, flexible work policies, and sensory-friendly workspaces have proven effective (Austin and Pisano 2017), yet they are not without challenges. Resistance from employers, often stemming from misconceptions about the cost or complexity of implementation, remains a significant barrier. Additionally, a lack of awareness about the necessity and benefits of these accommodations can hinder their adoption, particularly in industries with less exposure to neurodiversity initiatives (Hedley et al. 2022).

5 | Challenges Associated With Interventions

One key challenge lies in the reluctance of some employers to invest in accommodations due to perceived cost or concerns about setting a precedent for other employees. For instance, employers may fear that offering flexible schedules or specialized equipment to one individual could lead to widespread requests for similar arrangements. Another challenge is the limited understanding among colleagues and managers about the unique needs of autistic professionals, which can lead to misunderstandings or inadequate support. Furthermore, some accommodations, such as mindfulness training tailored to sensory sensitivities, require specialized expertise that may not be readily available in all workplaces. There is also the challenge of scalability. While programs like Microsoft’s Autism

Hiring Program have shown immense success by providing mentorship and customizing job roles, these initiatives require significant resources and organizational commitment. Smaller businesses may struggle to replicate such models due to financial and logistical constraints, which highlights the need for scalable, cost-effective solutions.

6 | Preventing Autistic Burnout: Specific Strategies and Real-World Examples

Preventing autistic burnout requires targeted strategies that address sensory, emotional, and social challenges. For example, mindfulness training tailored for autistic individuals could incorporate elements like guided breathing exercises in low-stimulation environments. Such training has been implemented successfully at companies like SAP, which runs autism-focused programs that include stress management workshops for neurodiverse employees (Austin and Pisano 2017). These sessions help individuals identify early signs of burnout and develop coping mechanisms suited to their sensory sensitivities.

Workplace workshops educating colleagues about neurodiversity are another effective intervention. For instance, Ernst and Young's (EY) Neurodiversity Centers of Excellence include regular training for neurotypical employees aimed at fostering understanding and empathy for neurodiverse colleagues. These workshops reduce workplace misunderstandings, promote better communication, and create a more inclusive organizational culture. Additionally, structured mentorship programs, such as those provided by JPMorgan Chase, match neurodiverse employees with experienced mentors who help them navigate workplace challenges and build professional networks.

Flexible work policies tailored to individual needs are also critical. A specific example includes Dell Technologies, which offers remote work options and adjustable work hours for neurodiverse employees. This approach helps autistic professionals manage sensory overload and avoid the stress associated with rigid schedules or high-stimulation office environments.

7 | Broader Positive Implications of Interventions

The benefits of these interventions extend beyond autistic employees, positively impacting neurotypical colleagues and workplace culture as a whole. For instance, sensory-friendly workspaces and flexible scheduling can reduce stress and increase productivity for all employees, not just those with autism. Empathy-focused training and workshops foster stronger teamwork by improving interpersonal understanding and communication. These changes also reduce workplace conflicts and improve overall morale, creating a more harmonious environment for everyone.

Moreover, inclusive practices often drive innovation. Diverse teams, including neurodiverse members, bring varied perspectives that can lead to creative problem-solving and better decision-making. Companies like SAP and Microsoft have reported significant business benefits from their neurodiversity

hiring initiatives, including improved efficiency and unique insights that have enhanced product development.

By addressing these challenges and implementing targeted interventions, workplaces can create supportive environments that not only prevent autistic burnout but also build a more inclusive, innovative, and productive workforce. Ultimately, these efforts contribute to broader societal change, promoting acceptance and understanding of neurodiversity while setting a standard for equity and inclusion in professional settings.

The following are key areas in which interventions can significantly improve the quality of life for autistic professionals while addressing potential challenges and offering real-world examples.

8 | Workplace Accommodations

One of the most impactful interventions involves creating flexible and inclusive work environments tailored to the sensory and cognitive needs of autistic professionals.

Accommodations can include providing quiet workspaces, flexible schedules, and the option to work remotely. Sensory-friendly environments, where excessive noise, harsh lighting, and other sensory stimuli are minimized, significantly reduce the need for masking and help autistic employees perform at their best (Baldwin et al. 2020).

For example, Dell Technologies implements adjustable work environments and remote options to accommodate sensory sensitivities, empowering employees to work in a way that minimizes stress.

However, these accommodations face challenges. Employers may resist such changes due to misconceptions about costs or fairness, fearing that accommodations for one employee could lead to similar demands from others. To address this, organizations like SAP have demonstrated the feasibility and benefits of implementing accommodations through their Autism at Work program, which has shown increased employee productivity and team cohesion.

Additionally, offering alternative communication methods, such as written communication in place of verbal exchanges, can reduce social anxiety and foster clearer interactions. This approach has been successfully integrated into organizations like Microsoft, where employees are encouraged to use communication methods that suit their needs without fear of stigma.

9 | Mental Health Support

Access to mental health services specifically tailored to autistic individuals is essential for improving their overall well-being. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), when adapted for autistic adults, effectively addresses anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges (Kerns et al. 2018). Real-world examples include autism-specific CBT programs developed by

specialized therapists, which focus on sensory triggers and social pressures unique to autistic experiences.

Beyond therapy, peer support groups and mentorship programs play a critical role. These initiatives create safe spaces for autistic professionals to share experiences, develop coping strategies, and build a sense of community. For instance, EY Neurodiversity Centers of Excellence incorporate mentorship as a key component, pairing autistic employees with experienced professionals who provide guidance on navigating workplace challenges and building career resilience.

Challenges in mental health support often include a lack of specialized providers and limited awareness of these resources among autistic individuals. Overcoming these barriers requires increased investment in training mental health professionals and promoting the availability of tailored services.

10 | Career Development and Coaching

Career coaching tailored to autistic professionals helps address unique workplace challenges and promotes long-term career success. Coaching programs teach advocacy for necessary accommodations, stress management techniques, and communication strategies that reduce the reliance on masking. For example, JPMorgan Chase's Autism at Work program provides coaching to help autistic employees navigate workplace dynamics while emphasizing their strengths (Austin and Pisano 2017). Challenges in implementing such programs include ensuring they are accessible to professionals across industries and income levels. Nonprofit organizations and public-private partnerships could play a vital role in offering affordable or free career coaching to individuals without access through their employers. These programs not only improve individual outcomes but also help organizations retain talented employees who contribute innovative perspectives and diverse problem-solving approaches.

11 | Education and Awareness Training for Employers

Employers play a pivotal role in creating inclusive workplaces and can significantly impact outcomes by offering education and training on autism and neurodiversity.

Training programs raise awareness about the challenges autistic employees face and highlight their unique strengths, reducing stigma and fostering more supportive interactions (Hedley et al. 2022). Real-world examples include EY's training sessions for managers, which emphasize empathy and practical strategies for supporting neurodiverse team members.

Inclusive education has broader implications, benefiting neurotypical employees by fostering a culture of understanding and collaboration. These training sessions encourage open communication, reduce workplace conflicts, and enhance team dynamics. Additionally, organizations that implement neurodiversity training report improved morale and productivity across teams, as greater inclusivity helps all employees feel valued and supported.

Despite these benefits, challenges such as time constraints, budget limitations, and resistance from leadership can hinder implementation. Organizations must prioritize inclusivity as a long-term investment, demonstrating the substantial return on investment (ROI) that comes from supporting a diverse workforce.

These interventions not only support autistic professionals but also yield broader positive implications for organizations and society. Inclusive workplaces drive innovation, enhance team performance, and improve overall employee well-being, setting a benchmark for equitable and empathetic professional environments. By addressing these challenges, we can ensure that both autistic and neurotypical employees thrive in a culture that celebrates diversity and inclusion.

12 | Preventing Autistic Burnout: A Lifelong Approach

Preventing autistic burnout requires a comprehensive, proactive approach that recognizes the cyclical nature of masking and burnout. Resources must be readily available throughout an individual's career, not just in times of crisis. Early intervention programs, ongoing workplace accommodations, and consistent access to mental health services are essential in creating sustainable, fulfilling career paths for autistic professionals. These measures provide autistic employees with the tools to manage sensory sensitivities, reduce the pressure to conform to neurotypical norms, and ultimately thrive in both professional and personal domains.

Moreover, these interventions have broader implications for neurotypical employees and workplace dynamics as a whole. Creating inclusive environments where autistic professionals are supported fosters a culture of empathy, collaboration, and innovation. For instance, neurotypical colleagues benefit from workplace accommodations like flexible scheduling and quiet zones, which can enhance overall employee productivity and well-being by reducing workplace stress (Austin and Pisano 2017). Workshops and training on neurodiversity also help neurotypical employees develop better communication skills, patience, and a deeper understanding of diverse work styles, fostering stronger teamwork and more cohesive work environments (Higgins et al. 2021). Broader societal changes in how autism and neurodiversity are understood are equally important. By promoting acceptance of autistic traits and challenging societal pressures that force individuals to mask, workplaces and communities become more inclusive for everyone. This inclusivity has ripple effects (Austin and Pisano 2017): neurotypical individuals may feel empowered to seek accommodations for their own mental health needs, reducing stigma across the board. Additionally, fostering a culture of acceptance can lead to improved retention rates and reduced turnover (Hedley et al. 2022), as employees—both neurodiverse and neurotypical—feel valued and supported in their unique contributions (Austin and Pisano 2017).

In turn, these changes lead to improved mental health, increased job satisfaction, and a better quality of life for autistic professionals while simultaneously enhancing workplace morale, creativity, and inclusivity. By recognizing the benefits of supporting neurodiverse employees, organizations can build a

more resilient, innovative, and harmonious workforce that thrives on the strengths of all its members.

13 | Conclusion

This study highlights the importance of personalized accommodations and self-advocacy in improving the quality of life for autistic adults. Future research should explore how intersectional factors such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status influence the efficacy of accommodations, as these factors can significantly shape access to resources and the effectiveness of support strategies. Expanding the range of tools available to support diverse sensory profiles is equally critical, as current accommodations may not fully address the needs of individuals with unique challenges. Longitudinal studies examining the sustained effects of accommodations on employment, mental health, and social engagement could provide valuable insights into their long-term benefits and areas for improvement. Additionally, more research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of workplace training programs aimed at increasing neurodiversity awareness among employers and colleagues. Studies exploring the economic impacts of inclusive policies—such as improved employee retention, productivity, and innovation—could further solidify the business case for accommodations. Lastly, investigating the experiences of autistic individuals in various cultural and organizational contexts could offer a global perspective, identifying best practices and novel interventions. Addressing these gaps not only benefits autistic individuals but also contributes to a more inclusive and understanding society, where neurodiversity is celebrated and supported as a vital component of human diversity.

Author Contributions

Adam Hazlett: conceptualization, investigation, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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