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10 Unfortunate and Unfair Reasons Autistic People Have Been Fired

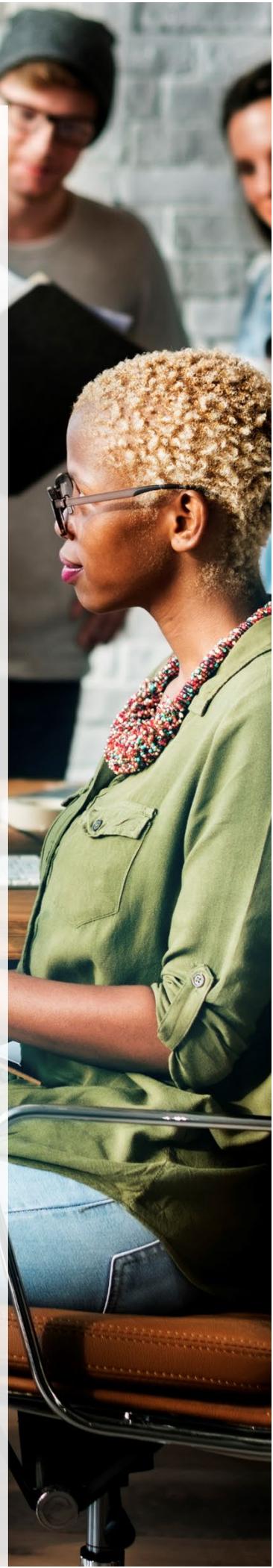
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SUMMARY

Being fired unexpectedly is a traumatic experience. Not only does it mean you suddenly can't pay your bills, it also harms your self-esteem, and it can make you anxious about even looking for another job—let alone starting one. This is especially true if you've found yourself in this exact situation multiple times.

Being fired suddenly and for seemingly no reason is an all-too-common autistic experience, and one of the most unfortunate and unfair aspects of this is the reason for termination often boils down to inaccurate assumptions about the person's character and intentions, not poor job performance.

What often happens is the neurotypical employer observes their employee's natural autistic behavior and mistranslates it as insubordinate, rude, disrespectful, lazy, sarcastic, etc. They then fire that employee without warning, often giving them no chance to defend themselves or explain their side of the story.

What's more, when an autistic employee who's being fired is allowed to speak up, their earnest and logical explanations of what happened from their perspective are viewed as attempts to make excuses or be manipulative, causing an already tense and demoralizing situation to become even more fraught with emotional pain and confusion.

In this paper, we're going to take a look at 10 reasons autistic people have been either unfairly fired or threatened with job termination. If you're a neurotypical employer who employs or wants to employ neurodivergent talent, pay close attention to each point, and try to view these situations from our perspective.

10

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UNFAIRLY FIRED or THREATENED WITH
JOB TERMINATION

1. Not “catching on” to non-verbal cues
2. Being uncomfortable with lying
3. Doing a job “too well”
4. Taking instructions literally
5. Not performing to unwritten and unspoken expectations
6. Not socializing in the office or at after-work events
7. Being unaware of hidden social expectations
8. Not making small talk or sounding animated enough
9. Asking “too many” questions
10. Not being a “team player”

A person in a white shirt is holding a cardboard box in the foreground. In the background, three people are sitting around a table in a meeting room, looking towards the person with the box. The scene is brightly lit with warm tones.

1. Not “catching on” to non-verbal cues

Autistic people, by and large, are literal thinkers and communicators. We say what we mean, and we mean what we say with no hidden agenda, and we thrive in environments where people communicate the same way with us.

However, when we work in an environment where there’s lots of non-verbal communication and implied meaning, we don’t do well. We don’t “catch on” to this type of communication because, for our brains, **there’s nothing to catch on to.**

An irritated facial expression, a pointed clearing of the throat, a raised eyebrow, a change in vocal tone—these things either won’t register at all because our brains can’t read them, or we’ll feel *something* is amiss but we won’t know what (and past experience has painfully educated us that it’s considered impolite to directly ask).

You, as the neurotypical employer, believe we are purposefully ignoring our duties out of laziness or a passive-aggressive attempt to disrespect you, and you angrily fire us for it.

Meanwhile, we have no idea what happened!

If you have autistic employees, please remember **that nothing goes without saying.** Even if you think something is glaringly obvious, it may not be to your autistic employee. Be clear

and concise in your instructions, leave nothing out, and follow verbal instructions with a written summary.

If your autistic employee is not doing something that's expected of them, talk with them, and find out what's going on from their perspective before drawing and acting on any negative conclusions.

2. Being uncomfortable with lying

An autistic employee usually will not thrive in a company where lying is an unspoken (or spoken) part of the job. For example, talking up high-ticket items to make a sale when the products are actually faulty, hiding company secrets, or covering up office romances.

As I mentioned in point one, autistic people say what we mean and mean what we say. We are literal, we are direct, we are honest, and many of us are uncomfortable with lying or even “fudging” the truth.

It feels viscerally wrong on a very deep level for us, and no amount of incentive or coercion will induce many of us to take part.

Furthermore, we're not the best at keeping secrets or even knowing that something is supposed to be kept a secret unless we are explicitly told.

If fudging the truth or outright lying is expected, for any reason, on the job—don't expect us to “just know”, tell us explicitly, and then let us decide if the position is the right fit for us.

3. Doing a job “too well”

Another unfortunate and unfair reason autistic people are fired is for doing their job too well. I fit this description when I was still working in the corporate world, and it took me a very long time to understand how my work ethic was viewed from a neurotypical perspective.

When I'm asked to do something, I do it at 100%, or I don't do it at all. There's no in-between, and there's no thought of doing it slowly, taking shortcuts, phoning it in, or anything like that. I take the instructions literally, and I do exactly what I'm told is expected of me.

The problem with this is my efficiency often got me into trouble with my co-workers because they believed I was purposefully trying to outperform them and make them look bad.

At the time, I had no idea why people seemed so angry and irritated with me. It just didn't make any sense!

If you have an autistic employee who is finishing their work way before everyone else or is doing double or triple the workload, this doesn't mean that there's a hidden agenda, that they're trying to stand out, get a promotion, or impress you. They're just doing something they naturally excel at.

I've talked about the spiky profile in autistic people in past articles, and I think it bears repeating here. While neurotypical people often have an even set of skills where they do well at many different things at the same level of aptitude and performance, autistic people often do not.

Rather, we tend to specialize and excel in one, two, or three areas, but we may struggle with other tasks neurotypical people would not find challenging.

This, again, is just how our brains work. We may not know we are expected to say “good morning” to anyone when we walk into the office, and we may always skip the quarterly company get-togethers, but we’ll clear your backlog out in no time!

4. Taking instructions literally

I delved into this topic more deeply in a previous article, but I wanted to include it in this list because autistic people have been fired for taking instructions literally and performing exactly as instructed.

Taking instructions literally may mean that we spend too much time on one detail of a project trying to get it perfect, and that results in us turning in assignments slower than expected. It may also mean that when our supervisor says something like, “*Do you want to work on the Munson account now?*” (which the neurotypical brain would immediately interpret as a direct order), our autistic brains may interpret it as a literal question, and we’ll answer, “No.”

The next thing we know, we’re accused of being sarcastic and insubordinate while being ushered out the door, box of belongings in hand, wondering what could have possibly gone wrong!

As I mentioned before, nothing goes without saying. If you believe your autistic employee is being sarcastic or “smart” with you, talk to them about it, get their perspective, and clarify your meaning.

5. Not performing to unwritten and unspoken expectations

Employee handbooks and training videos only cover the basics when it comes to job expectations. The rest is filled in by observing and absorbing what's expected from the environment while using previous life and job experience as building blocks and guidelines-if you're neurotypical.

See, neurotypical people are top-down thinkers. They look at the big picture first and then the details. They take their existing experiences, adapt them, and apply them to fit into their current situations. They're excellent at extrapolating information in this way.

Not your autistic employees. We are bottom-up thinkers. We start with the details and then those details form the bigger picture. It's why we ask so many questions! The more details we have, the faster we'll be able to build the big picture in our brains and get on the same page as you.

Because we are bottom-up thinkers, we often have to start from scratch with each new situation even if we have previous experience in a similar situation.

For example, let's say your autistic employee has worked as a customer service representative in the past. When they come to work for you, they bring the knowledge of, say, how to greet the customers over the phone, how to type in and send orders, how to file, and how to make sure the supply cabinet stays stocked.

However, your phone system is new, their co-workers are new, the office dynamic is new, and the customers and products are different. They have the experience of doing something similar, but they still need to learn your way, beginning with the minute details and working up to the bigger picture.

Let's say that in this customer service job, your new autistic employee is expected to not only take orders by phone but also be at the front desk greeting customers, as well. They

may not know unless they are explicitly told that they are expected to smile, project warmth, make small talk, ask if the customer would like coffee or tea, etc., because they weren't expected to do that in their old position.

Customer complaints may lead you, as their supervisor, to become irritated and think that they must have lied on their resume or something when, in reality, they just need neurodivergent-friendly training!

Tell your autistic employee exactly what's expected of them. Leave nothing out, even if it seems obvious to you.

6. Not socializing in the office or at after-work events

Being autistic in a neurotypical world can be exhausting. Many of your autistic employees use all of the mental energy and emotional bandwidth they have available to mask their autistic traits, monitor their facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language, and cope with sensory overload all day at work to have anything left over for socializing.

Your autistic employees need to conserve as much energy as possible, so you may rarely see them making small talk by the copy machine or attending after-work functions.

This doesn't mean that they have a secret dislike for you or their co-workers, that they are anti-social, or that they are not a team player. They are just tired.

For us to be at our best, we must be allowed to rest.

7. Being unaware of hidden social expectations

I used to read employee handbooks cover to cover, not skim them the way my neurotypical counterparts did. I figured if I knew every single rule, I couldn't break them, and I would avoid getting into trouble the way I always seemed to. Of course, that didn't work. Why? Because, in a neurotypical world, the most important rules are the unspoken and unwritten ones, and I can't see them.

I've been reprimanded for not greeting co-workers when entering the office, not saying "goodbye" to them at the end of the day, or not personally greeting each customer as they walk in the door.

The story my former neurotypical supervisors told themselves was that I was rude and standoffish and treated me accordingly. For my part, I wasn't explicitly told that was expected of me, *so I didn't know to do it!*

Not only did they not believe me when I explained that, it only made them angrier and more determined to let me go.

Again, be very clear and concise about **every single expectation** you have of your autistic employees, and leave nothing out, even if it seems like it should be obvious.

8. Not making small talk or sounding animated enough

This one falls into the same category as being unaware of hidden social expectations, but I thought it needed its own point. When I was quite young, just starting out in the working world, I didn't have much in the way of facial expressions, and I spoke to customers in a flat, monotone voice only about their business needs.

Nothing in me made me think to make small talk with them or even *how* to do that. And I truly didn't understand the purpose of talking about the weather or current events.

Since making small talk seems to come naturally and automatically to neurotypical people, nobody thought I might need someone to specifically tell me that being "all business" was considered rude.

Moreover, I had no idea that I didn't make facial expressions or have much vocal prosody until later in life, so I had no *idea* what my customers were seeing or experiencing from me—because, on my end, I felt and sounded very animated!

If you have an autistic employee who comes across as short or abrupt with customers, avoid assuming that they are rude or don't care, talk with them about it. Tell them what you're observing and how customers are responding to it. They may genuinely not know.

9. Asking “too many” questions

Of all of the unfortunate and unfair reasons autistic people have been fired, this one is the most upsetting for me personally. I've written at length about how the functional purpose of asking questions for clarification has been misconstrued to the emotional detriment of autistic people.

Your autistic employees are not asking questions to challenge your authority, to argue with you, or to question your intelligence.

Autistic people ask questions for one purpose, to get answers. Due to our bottom-up way of thinking, we need as many details as possible in order to form a full picture in our heads of what's expected of us.

Without these critical pieces of information, we remain unable to fully understand your meaning and do the jobs we were hired for.

Clear, concise answers to our many questions provide accessibility and level the playing field, which helps us work more effectively alongside our neurotypical counterparts.

10. Not being a “team player”

The term “team player” has always been elusive to me, personally. Since it’s more of an idea and an attitude than a precise instruction, it can be hard to pin down exactly what unspoken expectation is attached to this oft-used corporate phrase.

Being seen as not being a team player can be the result of the autistic person not knowing how to delegate tasks (or even knowing that they are expected to), completing work faster and more efficiently than their neurotypical co-workers, unintentionally dominating conversations, or avoiding social situations.

If you feel your autistic employee falls into the category of “not a team player”, talk with them and be more specific about your expectations. Use clear and concise language instead of corporate jargon that can be confusing for the literal mind to interpret.



THE TAKEAWAY

Autistic people are often unfairly terminated from jobs, and the most common reason for that is social misunderstandings, not subpar job performance.

For every one of the reasons I listed above, the solution is simple: Assume nothing, talk to your employees about what you're observing and how it's affecting you, their co-workers, and customers, be clear and concise with instructions, and set aside time to answer their questions to provide clarity.

Being neuroinclusive means understanding that communication differences do exist while also providing understanding and accessibility for those communication differences. It's also about asking questions instead of making assumptions, and sitting down with your employees when you first feel something is amiss rather than waiting until you're ready to explode with frustration.

Autistic people have so much to offer, and when a company is able to provide accessibility and psychological safety, you'll have loyal, hardworking people you can be proud to have on your team!

About the Author

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Jaime A. Heidel is a late-diagnosed autistic woman who writes, advocates, and translates communication between the neurotypes so that autistic and non-autistic people better understand each other and communicate more effectively. You can find her on her [Instagram page](#) asking questions, sparking lively discussions, and gathering detailed information about the autistic experience to increase understanding and decrease the lifelong inter-neurotype miscommunication that leads to complex PTSD.

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