

The Pull of Self-Employment for Autistic & Neurodivergent Folks

Why Traditional Workplaces Can Be Unsuitable

Communication Disconnect: In too many workplaces, Autistic & Neurodivergent folks may not always grasp what managers want because instructions are vague or poorly communicated. And when clarity is asked for, it is not always made clearer, and we can be made to feel like we're being difficult or resistant. (refer to the double (or triple) empathy problem).

Sensory Overwhelm: Ineffective lighting. Perfumes, odours, overpowering smells. Nonstop chatter and small talk. These environments may be inconvenient, they can be overwhelming and, for many of us, an unbearable mix to complete work.

Burnout: Trying to fit into these spaces can mean people-pleasing to the point of exhaustion, especially for those of us who've faced bullying, masking, or rejection before. We may push ourselves trying to fit into other's expectations until there's nothing left, and then we burn out.

Social Pressures: Small talk and forced socialising may drain us. And the recovery from this may take up our own time, leaving us with little energy for anything else.

Rigid Schedules: These workplaces demand a 9-to-5 grind, glorifying a busy working lifestyle, ignoring that our energy levels can vary from day to day. There's no room for how our bodies and minds naturally function.

Office Politics: This is where things get even messier. Office politics can be like an alien language - full of hidden, arbitrary rules that make no sense and just add to anxiety.

Hierarchies: Following orders just because someone's role has been deemed "above" others in an arbitrary hierarchy, even when their way is inefficient or flat-out wrong? Hierarchies are understood, but not necessarily agreed with.

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Part-Time Work is Minimal: It can be hard finding a part-time gig in your field. The lack of flexibility means many of us are shut out from jobs we could otherwise excel in.

Inconsistent Support: Sure, there are laws about reasonable accommodations, but whether or not you get them is a roll of the dice. Support is inconsistent, at best, and work/ workplaces should be designed for everyone in mind.

Misunderstood Communication: We're often direct and clear because it's how we communicate best, and require this in return, but this is too often labelled as rude or abrasive.

Integrity Clashes: When a workplace lacks integrity, it's a dealbreaker for many of us. We value honesty and clarity, and we're not about to compromise on that.

Arbitrary Rules: Rules that don't make sense? Following them feels impossible because we're wired to see and do things logically or would like them to be explained to us.

Unfair Promotion Standards: Traditional performance metrics don't always account for our individual strengths, locking us out of promotions or advancement.

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What Makes Self-Employment So Attractive

Passion-Led & Interest-Led Work: When we're our own bosses, we can build businesses around what we love, tapping into our special interests and deep focus to create something truly fulfilling.

Flexibility: We set our own hours, adapting to our energy levels instead of forcing ourselves into a rigid schedule. Some weeks are marathons, others are more about maintaining health, family, self, and personal life—and that's okay.

Autonomy: Self-employment means freedom. We set our own rules, create policies that work for us, and build a work environment that makes sense.

Customised Supports: We know what we need to thrive, and in self-employment, we don't have to rely on someone else's understanding—or lack thereof—to get those supports in place.

Freedom to Change: We can pivot when we need to or stick with what's comfortable. Self-employment gives us the space to be dynamic or routine-oriented, depending on what we need at the time.

Sensory-Affirming Spaces: We create our own work environments, free from the overwhelming sensory input that comes with traditional offices.

Living in Sync with Our Brains: Self-employment allows us to craft lives that work with our Autistic & Neurodivergent minds, not against them.

Final Thoughts: Self-employment isn't a one-size-fits-all solution, but for many Autistic & Neurodivergent people, it offers the flexibility, autonomy, and alignment that traditional workplaces lack.

It's not always easy, but it's understandable why so many of us are drawn to it.