

People with Asperger Syndrome and Employment

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Individuals with Asperger syndrome, part of the autism spectrum, experience particular difficulties with social interaction and communication. These individuals have average (or above) intellectual ability, a strong preference for routines, difficulties in understanding specific aspects of language and communication, as well as other people's thoughts, beliefs and intentions. They also have difficulty identifying, describing and expressing their emotions. These difficulties lead to difficulties organising routines, adapting when unexpected outcomes arise and poor interaction with others¹. Despite high abilities in many areas, only around 15% of those with Asperger syndrome are in employment², despite the majority being keen to, and capable of, work. A further common consequence is high rates of mental health difficulties, particularly anxiety and depression, estimated to affect around 65% of those with Asperger syndrome³. In the National Autistic Society's 'I Exist' campaign, a striking 67% of adults on the autism spectrum reported anxiety due to lack of adequate support at home and/or work. 33% reported experiencing serious mental health problems due to a lack of such support⁴.

In general, more than one in four European adults experience mental health problems⁵. In 2009, stress was reported as the leading cause of long-term absence from work in non-manual workers, with each case of stress, anxiety and depression leading to an average of 30.2 working days lost⁶. However, in recent months there has been a sharp rise in work related stress, with a 4-6% increase in work stressors such as workload, conflict, job security and organisational change from Spring 2009 to Spring 2010, compared to an increase of 0.5-1% yearly in the previous 16 years⁷. Even greater pressure is likely to be felt by those on the autism spectrum, particularly those with additional mental health issues, who are at greater risk for these pressures in the first place.

The project

Following funding from Hoare's Bank, the Foundation for People with Learning Difficulties (FPLD) and NAS Prospects conducted a small project in which four adults with Asperger syndrome were supported over a 4-9 month period, out of an original cohort of nine referrals. These individuals were recruited into the project through their connections with Prospects. During the project, a mental health occupational therapy specialist employed by the FPLD and a Prospects employment consultant jointly ran sessions with each participant individually, to identify areas of difficulty that impeded on that person's work and caused heightened levels of anxiety. These areas were then addressed, and at the end of the study period we evaluated the improvements which had been made. Case studies were outlined⁸, with the Prospects consultants being interviewed at this point for their perspective and feedback.

Observations

- Much to offer. People with Asperger syndrome have a broad range of skills which can be of huge benefit to employers, for example having highly technical skills, excellent rote memory or great attention to detail.
- No 'one issue fits all'. Individuals with Asperger syndrome reported a large variety of issues and many of these were related to their mental health well-being and affected their work. Although these were very individual, differing widely from participant to participant, and were often not directly related to work, they affected the participants' work situation in direct and important ways. These issues included poor budgeting and time management skills as well as excessive time spend on MSN or internet dating sites.
- No 'one solution fits all'. During the project a variety of methods were used to support the participant in improving in the areas identified. Given the difficulty of people with Asperger syndrome in engaging with others, simply talking over how one feels about a problem is not likely to be a big success. In this project, successful strategies included using Talk Blocks for Work™, which help to increase the skills required for self-advocacy by promoting self-expression. This led to easier discussions with a line manager, as well as reducing unnecessary routines and rituals which allowed a participant to engage more appropriately with colleagues, and even arrive to work on time. Anxiety reduction techniques (e.g., being aware of changes in heart beat when you are anxious¹⁰), and computerised interventions (e.g., Smart phone training¹¹) as well as noise cancelling head

phones may also be beneficial.

- Organisational responsibilities. An organisation's policy for those with additional needs must be translated into practice, with appropriate individuals implementing the policy and pressing for suitable support.
- Direct links to the brain. The thoughts and behaviours of people with Asperger syndrome can be explained by brain processes that differ from those of other people¹¹. For example, difficulties with understanding other people's minds, and thus their thoughts, desires and beliefs, is a fundamental difficulty in those with an autism spectrum disorder (including Asperger syndrome) and has a significant impact on social communication and interaction. This is often referred to as having poor theory of mind, or 'mindblindness'. While adults with Asperger syndrome have learned many of the rules of social communication, they are likely unable to read facial expressions and body language. For example, not knowing when to end a conversation with a colleague who has passed the time of day in the lift. In the NAS Prospects and the FPLD's project, primary examples of the consequences of specific difficulties relating to Asperger syndrome are poor planning and decision making¹². These can hinder the benefit of techniques often used to help those with mental health difficulties. These are highly involved in organisation and multitasking, and as such have a major impact of daily life and work stressors. All of the project participants reported difficulties arising from not being able to stop one activity to start another (e.g., leaving for work), feeling increased stress when something did not go to plan (e.g., the daily commute) and distractibility.

The law and advice available

Disability and equality laws, as well as Health and Safety legislation, place a duty of care on employers to make reasonable adjustments for their disabled employees. In turn, this places an onus on Human Resources (HR) and Occupational Health (OH) departments to guarantee that the appropriate supports are in place to ensure that those with a disability (including Asperger syndrome) do not face barriers to employment success. With this in mind, the purpose of the joint project was to explore how people with Asperger syndrome who experience mental health problems can best be supported in the working environment. The aim was to produce a set of guidelines and information for HR and line managers.

In essence, it is important for those in HR to appreciate that Asperger syndrome is considered a disability under both the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA; 2004) and the Equality Act (2010).

Summary

As with any disability, the needs of those with Asperger syndrome are highly individual, and this relates also to those who have additional mental health difficulties, most commonly anxiety. However, with some targeted, individual support and understanding of an individual's difficulties and potential, employees can be supported and their equality promoted. This can be achieved through a range of techniques and with the support of a variety of organisations.

The current project has provided guidance for HR and OH departments, as well as senior managers and line managers that can be used in addition to the advice provided by Prospects and the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD).

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