

THE EMPLOYER'S GUIDE TO

ASPERGER'S SYNDROME

- *Working with smart, talented people who have trouble "fitting in"*
- *Recognizing a disorder that affects as many as 1 in every 250 people*
- *Solutions for employees with social, communication or organization challenges*
- *Advantages of "the Asperger mind"*

Chances Are, You're Working with Someone Who Has Asperger's Syndrome

I've written this guide to show employers how to utilize the talents of a capable, intelligent, well-educated and underutilized work force: individuals with Asperger's Syndrome.

Asperger's Syndrome is a recently recognized neurobiological disorder. People with Asperger's Syndrome have a hard time understanding and responding to social cues. They may make blunt or inappropriate comments, alienate colleagues with quirky behavior, or dominate conversations talking about areas of personal interest.

Although only officially recognized by the medical community in 1994, Asperger traits have been observed in many prominent individuals throughout history. It's been speculated that Isaac Asimov, Johann Sebastian Bach, Albert Einstein, Bill Gates, Vincent Van Gogh, Thomas Jefferson, Mozart, Isaac Newton, Carl Sagan, Vernon Smith (Nobel Laureate, Economics), Andy Warhol, and Ludwig Wittgenstein had/have Asperger's Syndrome.

Today the prevalence of Asperger's Syndrome is estimated to be as high as 1 in every 250 people in the United States.¹ Chances are you're working with or have worked with people who have Asperger's Syndrome.

People with Asperger's Syndrome have a hard time understanding and responding to social cues.



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¹ *The Complete Guide to Asperger's Syndrome*, ©2007 Tony Attwood

The business community benefits in two important ways from understanding how to effectively manage Asperger individuals.

- If you currently have employees who are struggling with social, communication and organizational skills, there are effective interventions and accommodations that can maximize their contributions and help you retain individuals who are at risk of derailing.
- In the right job with the right supports, individuals with Asperger's Syndrome are dedicated, loyal contributors and answer the on-going need of businesses for skilled, educated workers.

This guide is divided into three parts. The first explains what Asperger's Syndrome is and the specific strengths of "the Asperger mind." The second explores common challenges that these individuals face in the workplace, while the third section explains what employers can do to create work environments that are conducive to success.

Barbara A. Bissonnette, Principal
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PART ONE

What is Asperger's Syndrome?

Asperger's Syndrome is a neurobiological disorder that affects an individual's ability to read and respond to social cues, communicate effectively, and organize and prioritize tasks. Many people with Asperger's Syndrome have above-average (or even superior) intelligence and enter the workforce with advanced or multiple degrees.

The syndrome was first described in 1944 by an Austrian physician named Hans Asperger. He wrote about a group of children with unusual characteristics including difficulty making friends, pedantic speech accented with odd vocal tones and rhythms, and consuming preoccupations with topics of special interest. Writing in his native German, Asperger's work remained largely unknown until the 1980's when it was translated into English by a British researcher, Dr. Uta Frith.

It was not until 1994 that Asperger's Syndrome was officially recognized by the American medical community, and even at this writing theories about its etiology as well as the diagnostic criteria continue to evolve. It is generally agreed that individuals with Asperger's Syndrome are on the high-functioning end of the autism spectrum.

In addition to challenges with social and communication skills, people with Asperger's Syndrome have difficulty organizing and prioritizing information, switching attention rapidly from one task to another, and grasping "the big picture." They may also be distracted by tactile, olfactory or auditory sensitivities and have problems with fine and gross motor skills.

On the flip side, Asperger's Syndrome also confers specific strengths that make these individuals particularly well-suited to jobs requiring attention to detail and prolonged focus. Careers in computer programming, technical documentation, academic and scientific research, engineering, and academia are among the choices that make good use of their logic and analytical skills, excellent memory for facts, vast knowledge of specialized fields, tolerance of routine, and creative problem solving.

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Specialisterne, a Danish software company, specifically hires people on the autism spectrum because, according to its founder, "...they are methodical and exhibit great attention to detail."² He also notes strengths in "motivation, focus, persistence, precision and ability to follow instructions."³

Given the intelligence, tenacity, drive and often ingenious ways that people with Asperger's Syndrome compensate for their limitations, one can argue that Asperger's is not

a "condition" at all but simply a way of processing information that differs from the so-called "neurotypical" majority.* Or as Temple Grandin, Ph.D., an adult with autism known world wide for the innovative design of humane livestock handling facilities, so forthrightly puts it, "What would happen if you eliminated the autism gene from the gene pool? You would have a bunch of peo-

* NOTE: Within the Asperger's community the term "neurotypical" is used to refer to people whose neurological development is consistent with what is generally described as "normal" particularly when it comes to understanding social cues.

^{2,3} "A Danish IT consultancy is using the special skills of people with autism to improve the quality of its software testing," *ComputerWeekly.com*, February 8, 2008, *Reed Business Information*.

ple standing around in a cave, chatting and socializing and not getting anything done."

STRENGTHS OF THE ASPERGER MIND

People with Asperger's Syndrome are represented in all kinds of professions, including creative fields like music, writing and the arts; academia; law; science; accounting and finance; information technology; engineering and research. Like any other human being, each possesses a unique combination of talents, abilities, strengths and weaknesses.

Differences in the way that the Asperger brain processes information can be a terrific asset to the business community when individuals are placed in the right jobs and receive the right supports.

Individuals with Asperger's Syndrome have strengths in the following areas:

- Attention to detail and sustained concentration which result in accurate, high-quality work
- Excellent long-term memory with a recall of details that can be astonishing
- Tolerance of repetition and routine which is valuable in all kinds of jobs from telemarketing to computer programming and research
- Strong logic and analytic skills
- Vast knowledge of specialized fields
- Ability to think outside the box and discover creative solutions
- Absence of social filtering (will say when the emperor has no clothes!)
- Perseverance
- Honesty, loyalty, great desire to do well

Common Workplace Challenges

Individuals with Asperger's Syndrome vary widely in their abilities, challenges and need of support. Some appear awkward in their interactions with others, forgetting to make eye contact or to smile, or talking too loudly, softly or quickly. Others are charming and talkative but may ask too many questions or alienate others with blunt comments or social gaffes. Still others who appear neurotypical confound colleagues with an apparent lack common sense, unusual naiveté or odd reactions.

Asperger challenges fall into three main categories: social and communication skills, organization, and sensory / motor issues. As one would expect, the communication category presents the biggest hurdle to competitive employment. This is largely because the social communication problems of people with Asperger's Syndrome so often look like behavior or attitude problems.

I. Social and Communication Challenges

Interviewer to job candidate:

"Why should I hire you over the other applicants?"

Job candidate with Asperger's Syndrome:

"I don't know how to answer that because I haven't met the other applicants."

A large percentage of the workplace difficulties experienced by people with Asperger's Syndrome have to do with deficits in social and communication skills which can lead to serious misunderstandings and even job loss. Often the individual with Asperger's is shocked to hear that others consider him to be rude, insubordinate, or unhelpful.

The negative reactions of neurotypicals are understandable. Trying to interact with someone who doesn't make eye contact, takes

expressions literally, delivers blunt, pointed remarks, or doesn't readily initiate conversation can be confusing or irritating. The interpersonal style of people with Asperger's is so contrary to the way that most people relate that it's natural to attach a negative intention to such unexpected behavior.

For example, one of my coaching clients became so overwhelmed by people interrupting him at work that he'd simply sit at his desk shaking his head when someone stopped by. Another client overheard the company president talking to a colleague in the hall. This young man believed that he was being helpful by interrupting the conversation to point out a factual error the president made.

When working with people who have Asperger's Syndrome it is critical to remember that their intention is to be friendly and helpful, but they do not understand the social nuances that most people learn intuitively in childhood.

This means that someone with an advanced degree may literally forget to smile or greet co-workers in the morning. The CEO of the company might be spoken to in the same informal manner as a peer. Questions may be answered too honestly ("I think that's a stupid idea") and instructions taken very literally (jumping up and down when told to "hop to it").

NONVERBAL LEARNING DISORDER

Only about 7% of human communication is through the spoken word. The remaining 93% is non-verbal via body language, facial expression, tone and volume of voice and even physical proximity. Most people learn to comprehend this unspoken code during childhood. People with Asperger's, however, must learn these skills intellectually.⁴

Many people with Asperger's Syndrome equate navigating the neurotypical social world with being in a foreign culture. Imagine

⁴ *Nonverbal Learning Disorder (NLD) is a neuropsychological profile that includes difficulty processing visual information such as social cues and visual concepts such as time. A person with NLD is not on the autism spectrum yet can have many of the same difficulties as someone with Asperger's Syndrome.*

how hard it would be to communicate if you couldn't tell whether someone's facial expression or tone of voice was happy, sad, or mad. Or if you heard language very literally and thought, for example, that having a "bad hair day" at work was a grooming issue. Or if looking someone in the eye was distracting or painful. Imagine not understanding how to make small talk or casual conversation during a lunch break.

THEORY OF MIND

Theory of Mind is the ability to understand another person's perspective. For instance, you understand that a round of layoffs have your boss anxious about sales projections and salespeople anxious about their jobs. As a manager you know that the promise of a promotion motivates Jill while the potential for a quarterly bonus motivates Allan, and design incentives accordingly.

To varying degrees, people with Asperger's Syndrome have impaired theory of mind abilities that can result in poor decision-making. For example, one man thought that he was showing initiative by offering a customer advice instead of referring them to designated specialists. It simply didn't occur to him that the specialists would likely be annoyed that he was doing their job, or that his supervisor would not want him going outside the scope of his assigned responsibilities.

Difficulty reading social cues and understanding someone else's perspective means that a person with Asperger's Syndrome may:

- Take language literally and miss nuances like implied meanings or sarcasm
- Make statements that are too honest and direct, unintentionally offending others
- Neglect to make eye contact or to smile
- Not know how to make "small talk" and appear disinterested or unfriendly
- Talk at length about areas of interest and not notice that other people are bored

- Speak to a supervisor in the same way they'd speak to a peer
- Have difficulty controlling anger or frustration
- Interrupt; talk too quickly/slowly; too loudly/softly
- End a conversation by simply walking away
- Ask too many questions (and not see that someone is annoyed)

II. Organizational Challenges

Organizing and prioritizing information can be challenging due to a weak drive for central coherence and problems with executive function.

Central coherence is the ability to assimilate information from various sources and understand "the big picture." Usually this involves integrating what one hears, sees, remembers, and knows about other people's motives or desires.

Let's say that a salesperson is trying to crack the ACME account. She knows that the widget market is shrinking which puts pressure on ACME to become more competitive. After meeting with the operations manager, she learns that his strategy is to lower production time and materials costs. During a tour of the ACME plant, she observes that one of her company's new products would significantly increase ACME's production efficiency.

The salesperson uses her strong drive for central coherence to craft a proposal that demonstrates how her product answers the ACME objectives, will make their pricing competitive with that of other vendors, open a wider customer base, and make the operations manager look good.

By contrast, the weaker drive for central coherence in someone with Asperger's Syndrome means that his or her focus will be on specific details. Not readily seeing the big picture makes it hard to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant facts, and to integrate data from multiple information streams. Thus Mark suggests that

his company can save money by eliminating the entire marketing department. He correctly concludes that editorial staff can write marketing copy but fails to consider the many other tasks performed by the marketing personnel (or how they will react to his suggestion!).

Executive function is another area that impacts organizational ability. Imagine what a busy executive must do to manage a company or business unit. Data and tasks must be organized and prioritized, budgets developed, marketing and sales plans created, time and resources managed efficiently. An executive predicts likely outcomes and monitors results, and readily changes course if necessary.

One feature of Asperger's Syndrome is monotropism, that is, focusing on one thing at a time. This impacts executive function and means that these individuals generally do not perform well in jobs that require multi-tasking. They may also need specific assistance with organizing their time and tasks.

Difficulty with central coherence and executive function means that a person with Asperger's Syndrome may:

- Have trouble getting started on assignments
- Not know how long an assignment should take
- Focus too much on details
- Become locked into black & white thinking
- Have trouble with short-term memory and need extra training
- Take longer to complete a task
- Need direction about what the finished product should look like
- Have trouble following multi-step instructions
- Need help prioritizing tasks and organizing information
- Get overwhelmed with too many interruptions or requirements to multi-task
- Appear not to take initiative because they don't know what else needs to be done

- Ask too many questions in an attempt to clarify assignments or expectations
- Act impulsively, based on too little information
- Resist change

III. Sensory Challenges

People with Asperger's Syndrome may experience extreme sensitivities to light, sound, smells, and touch (such as the feel of certain fabrics on the skin). Some individuals can actually see the cycling of fluorescent lights, for instance, or hear a co-worker's keyboarding as a cacophony of utterly distracting noise.

Auditory processing problems can make it hard to follow spoken directions, especially if there is a sequence of more than two or three steps. Following conversation in a group setting can be challenging and the individual may not recognize that he or she is speaking too loudly, too softly or in a monotone.

Sensory anomalies can make it difficult or impossible for some individuals to pay attention to input from multiple sensory channels at once (for example, making eye contact and listening to what someone is saying). Visual-spatial problems can make it hard to find items on a desk or to notice that one is standing too close to others.

Asperger's Syndrome can also affect fine and gross motor coordination. The individual might not be able to write legibly or fold and stuff papers neatly into an envelope. The person might be clumsy or have an awkward gait.

Difficulty with sensory and motor abilities means that a person with Asperger's Syndrome may:

- Require a workspace near a natural light source or illuminated with incandescent light bulbs
- Need noise-cancelling headphones and/or a workspace in a quiet location
- Require written instructions

- Take longer to process spoken words and formulate a reply
- Benefit from visual clocks and timers
- Need breaks to avoid sensory overload
- Organize using color-coding or visual icons

PART THREE

Optimal Jobs & Work Environments

Although Asperger's Syndrome exists on a spectrum and individuals can vary widely in their abilities and challenges, generalities can be made about the kinds of jobs and work environments that are most conducive to their success.

Difficult jobs/work environments tend to be those that:

- Require multi-tasking or responding to frequent interruptions
- Involve quick decision-making
- Are high pressure
- Are unstructured and rapidly changing
- Require lots of social interaction
- Involve managing other people
- Demand high rates of speed

Optimal jobs/work environments tend to be those that:

- Allow concentration on one task at a time
- Require accuracy and quality versus speed
- Offer structure and clear performance expectations
- Have at least some elements of routine
- Require minimal social interaction or scripted interaction
- Do not involve the management of others

Working with People Who Have Asperger's Syndrome

There are a number of things that employers can do to help individuals with Asperger's Syndrome be productive and successful at their jobs. Obviously, the diagnosis of Asperger's must be made by a qualified medical professional (usually a neuropsychologist) and it would be inappropriate, unethical, and illegal (under the Americans with Disabilities Act) to imply or ask someone if they have any medical condition.

If however you have an employee who is struggling with communication, organizational skills or other aspects of their job, it is perfectly acceptable to offer coaching from a specialist in social communication and organization. Should an individual self-identify as having a particular disability then an employer can discuss aspects of that condition with him and recommend interventions.

Whether you know or suspect that someone has Asperger's Syndrome, here are some general guidelines for making them productive on the job.

- **Be patient with training and break instruction into small segments.** If the individual is asking an excessive number of questions it could indicate anxiety or confusion about assignments. Provide specific, quantifiable expectations whenever possible ("the draft is due in 3 days" or "13 entries or more must be made per hour"). Regular feedback about performance is beneficial to any employee, but particularly to one with Asperger's Syndrome.
- The use of check lists, electronic reminders, and a personalized "rule book" of processes, procedures and where to go for help can **address problems with short-term memory.** A number of organizational problems can be alleviated with the use of written instructions, color-coded filing systems, and a quiet work station.
- Regarding the all-important area of social skills, **be mindful that usually what looks like a behavior or attitude problem is a communication problem.** People with Asperger's Syndrome often don't know what they have done to offend or anger someone and can become quite anxious and confused by general statements

like, “You’re rude,” “You’re not a team player,” or “How could you say that!”

- Don’t take blunt remarks or social gaffes personally; rather **use clarifying questions to understand the individual’s intentions. Be specific, direct and matter-of-fact in pointing out inappropriate or unacceptable behavior** (“When you tell people to ‘be quiet’ it’s considered rude. Instead, ask them if they’d mind lowering their voices.”)

Educate human resources personnel about Asperger’s... retaining even one employee at risk of derailing more than covers the investment in training.

- **Educate human resources personnel, managers and employees about Asperger’s Syndrome.** As mentioned earlier, the prevalence is estimated to be as high as 1 in every 250 people in the US. The chances are that you’ve interviewed, hired, managed, worked with or maybe even fired someone with Asperger’s. Increased understanding is directly proportional to increased employment success, and retaining even one employee at risk of derailing more than covers the investment in training.
- **Providing a coach to work with an employee and his or her manager** (particularly a coach who is familiar with conditions like Asperger’s and NLD) can prove highly effective for improving social and communication skills as well as organizational abilities. The pragmatic, goal-oriented nature of the coaching process combined with a personalized action plan based on organizational and individual needs assures that performance objectives are addressed along with skill development.

ABOUT BARBARA BISSONNETTE AND FORWARD MOTION COACHING

Barbara Bissonnette is the Principal of Forward Motion Coaching (www.ForwardMotion.info) and specializes in helping adults with Asperger’s Syndrome, Nonverbal Learning Disorder and other social and communication challenges to become more productive, effective and team-oriented workers. She also offers training and consultations to organizations so that managers and human resources personnel can learn to utilize the talents of these individuals.

Prior to coaching Barbara spent more than 20 in business most recently as Vice President of Marketing and Sales for an information services provider. She is certified through both the Professional Executive Coaching Program at the Massachusetts School of Professional Psychology and by the Institute for Professional Empowerment Coaching.

SERVICES

TRAINING & CONSULTATION

Consultation and training programs enable managers and human resources personnel to understand differences in the way people with Asperger’s Syndrome and NLD process information, and avoid some of the common misunderstandings that can result in lowered productivity, employee turnover or even job loss.

You will learn effective interventions and accommodations that will maximize an individual’s contribution and help you retain employees at risk of derailing. Programs are tailored to your specific needs and can include half- and full-day workshops, consultations and coaching for managers.

COACHING FOR EMPLOYEES

Regardless of whether or not an individual has been diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome or NLD, coaching can improve commu-

nication and social skills, time management and organizational abilities.

Coaching aligns individual and organizational goals and includes:

- Goal setting to establish desired outcomes, time frames, milestones and how success will be measured.
- Assessment to understand the current situation.
- Coaching to provide specific action steps for learning new skills, building competencies, changing behaviors, and achieving results.

Coaching sessions can be arranged at your place of business or at Forward Motion Coaching offices in Lexington and Stow, MA.

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SOURCES

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