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Asperger's Syndrome Employment Workshop Notes

Imagine...

Imagine you have just landed on another planet and you didn't know the inhabitants, their language, their customs how they interact or how you should behave in their presence

Imagine trying to find your way in a foreign country with only jumbled signposts to follow and directions which you can only partially understand

Imagine not being able to talk, use your hands, use facial expressions or gestures and you had not been taught sign language

Imagine hearing ten television sets all at once and not being able to tune into any of them

For a person with Asperger's Syndrome, ordinary situations can feel just like this

Benefits of a Diagnosis

A formal Asperger's Syndrome diagnosis can be beneficial to both employees with the condition and potential employers:

- Can help the person with Asperger's Syndrome identify strengths and weaknesses appropriately
- Mention of condition on job applications can avoid discrimination against candidate, especially if employers have the *Positive About Disabled People* mark
- Can also help employers understand condition if they are prepared to listen and can work with candidate to make adjustments where necessary

Unemployability?

People with Asperger's Syndrome may have good skills/qualifications, but often find they can't use them through lack of social skills/awareness:

- **Interviews** - a person with Asperger's Syndrome can have difficulty with the social skills required to be successful at a job interview
- **Acceptance** - a person with Asperger's Syndrome may be seen as an easy target for harassment and isolation from colleagues
- **Understanding** - potential employers can sometimes feel 'threatened' as a person with Asperger's Syndrome might appear 'different'

Adults with Asperger's Syndrome in Employment

In short, the situation regarding adults with Asperger's Syndrome in employment is:

- A very low percentage (around 2-3 percent) are in full-time paid employment
- Many in full-time paid employment are in jobs that do not use their skills
- Few employed Asperger's Syndrome adults are in permanent employment, often on temporary contracts. (Source: National Autistic Society)

An Asperger Employment Experience

Recent problems experienced by an Asperger's Syndrome employee:

- I applied for a lower grade job purposely to ease myself back into employment but they gave me a high grade job which left me under attack from all sides
- My support worker disappeared as soon as I'd got the job, which made maintaining the job much harder
- Few co-workers understood me

Issues in the Workplace

Work issues that can be confusing for Asperger Syndrome employees include:

- **Authority Figures** – An employee with Asperger Syndrome may not grasp social hierarchy in the workplace, which can be mistaken for ignorance
- **Staff Meetings** – Often an employee with Asperger Syndrome may want to put across a point or idea in this situation, but may have difficulty in recognising when to speak
- **Dress Codes** – This can be a confusing issue for an Asperger Syndrome employee, such as knowing when to dress smart (e.g. board meetings) or casual (physical work such as lifting)

Anxiety

A person with Asperger Syndrome can experience high levels of anxiety in certain situations:

- In roles run off own time-management, where there is no clear start, finish or lunch hour.
- When given a task that the person hasn't been trained on or hasn't previously undertaken
- In organisations where each individual has their own agenda (e.g. the media, insurance). Conflict this can create can lead to anxiety
- In posts that are temporary/contract-based, where employee can become anxious about contract renewal

Potential Strengths

However, Asperger's Syndrome employees can have some notable strengths:

- Punctuality – from their preference for routine an Asperger Syndrome Employee can be very reliable
- Eye for detail – can often remember small detail, while others remember plot/structure
- May have specialist knowledge in a particular field (e.g. local history)
- A team situation can often benefit from inclusion of an Asperger Syndrome employee, especially if they can display such strengths. Their individual contribution can enhance a work/project if listened to.

Potential Solutions

Suggestions to help an Asperger's Syndrome candidate into a job include:

- To identify a suitable position for an employee, an aptitude test may be beneficial. This can also help identify the candidate's strengths/skills so they can be put to good use
- Employers could discuss with the candidate about any necessary arrangements to enable the candidate to perform their job better (e.g. a workspace not too close to colleagues)
- So that the candidate can get used to their place of work and their employer, a probationary/trial period may help. This would also help the candidate find out if a role is suitable or unsuitable for them

Suggestions to help an Asperger Syndrome employee keep a job and generally feel secure:

- Potential employers could be informed about Asperger's Syndrome and the difficulties the Asperger's Syndrome employee may experience
- To avoid anxiety, a timetabled routine with clear start and finish times and lunch break would be beneficial
- A 'buddy system' could be employed to avoid isolation and potential harassment/conflict. Access to a support worker would also be beneficial
- On-the-job training can be beneficial, as the Asperger's Syndrome employee may have difficulty applying college-based training to the workplace

Training Issues and Methods

An employee with Asperger's Syndrome ability to focus may be very different to others:

- When absorbing training, an employee with Asperger's Syndrome may be 'one-channel' with their ability to focus, often struggling to understand the 'bigger picture'
- Don't expect an employee with Asperger's Syndrome to master skills as quickly as others
- Don't expect them to multi-task easily, as the Asperger's Syndrome employee may have difficulty transferring skills from one area to another

Some suggested training methods for employees with Asperger's Syndrome include:

- **Use 'chunk' information** – Break the job down into simple tasks, explaining each part, before showing how all tasks demonstrated link in with one another. Use of visual aids to show links can also be useful
- **Acting out tasks** – Acting out how to do different tasks within a job can help the person learn (e.g. franking mail, talking to customers etc.)
- **Repeat Tasks** – Encourage employee to repeat tasks once they have learned them, so they will become second nature
- **Give positive feedback** – including helping employee recognise mistakes where necessary

Personal and Professional Development

Employees with Asperger's Syndrome may have difficulty coming to terms with the unwritten skills of social behaviour/intercatriion on the workplace:

- **Define Good and Bad Behaviour** – Assume you are talking to someone who has just arrived from Mars. Be explicit as possible as it is often small behaviours that are rarely noticed that make differences e.g.
 - **Bad** – gossiping excessively
 - **Good** – smiling at people
- **Maintaining Professional Behaviour** – get employee to realise appropriate professional behaviour is on the agenda, focusing on the impact behaviours may have on colleagues and customers. Where possible, offer rewards for adhering to the behaviour code.

A person with Asperger's Syndrome may have very different professional and personal values to their colleagues. Some strategies for the person to help colleagues understand include:

Look at what you do – Observe yourself and how you act, including how you treat your colleagues and customers. Allow complete honesty over reasons you have in your mind for why you took one action over another

Ask others for feedback – Find out what colleagues (those who work closely with) think you may value

Reflect – Bring together findings from your feedback and find out how your values relate to what your colleagues expect of you. If your values differ from what colleagues expect from you, show them your values are real through your behaviour, within the boundaries of professionalism

We are not Unemployable!

Given the chance in a position that matches their skills/qualifications, people diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome are capable of performing just as well as others. All we ask for is to be listened to so that potential employers understand our condition better.