

Understanding Autism in the Workplace

By Barbara Bissonette

Certain employees are enigmas to their colleagues and supervisors. Consider “Allan” a brilliant programmer who forgets to make eye contact and to smile. He irritates co-workers with painfully blunt, but usually accurate, assessments of their ideas: *“That’s dumb and won’t work!”*

Doreen has lost more than a dozen technical writing jobs for asking too many questions and being “rude.” Notoriously, she tried to empathize with a colleague by observing, *“I can tell that your diet isn’t working because you’re still fat.”*

Meanwhile, Mark’s supervisor laments, *“He can be an incredibly creative, out-of-the-box thinker, but he gets so caught up in the details that he loses sight of what we’re trying to accomplish. How do I get him to stay on track?”*

What all of these employees have in common is Asperger’s Syndrome (AS), a mild form of autism. Although awareness of Asperger’s Syndrome has grown dramatically, little attention is given to the challenges that adults face in the workplace – particularly those earning high salaries in white-collar jobs. Many of them do not disclose their AS to their employers, while others entered the workforce before this disorder was recognized by the medical community. Many of these individuals aren’t even aware that they have autism.

Asperger’s Syndrome is estimated to affect 1 in every 250 people in the U.S. In fact, some sources estimate that as many as 1 in 68 people may have some sort of autism. (It is referred to as a spectrum disorder due to the varying degrees.)

As a result, chances are that EA professionals are likely to come into contact with employees with autism. For instance, they may receive a call from a supervisor about an

employee who is smart but doesn’t “fit in.”

The employee in question usually has no idea that something is wrong. Interventions that do not match the unique way that these individuals process information will not work. In many cases, there are low-cost and even free accommodations that will enable an employee to meet performance requirements.

Individuals with AS Process Information Differently

Individuals with autism vary widely in their abilities, challenges, and need of support. Not every person experiences every symptom. For some, holding on to *any* job is a challenge. Others are able to establish careers, although they usually face significant struggles with communication throughout their working lives.

Individuals with AS in the workforce are typically bright and college educated. Although represented in all types of careers, the areas of high technology, technical writing, scientific and academic research, library science, and engineering make good use of their logic and analytical skills, excellent memory for facts, attention to detail, vast knowledge in specialized fields, and tolerance of routine.

Persons with AS process information differently than individuals who do not have autism. Problems with social skills and communication can cause them to behave in ways that seem willfully rude or insubordinate. They may offend others with candid remarks, which they consider to be honest and factual.

The literal interpretation of language can lead to serious, sometimes comical, misunderstandings: *“How come you’re not using the new scheduling software?”* asks Tim’s manager, *“I told you to take a look at it two weeks ago.”* *“I did look at it,”* replies Tim, *“and didn’t think it was useful, so I deleted it off my system.”*

Moreover, non-verbal communication, such as body language, facial expression, and tone and volume of voice, may not be recognized or interpreted correctly by individuals with autism. As a result, they may not be aware that other people are upset with them, or understand an implied request from a supervisor. Jokes and sarcasm elude them. The individual may have no awareness of a non-verbal message that *he* or *she* is sending by not making eye contact, standing too close to others or speaking in a monotone.

In addition, deficits in executive functioning, which govern the ability to plan and organize, can impact productivity. An employee with AS or other form of autism may have trouble prioritizing, multi-tasking or working quickly enough to meet productivity requirements. He or she may not see how tasks fit into the larger whole unless they are explicitly explained.

A tendency toward black-and-white-thinking makes it hard for those with AS to perceive options. Other workers, who see the AS individual's talent and intellect, brush aside appeals for help with comments like, "*You should know what to do; it's obvious!*" or, "*At your level you should know what the priorities are.*" Chances are they don't know!

Environmental Sensitivities also Common

Severe photo, olfactory, auditory, and tactile sensitivities may also interfere with job performance. An employee with AS may see the cycling of fluorescent lights, or hear the sound of a co-worker's typing as harsh, utterly distracting noise. The smell of tobacco smoke on a colleague's clothing made one of my clients so ill that she had to quit her job. Others have reported that they are unable to look someone in the eye and listen to what they are saying at the same time.

Employees with AS often experience heightened levels of anxiety. This can lead to magnification of workplace situations. This individual may become panicked over making a minor mistake, or over an insignificant conflict with a co-worker. My clients frequently report the need for contin-

ual hyper-vigilance to avoid saying or doing the wrong thing, which leaves them exhausted by the end of the day.

Autism and the ADA

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) says that employers must provide equal opportunities to *qualified* individuals with disabilities. A qualified individual is someone who meets the employer's requirements for education, skills, experience, and job performance. The ADA does not contain a list of specific disabilities. Instead, "disability" is defined as a physical or mental impairment "that substantially limits one or more major life activities" which can include "walking, seeing, speaking, breathing, learning, performing manual tasks, caring for oneself and working [etc.]." Depending on the nature of the impairments, a person with Asperger's Syndrome may – or may not – be considered disabled under the ADA.

The Americans with Disabilities Amendments Act of 2008 (ADAAA) lowered the threshold of "substantial limits," and stated that mitigating measures (e.g. medications to control symptoms) can no longer be used to determine if a person has a substantially limiting impairment. This increases the number of people who qualify as disabled. The Amendments Act shifts the focus from whether an employee is disabled to whether the employer meets its obligation to reasonably accommodate a disabled individual. And under the ADA, employers are protected from having to make accommodations that would pose an undue hardship on the organization.

Workplace Accommodations

As a result of the ADAAA, employers are more willing to work with employees to make accommodations that enable them to perform the essential job functions. Discussions between employers and employees about accommodations need not be adversarial. On the contrary, I have had a number of cases where relatively simple adjustments have resulted in the retention of skilled and loyal workers. The following are a few of them:

- To accommodate a receptionist with Asperger's Syndrome, her employer agreed to



turn off the lobby television during her shift, eliminating a distraction that led to errors.

- A sales manager's auditory processing problems made it impossible to follow the rapid conversations in meetings. She was given an agenda in advance; along with the questions she would be expected to answer.
- Common accommodations for AS employees include: access to meeting notes taken by a colleague; weekly meetings with a supervisor to clarify expectations and identify priorities; written instructions for tasks; permission to wear noise-canceling headphones; and/or relocation to a quieter workspace.

Disclose – or Not to Disclose?

The decision to disclose a disability is solely that of the employee. Whether it is the right option depends on the individual, the job, and his/her performance. Disclosing is not without risks, and it can be difficult, time consuming, and expensive to prove discrimination.

Resources

Job Accommodation Network (JAN) offers free information for individuals and employers on workplace accommodations and disability employment issues: www.askjan.org.

Online Asperger Syndrome Information and Support (OASIS) provides resources for individuals and medical professionals: www.aspergersyndrome.org.

U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) investigates charges of discrimination against employers: www.eeoc.gov.

Yale School of Medicine Child Study Center lists clinics, support groups and professionals nationwide (including adult resources): <http://medicine.yale.edu/childstudy/autism/resource/index.aspx>.

Employers are within their rights to request proof of diagnosis from a qualified medical professional, along with information about how specifically; the disability impacts job performance and what accommodations will be needed.

Adults who have not had formal evaluations may need referrals to neuropsychologists experienced with autism spectrum disorders. They may also need assistance clarifying the specific accommodations that are needed, and explaining challenges to their supervisors.

Unfortunately, there are times when an individual is unable to meet performance requirements. If the clinician is able to mediate with a supervisor, the feedback can help the person with AS understand what went wrong on the job:

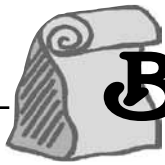
- Communication skills may need to be improved;
- The individual may need to better manage anxiety, learn how to ask for help; and/or
- Be taught systems for managing time and tasks.

The individual may be in a job that emphasizes areas of weakness, and not areas of strength. I had a client who was able to switch from a management role to one that utilized his outstanding technical ability.

Summary

Understanding Asperger's and other forms of autism enables an EA professional to bridge the gap between individuals with AS, and others in the workplace. "One reason I was successful as a Peace Corps volunteer," explains a 47-year-old IT specialist with AS, "is because they train everyone on how to act in the foreign culture. If I could have lessons on how to act in the U.S., it wouldn't be so bad for me here."

*Barbara Bissonnette is the Principal of Forward Motion Coaching. She specializes in career development coaching and workplace advocacy for adults with Asperger's Syndrome, and consults with professionals and employers. She is the author of the *Asperger's Syndrome Workplace Survival Guide*.*



The Benefits of Employees with Autism



Did you know that, in some circumstances, an adult with autism may be the individual best suited for a particular position? Many adults with autism are consistent in their job performance. They also:

- Enjoy routine;
- Have lower turnover rates than the general population;
- Focus well on repetitive tasks;
- Are detail-oriented;
- Have a serious work ethic; and are
- Extremely honest.

Support is Vital

Continued support is necessary for adults with autism to remain successful and employed over time. It is commonly understood that job coaches, mentors, liaisons – and/or the EAP – are needed to ensure that individuals with autism understand their jobs and employers and co-workers grasp the unique needs of a colleague with autism.

Individuals with autism have social difficulties, therefore social aspects of the working relationship are an important factor for support persons such as job coaches, EA

professionals, or others to address. *Support must be tailored to the individual.* Each adult with autism has different skills and challenges to overcome in the workplace. *Adults with autism are a valuable sector of the workplace and with support can be very productive and valued employees.*

Develop Model Programs

Companies that have successfully hired and retained individuals with disabilities (including those with autism) include Walgreens, Glaxo Smith Kline, Clark Manufacturing, Outback Steakhouse and CVS Pharmacy. Firms like these have developed programs so managers and employees alike can learn about the benefits of accommodations for workers with disabilities, such as autism. Moreover, managers and co-workers should be educated about common challenges faced by individuals with autism so they may better understand and work together.

Summary

Most adults with high-functioning autism possess some unique talents. As mentioned earlier, they include laser-like focus, attention to detail, superior ability to spot irregularities, superlative technical skills, and lack of boredom with highly repetitive tasks. Many individuals also possess high levels of intelligence and an intense desire to perform work commensurate with their skills.

In a day and age in which reliable, skilled help is too often in short supply, it is in management's best interests to work effectively with persons with autism.

Additional source: Advancing Futures for Autism.