



*Berkshire Autistic Society*

# ***Support Into Employment Project***

***Finding and Sustaining Employment***

***A Guide for People with Asperger Syndrome***

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## **Part 1**

### **• *Introduction***

This short guide has been written to help you to find and sustain employment. **Part 1** is based on the approach used in the 'Employability Options' course that was designed by Berkshire Autistic Society in conjunction with East Berkshire College and will provide you with a systematic approach that will help you to progress to suitable employment. **Part 2** will help you to manage and sustain long-term employment and is based on knowledge gained from supporting people with Asperger Syndrome in the workplace.

In addition to this guide there are a number of other employment related publications on the market that have been specifically written for people with Asperger Syndrome that you might also want to read, some of which will provide you with additional and useful information on employment issues. A full list is provided at the end of this guide.

### **• *Where to start***

You may have a very precise idea about what kind of employment or career you want to follow, or maybe you have lots of different ideas or options that you are considering. People with Asperger Syndrome are, in that respect no different to their non-Asperger or 'Neuro-typical' counterparts. You may however, find it a little more difficult to make a decision about your future in which case you will need to make a plan that is based on facts about what you would be suitable to do.

If you are not sure about what career you want to follow, it's worth doing some 'career matching' exercises, the easiest of which is the 'Kudos' computer careers programme, which is generally available at further education colleges. Every college has an advisor who can help you to access this programme and it only takes about 20 minutes to complete the basic job-matching element.

The programme asks you about your skills and interests and then provides you with a list of job options, which you can then consider further. You will probably find that the list will include many careers that are of no interest to you, however it's amazing how many times it suggests jobs that people haven't yet thought of. Think of it as a starting point and highlight any jobs that are appealing to you. The Kudos programme will also give you information about the qualifications and skills that are needed to do each job and is a useful way of discovering the likelihood of ever doing the job that you are interested in.

Once you have decided on some suitable job options, it's important to find out more about what it's actually like to do that job. The best way to do this is to talk to someone that is actually doing the job that you are interested in. If for example you are interested in becoming a hairdresser, phone a local salon and

explain that you are interested in a career as a hairdresser and ask if you can visit the salon to talk to the manager or one of the staff. Ask as many questions as you can because this will help you to decide if the job is still suitable for you. Don't forget to take notes so you can remind yourself or discuss the meeting with a friend or someone that can help you to make a sensible decision. Most importantly find out what qualifications are needed and try to be honest with yourself about the possibility of getting the required qualifications.

For example, if the job requires a subject degree or professional qualification, if you don't already have it, could you or would you be able to undertake the training required? If you already have A levels or the equivalent then it may be a realistic option for you, however if you have no formal qualifications then it is likely to be a more unrealistic option.

Working towards a desired qualification will often take a considerable length of time. Even relatively low-level qualifications such as a level 2 National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) could take two years or more. Once you know what level of qualification is required, use the table below to calculate approximately how long it will take to achieve. You will then know how much study you will have to commit to if you want to qualify for your choice of job.

<b>Level of Qualification</b>	NVQ & other Level 2	NVQ & other Level 3	NVQ & other level 4	Level 5 or undergraduate level 2 Cert/Diploma	Undergraduate level 3 (1 <sup>st</sup> Degree)
<b>Approximate length of study</b>	1-2 years	1-2 years	2 years	1-2 years Full Time	Up to 4 years Full Time

*Note: The above figures are used for illustration purposes and will vary from course to course and may depend on the content and amount of study undertaken at other levels.*

If the job you want to do requires qualifications, the lowest will probably be at level 2. Some employers operate NVQs and Modern Apprenticeships that allow their employees to gain qualification whilst they are already working, however you would still need to prove that you had the ability to study at the required level and this would mean completing a course of study at a level below or by passing a test.

If you decide to undertake a course of study, it's advisable to talk to a student advisor at your choice of college. If you choose to tell them about your Asperger Syndrome, they will be able to arrange the appropriate study support that will help you to achieve your potential and your study objectives. Some colleges also run employment skills courses that help people to match their hobbies, skills and interests to possible employment opportunities.

- **Employment Training Courses**

If you are currently unemployed, it is worth making enquiries with the Disability Employment Advisor (DEA) at your local Jobcentre to find out which colleges and local organisations run employment courses.

In addition to making enquiries with the DEA, it is worth doing your own research to find out if other organisations, like local charities and colleges run employment courses. The DEA's main source of information is likely to be a list of 'approved providers' who are organisations that are contracted to the Jobcentre to provide a range of options to help their clients to find employment. The range of schemes they offer is too broad to cover in detail but is likely to include elements of Job-Searching and Work Experience.

If you are offered a place on an employment scheme or college course, it's worth asking if they have experience of helping people with Asperger Syndrome and to give examples of how they have helped. It's surprising how many training providers will take referrals despite knowing little or nothing about Autistic Spectrum Disorders!

Courses that provide careers matching and work experience are helpful as they give you the opportunity to discover employment options that are suitable for you. If however the course on offer, concentrates on the generic skills needed in the workplace, such as social skills and coping with the environment, it's worth considering whether you will be able to transfer the skills you have learnt. People with Asperger Syndrome will almost certainly struggle to transfer these skills unless there is sufficient support in the workplace to do so.

- **The Labour Market and Transport Issues**

Making a decision about a future job is one thing, however, finding a job is another! Looking at what's available within the area that you can travel, is vital before embarking on choice of career. If you don't want to, or cannot travel, then pursuing an option that is not supported by the local labour market is likely to be a frustrating experience. For example, if you live in a rural community and want to work as an office administrator, you will almost certainly have limited opportunities for employment.

Also, if it's likely that every job that becomes available will have multiple applicants, you have to consider the possibility that the employer may choose to employ someone that does not have a disability. Although this would be discriminatory on the part of the employer, there is no practical way of telling if this has happened. However, if the person/s responsible for recruitment has an understanding of, or possibly even an appreciation of the benefits of employing someone with Asperger Syndrome, then disclosing this information could be a distinct advantage to you. The point is that once the disclosure of information about Asperger Syndrome has been put on the application form,

you will have to rely on the integrity of the employer not to discriminate against you. To counter the possibility of discrimination it's worth considering a range of job options to pursue rather than be limited to one.

- **Disclosure**

Application forms for employment will ask for information about an individual's disability and probably the biggest dilemma faced by people when they make applications for employment is whether to disclose information about their Asperger Syndrome.

Because Asperger Syndrome is often considered to be something of a hidden disability, it's difficult to know what the employer wants, or needs to know. In fact a declaration of disability is something that is personal to the individual and whilst you may consider your Asperger Syndrome to be disabling, others may not. There's certainly a debate to be had about this issue, and this is a topic that is included in the 'Employability Options' course that is run by East Berks College. However for the purposes of this guide, there is no easy answer and it's really a matter for your personal choice.

Making a disclosure could be an advantage or a disadvantage or neither. Unless you have an intimate knowledge of the recruitment panel's agenda, there's no way of knowing. It really is something of a lottery when it comes to recruitment and an employer's declaration that they have an equal opportunities policy or are positive about disabled people is not always reflected at grass roots level.

If you are undecided as to whether to make a declaration about your Asperger Syndrome or worried about being discriminated against, then unless the you require a 'reasonable adjustment' to be made to enable you to participate in the recruitment process, it may be advisable not to make a declaration at the point of application.

*NB: The term 'Reasonable Adjustment' is contained in the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA) and refers to adjustments that would be considered to be reasonable for the employer to make to prevent a person with a disability being treated less favourably. Although the term is open to interpretation, most employers are willing to have an appropriate person present in an interview to support someone with Asperger Syndrome.*

- **Support in interviews**

Many people with Asperger Syndrome will prefer to go through an interview without any direct support however, if you think that you will struggle and possibly fail, you might want to think about getting some support in order to highlight your strengths rather than your difficulties. With or without support you may appear to be 'different' and a recruitment panel may have reservations about employing you. However, if there is someone available to translate ambiguous questions for you, then you have a much greater chance of success. Whether or not you have made a disclosure about your Asperger Syndrome on a job application, it is strongly recommended that you do so if you are invited to any interviews. Making a disclosure at this point means that you are being honest with the employer and can legitimately request (as a reasonable adjustment) that someone accompanies you to the interview. Any employer that subsequently withdrew an offer of an interview or refused your request would almost certainly be breaking the terms of the Disability Discrimination Act.

When choosing who should support you in an interview, your decision should ideally be based on which person or organisation is most likely to help you to sustain long-term employment. Here are some key points to consider:

If you choose one of your parents, they may be inadvertently transferring the parent-child relationship to the employing organisation and in effect, encouraging them to think of you as being a child rather than as an adult in your own right. This often causes difficulties during the period of employment as the employer has effectively been conditioned into thinking that it's appropriate to contact the parents of the employee every-time that there's an issue at work, rather than attempting to support you to resolve the issue within the framework of their existing policies and practices. Parents often make excellent advocates for obvious reasons, however it's worth considering the longer-term outcomes of extending the parental relationship into the workplace.

Whoever you choose to support you should be someone who understands you and is able to support you to advocate for yourself with the minimum of help. It's important that the supporting person is seen as being impartial and whose objective is to achieve the best outcome for both parties. Employers are more likely to be sympathetic towards a person whose supporting organisation or network has this ethos and will ultimately feel more confident in the support that they are likely to receive.

- **What happens next?**

If you have been fortunate enough to have the support of a suitable employment scheme, then hopefully there will have been a smooth transition to employment and the supporting organisation will probably take care of all the your additional needs. If however you do not have the support of an appropriate scheme then it's important to keep the DEA at the Jobcentre up to date and to enquire about any additional support available.

The scope and breadth of all the available schemes is too complex to cover in this guide and the way schemes are administered will vary depending on each individual's situation. The best way to obtain a comprehensive overview of the support available and the likely impact employment will have in financial terms is for you and your advocate (if appropriate) to make an appointment with the DEA prior to taking up employment.

If possible register with any supported employment schemes that have experience of supporting people with Autistic Spectrum Disorders. Even if they are not able to support you through the whole recruitment process, they may be willing to give advice and guidance or support in the workplace once you have found a job.

- **Some additional tips for discovering job opportunities**

Obviously local papers and the Jobcentre provide a wealth of information about job opportunities however, for people with Asperger Syndrome, the most widely used medias for advertising job vacancies are often the least useful. This is particularly true of the kind of employment agencies that are found on the high street because their remit is usually limited to filling posts for a commission and the amount of support you receive is likely to be minimal.

When looking through local newspaper or job-paper adverts, you may have difficulty in interpreting written adverts which are often ambiguous. The skill of 'reading between the lines' may not be one that comes naturally to you and you may be tempted to apply for jobs that are not right for you.

Rather than going down either of these obvious routes, it's worth doing your own research to discover other sources of advertised and unadvertised, or discreet employment opportunities such as those found on company websites. Local authorities, colleges and voluntary organisations often maintain 'Latest Vacancy' pages on their websites and provide the viewer with an opportunity to browse other information about those organisations. In fact, local authorities, PCTs and colleges are often good places to start the job-hunting

process because they generally have strong equal opportunities policies and are more likely to be supportive of people with diverse employment needs.

The same can often be said of charitable and voluntary organisations that are more likely to have a positive attitude and be more sympathetic to the needs of people with Asperger Syndrome.

Once you have a good idea of what job you would like to do or career path you would like to follow, it's often a worthwhile exercise to send out what is known as a 'Spec Letter.' This is a basic enquiry letter that is sent out to employers of interest and details the individual's experience and qualifications. The letter will usually include some kind of C.V and will ask the employer to forward details of any available posts that might be relevant. It's surprising how often this simple exercise will reveal employment opportunities that go unadvertised and will thus effectively give the person with Asperger Syndrome a 'head start' when making an application.

## **Part 2**

### **• *Introduction***

There are certain 'predictable' areas of difficulty that people with Asperger Syndrome will have in employment and these will almost certainly be related to undertaking tasks correctly and getting on with work colleagues.

When Berkshire Autistic Society carried out some research enquiries to inform the development of an employment course, they discovered that in nearly every case where someone with Asperger Syndrome had encountered a substantial difficulty at work it could be traced back to an incident with a supervisor or manager who had become frustrated because the employee could not manage a specific task and had to be shown, or told how to do it over and over again with little discernable improvement in their competence or ability.

This section of the guide is suitable mainly for people that are starting work without the support of an employment scheme and provides some practical tips for pre-empting and solving workplace difficulties. If however, you have workplace support then you should follow the guidance of your support worker as they will know more about your employment situation and will be the best person to advise you.

### **• *Preparation for starting work***

If you are starting work without any direct assistance it is important that you let your manager or supervisor know as much as possible about the help that you need. Make a list of things that have caused you difficulties in the past and suggest some solutions. It is unlikely that your manager or supervisor will know much about Asperger Syndrome and may not understand why you do things a certain way. If for example you find it difficult to remember a series of tasks, suggest that they be written down for you in the sequence that they need to be done. Or if you find eye contact difficult, suggest that the person talking to you asks you to make a clear acknowledgement that you have understood what has been said.

If you are experiencing difficulties, don't expect other people to know what is wrong. You must tell them if there is a problem because they will not automatically know. Good communication is vital if you are to maintain positive relationships at work and people with Asperger Syndrome often experience difficulties that spiral out of control because they have problems with communicating their issues.

Try to be sociable, but don't try too hard! One of the reasons that people go to work is for social contact. You may only be going for the money or for other reasons, however it is important that you take time to engage in some of the social rituals of the workplace. There is no need to be very sociable if you find

this difficult or confusing but you should make the effort to do things like greeting immediate colleagues in the morning and offering to make drinks. Above all remember, If you try too hard you may get it badly wrong, so keep it simple.

- **Overcoming difficulties**

There will inevitably be times when despite careful planning and support things may go wrong. You may find it difficult to understand other people's feelings and sometimes accidentally say the 'wrong thing'. When this does happen it's important to remember that it is not your fault, it's just that you might be the last one to know when you have annoyed or upset someone.

The kind of things that might go wrong for you are normally quite predictable and easy to nip in the bud. It's not unusual for simple acts, like not taking a turn at making the tea or forgetting to apologise for being late, to cause ill feelings. Most problems can be easily overcome, if you communicate your difficulties, and supervisors and managers need to be alerted to potential difficulties before they become problems. Ask your employer to help you to evaluate every aspect of a difficulty. This will help you to pinpoint the root cause and hopefully to find an acceptable solution. Keeping a daily diary and highlighting any concerns will also help you when you are discussing any difficulties with your supervisor or manager.

- **Career progression and work opportunities**

At work, opportunities for career progression, a change in working arrangements, overtime or the opportunity to transfer to another dept can come very suddenly without warning and you may find that opportunities pass you by or that other employees seem to be taking advantage of these opportunities before you can. Despite being competent and reliable, employees with Asperger Syndrome often have difficulty making quick decisions, or will make decisions, which are not adequately thought through.

If there are opportunities that you are interested in, like career progression or working overtime, it's worth letting your supervisor or manager know in advance. Writing a letter to the human resources or personnel dept, outlining the opportunities that you are interested in will help you to do this.

If an opportunity that you are interested in arises, try to make further enquiries as soon as possible. Ask the relevant manager if you can meet to discuss the opportunity and ask them to help you to make a decision about whether the opportunity is suitable for you. If you are having difficulty making a decision, you might want to make a list of the advantages and disadvantages of the opportunity and discuss them with a friend or someone that knows you well enough to help you to make a sensible decision.

- **Managing change**

It's a bit of a myth to say that people with Asperger Syndrome can't cope with change. It's actually more likely that you will either be resistant to change or will have difficulty with making changes at short notice or without sufficient preparation or support.

Unfortunately for many people with Asperger Syndrome the workplace and work practices are subject to constant change. The probability of finding a long-term job where work tasks remain constant is unlikely and if you are very reliant on a routine then you may want to consider short-term contracts that have specific tasks or objectives, which can be achieved within a routine that you can predict and manage.

If however you are working in an environment that is subject to change, then you may need advance warning of any changes that are likely to be made in order for you to cope sufficiently well. One of the major causes of people with Asperger Syndrome being dismissed or having disciplinary action taken against them is because of their apparent inability to cope with new systems and working practices.

If you know that change will cause difficulties for you, ask your supervisor or manager to give you as much advance warning as possible if a change is due to take place and ask for the changes to be written down for you in straightforward language. If necessary, tell your supervisor or manager that you will need some additional support and help to re-structure your routine and reassure them that you can cope if you are given some extra support.

- **Useful contacts and addresses**

Berkshire Autistic Society 'Support Into Employment Project'

13 Boulton Street,  
Reading, RG1 4RD  
Tel: 0118 9590247

National Autistic Society

393 City Road  
London, EC1V 1NG  
Tel: 020 7833 2299

NAS 'Prospects' London

Studio 8, The Ivories,  
6-8 Northampton street,  
London N1 2HY  
Tel: 020 7704 7450

- **Employment related publications**

Meyer R.N 2001. *Asperger Syndrome Employment Workbook*. Jessica Kingsley. London.

Datlow-Smith M. et al 2000. *A guide to Successful Employment for Individuals with Autism*. P H Brookes. Baltimore

DFEE. Disability Discrimination Act 1995- a guide for everybody DL160 (Revised)