



*Berkshire Autistic Society*

# ***Support Into Employment Project***

***A Guide to Supporting Employees  
with Asperger Syndrome***

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- ***Introduction***

This short guide is intended for use by employers who are either employing or considering employing someone with Asperger Syndrome and addresses some of the main issues that employers commonly encounter when supporting employees who have Asperger Syndrome. The guide is intended to be used as a practical introduction to employing and supporting individuals in the workplace rather than as a technical manual and therefore in the interests of remaining 'user friendly' to employers, where jargon is used it is explained and kept to a minimum.

Employers wishing to gain a greater insight into Asperger Syndrome are encouraged to read some of the many publications on the subject, some of which are listed at the end of this guide

- ***What is Asperger Syndrome and what you should know about supporting someone with Asperger Syndrome***

Asperger Syndrome is an Autistic Spectrum Disorder or if you want to be more technical, a Pervasive Developmental Disorder! If that sounds complicated don't panic because the jargon simply means that people with Asperger Syndrome have what is often described as a mild form of Autism which means that they have not developed certain skills that people without Asperger Syndrome take for granted. These skills are primarily in the areas of social interaction, communication and imagination, however unlike more severe forms of Autism these deficits tend to be mild and sometimes hardly discernable in comparison. Individual intelligence is generally unaffected and the IQs of people with Asperger Syndrome are generally normal to above average.

So why should someone who is seemingly intelligent, experienced, occupationally qualified even, need support or additional help at work?

People with Asperger Syndrome have comparable levels of competence with their work colleagues, however they struggle when they are expected to learn tasks, transfer skills from one situation to another and multi-task in the same way as someone without Asperger Syndrome, and therein lies the root of their difficulties.

Non-Asperger employees will almost certainly have some of the same difficulties at work and possibly even to the same degree, however the difference will invariably be in the way that someone with Asperger Syndrome will deal with the difficulty in comparison to someone without Asperger Syndrome. The person without Asperger Syndrome will generally use their social skills to solve the difficulty, whereas someone with Asperger Syndrome

may find this to be more problematic and confusing, leading to breakdowns in communication which are then incorrectly interpreted as 'personality clashes' or other such inter-personal difficulties.

The good news is that with a little bit of careful planning and supervision these difficulties can be overcome before they cause a problem and then the benefits of employing someone with Asperger Syndrome will become apparent and individual potential can be realised.

- **Why should you employ someone with Asperger Syndrome?**

People with Asperger Syndrome are renowned for their reliability, attention to detail and professional attitudes to work. In jobs where routine and repetition are key to good productivity, people with Asperger Syndrome often excel where others become bored or frustrated. Jobs such as data entry, proof reading and clerical work often provide the ideal environment for people with Asperger Syndrome as they generally thrive on order and predictability in their working lives.

Although employees with Asperger Syndrome are sometimes regarded as being 'different' their lack of interest in office politics, gossip or pre-occupation with non-work issues can come as a refreshing change. That's not to say that everyone with Asperger Syndrome will excel in every job or career but where they do find a niche they are generally well regarded and with a little support and understanding, make reliable, effective and productive employees.

- **Suggested Careers/Vocations**

Although many common virtues are associated with Asperger Syndrome employees, it is still important to see every employee or potential employee as an individual. It would be misleading to suggest or provide a prescribed list of suitable careers, as people with Asperger Syndrome can't be pigeon holed anymore than people without Asperger Syndrome. To say that most people with Asperger Syndrome will enjoy repetitive or mundane work (as some publications suggest) is, at worst untrue and at best an over simplification. It is probably more accurate to say that routine and structure, or predictability are more important and although employees with Asperger Syndrome may find new tasks more daunting than some of their colleagues, if the job demands a degree of flexibility this should not be a problem so long as new tasks are properly explained and incorporated into an existing routine.

If however the job requires greater flexibility as many do these days, it's important to consider whether the employee with Asperger Syndrome will cope with these demands. For example, many retail organisations now expect their employees to change roles at any given time to meet the needs of their

customers, routines are a thing of the past and the ability to manage change is of paramount importance. If this sounds like your organisation and you are hiring staff, it's important to fully explain the nature of the work to someone with Asperger Syndrome so that both parties can make sensible decisions about possible employment.

If the person with Asperger Syndrome has the requisite skills and experience then you might want to suggest a work trial or work experience period to allow the individual to evaluate their own ability to cope. Unfortunately it is common for people with Asperger Syndrome to confuse their interests with suitable careers and often find that their expertise alone doesn't always make them a suitable employee. For example, someone with Asperger Syndrome may assume that because they have an unrivalled technical knowledge of mobile phones that they would be suitable to work in a phone shop. In fact, technical expertise is relatively unimportant, whereas the ability to sell phones is the primary requisite. People with Asperger Syndrome that are employed in jobs that are unsuitable for them will always struggle, whereas people with Asperger Syndrome that are helped to match their abilities appropriately can and do make excellent employees.

- ***How to interview someone with Asperger Syndrome***

Interviews are undoubtedly the greatest hurdle for any person with Asperger Syndrome to overcome and where most will fail quite unnecessarily. People with Asperger Syndrome may have all the right skills and experience for the job but they simply do not come across well at interviews.

It could be argued that the interview, that time honoured ordeal that we all have to go through to impress an employer, is rather an outdated concept that doesn't necessarily elicit the best outcome in terms of finding the 'right' person for the job at the best of times. If a candidate with Asperger Syndrome has to go through this process then the chances of failure are quite high, unless the employer understands their predicament and structures the interview to get the best out of them.

Interviews are all about communication and this is where the difficulties begin for someone with Asperger Syndrome. It has been suggested that interviewers make a decision about a candidate in the first three seconds. This may or may not be true. The point is that first impressions count for a lot and people with Asperger Syndrome need an interview panel to be sympathetic and patient if they are to stand any chance of success.

People with Asperger Syndrome have difficulty with social communication. For example, for some it may be maintaining eye contact. It's not that they are being rude or are disinterested, it's just that they either find it painful or are unaware of its social significance.

Use of clear unambiguous language is also important. People with Asperger Syndrome don't 'read between the lines' and sometimes take questions out of context. For example a young man was asked by an interviewer "what are your strengths," to which he replied... "My arms!"

If the interviewer had asked him what his strengths were in relation to the job, the answer would have been more appropriate. In terms of the Disability Discrimination Act, which is discussed in more detail later, the employer needs to make what is known as a 'reasonable adjustment.' For someone with a physical disability this might be wheelchair access, for a deaf person it might be a signer, however for someone with Asperger Syndrome it could be the help of an advocate, someone who can help the interview panel to structure the questions to elicit the most appropriate responses. The use of an advocate not only allows the employer to make an informed decision about the individual's potential but also gives them a valuable insight into how best to communicate with the individual should they decide to employ them.

If the candidate does not have an advocate then it will be necessary for the interviewing panel to structure the interview by giving the individual very clear questions with directions about the amount of detail required in the answer. Don't be afraid to tell the candidate when to stop. People with Asperger Syndrome often don't realise when they have said enough or not enough, this can be for a single or combination of reasons. If for example the question is about their favourite subject, they might be inclined to keep talking as long as there appears to be someone listening, or they might not pick up the social clues, such as facial expressions that would otherwise tell them that the listener has heard enough. Saying something like "*you can stop talking about that now because I want to ask you another question*" will be welcomed by someone with Asperger Syndrome because the questioner is giving a clear direction coupled with an explanation.

It also helps to tell the person when the interview is drawing to a close. By saying something like "*we will finish this interview in five minutes and we will tell you if you have got the job (by a specified date if possible)*" is a bit like calling 'last orders' at the bar. They need this advanced warning to mentally wind up the process!

- ***Practical tips for supporting employees with Asperger Syndrome***

It's been said about people with learning disabilities that the right person in the right job needs little support and this is certainly just as true of people with Asperger Syndrome. In fact it's not unusual for individuals who have experienced a great deal of difficulties in employment to undergo what seems like a total transformation when they find a job that really is right for both them and their employer.

If you are employing or intend to employ someone with Asperger Syndrome, if they are well matched to their job and are competent to carry out the requisite tasks then any problems that are likely to arise are likely to be fairly simple to anticipate and to solve.

Most people with Asperger Syndrome will need a structure and a routine if they are to feel comfortable at work. Order and predictability should be maintained where possible and where not possible, notice of change should be given. Clear instructions with explanations will also help the individual to put tasks into meaningful contexts. At the risk of being patronising you might want to think of your employee as a kind of Dr Spock character needing 'logical explanations' to make sense of their work. Now, before you read any further, take a moment to imagine you are travelling on the underground in Japan (assuming that you can't read or speak Japanese) and that you are totally lost and don't understand any of the station signs, the anxiety you feel is comparable with that of someone with Asperger Syndrome who has just been asked to do a new task without proper explanation or prior warning!

Try to be clear-cut and decisive; people with Asperger Syndrome benefit from straight talk. If for example staff organise their own breaks or shift patterns according to their schedules, encourage the individual to agree times and durations, otherwise you may find that they either do too much or too little work. They're not being difficult, they're just likely to get confused about what is required of them.

Be patient, people with Asperger Syndrome may need to practice tasks more often but once they have mastered them, they are unlikely to be forgotten. Encourage supervisors to be patient and to think of the time spent with an employee with Asperger Syndrome as an investment. The more you put in the more you are likely to get out!

- ***How to teach new skills to people with Asperger Syndrome***

When Berkshire Autistic Society's 'Support Into Employment Project' carried out some research to inform the development of an employment skills course for people with Asperger Syndrome, they discovered that in every case, where someone had experienced conflict at work it could always be tracked back to a single incident between the individual and a supervisor or colleague.

People with Asperger Syndrome will sometimes repeatedly get seemingly straightforward tasks 'wrong' causing anxiety to themselves and frustration to their work colleagues. This in turn leads to conflict, which rarely gets resolved. It's not that the employee with Asperger Syndrome can't learn the required tasks, it's just that they may need to learn it in a different way in order for it to be remembered. When people are taught new tasks in the workplace, they are generally 'shown' how to do it, then expected to copy and practice the task.

This kind of teaching and learning is by far the most practical and established way of imparting knowledge in the work environment, however it needs to be adapted slightly if the employee with Asperger Syndrome is to fully benefit.

Some tasks can be done in different ways with the same result, however it is better for the person with Asperger Syndrome to fully master 'one' way, (preferably through repetition) before learning 'another' way. It's also helpful to explain why the task is being done (even if it seems to be obvious) and try where possible to explain how the task is connected to other activities. If you have to tell someone how *'not to do'* a task, always demonstrate how *'to do'* the task, this is because most people, when told how *'not to do'* something will automatically start thinking about how they could do the task, whereas someone with Asperger Syndrome will need the correct instruction.

Having a way to remind the employee how to do the task, such as with written instructions, symbols or photographs will not only help them, but will also reduce the amount of frustration that supervisors feel when they have to repeatedly demonstrate or assist with a task. This in turn will lead to improved relations and greater productivity.

If you are not sure whether to use written instructions, symbols or photos to support learning, just experiment. Although they take a little more effort to produce, photos are often very effective because many people with Asperger Syndrome benefit from instructions when they are presented visually. Luckily with digital cameras it's relatively easy to photograph someone demonstrating a task and then print off the results in a sequence that can be followed. Don't forget to add written instruction and explanations if necessary.

*Here's a simple example that could be used for someone working at a garden centre that took twenty minutes to prepare. (The same process can be adapted for more complex tasks.)*

Step 1



Take a..... plant

Step 2



Take a cutting that is three Inches long

Step 3



Place the cutting in a pot of compost

- **Overcoming difficulties**

There will inevitably be times when despite careful planning and support things may go wrong. People with Asperger Syndrome find it difficult to understand other people's feelings and sometimes accidentally say the 'wrong thing' and will lack empathy with other staff. When this does happen it's important to remember that it is not deliberate, it's just that they are often the last ones to know when they have annoyed or upset someone. This is because they don't pick up on unspoken social clues, such as the body language and facial expressions that we all recognise and use to inform us about other people's feelings towards us.

The kind of things that can go wrong for people with Asperger Syndrome 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. An example of this is a man who would arrive for work every day in a very anxious mood, which meant that it would take at least half an hour to calm down before he could begin work. This behaviour bothered his colleagues, who pointed out to him that he was paid the same as them but did less. As you can imagine, this only made him more anxious and it wasn't long before relations had broken down and he became very unpopular. When he was subsequently encouraged to analyse the problem it was discovered that his anxiety in the morning was caused by not wanting to miss a train and if he did miss the train he risked being five minutes late. Because he had always been taught that time keeping was important, he incorrectly assumed that being five minutes late would lead to his dismissal.

This problem could have been easily overcome, if this person had been able to communicate his difficulty, which is why supervisors and managers need to be alert to potential difficulties before they become problems. Supporting the employee with Asperger Syndrome to evaluate every aspect of a difficulty will help them to pinpoint the root cause and hopefully to find an acceptable solution.

Having a 'Saying It Straight' policy is another way of ensuring effective communication between employees with Asperger Syndrome and their colleagues. In the interests of the individual it is generally useful for other close work colleagues to know something about Asperger Syndrome and how it might affect their working relationship, however this can be something of a bone of contention for some people with Asperger Syndrome who would rather other people didn't know.

- **Disclosure**

Probably the biggest dilemma faced by people when they begin employment is deciding whom they should disclose information to about their Asperger Syndrome. Because Asperger Syndrome is often considered to be something of a hidden disability, it's difficult to know what other people need to know. A declaration of disability is something that is personal to the individual and whilst some may consider their Asperger Syndrome to be disabling, others may not.

Employees with Asperger Syndrome usually conclude that if they are to receive adequate support, bosses and supervisors will need to know, however only a minority will be happy for all their work colleagues to be informed. There is no formula for disclosure and if there are no concrete reasons for other employees to have this information then it's probably best kept private. If there are sufficient 'discreet' structures and support to enable the individual to function effectively then there's no reason to tell other employees.

- **What you need to know about Disability Discrimination and Asperger Syndrome**

It is reasonable to assume that people with Asperger Syndrome may be discriminated against in the recruitment process, simply because employers are concerned about employing someone with a 'Syndrome' that hardly anyone seems to understand. Luckily more companies are now seeing the benefits of employing a diverse workforce and will welcome a broad variety of applicants for available jobs.

Hopefully after reading this guide you will have a better understanding of how to support and get the best out of an employee with Asperger Syndrome and feel more comfortable about employing them. You may however, still be concerned about inadvertently discriminating against someone with Asperger Syndrome in the workplace, possibly because you are not sure about what 'adjustments' to make.

The term 'Reasonable Adjustment' is contained in the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 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. Because the term 'reasonable' is open to legal interpretation, it would be impossible (and unwise) to present a comprehensive list of do's and don'ts, however there are a few more obvious examples of how people with Asperger Syndrome could be discriminated against, for example as mentioned earlier, there is an increasing demand for employees to 'multi-task' and that in itself is simply a symptom of market forces at play. If however an employee with Asperger Syndrome could not cope with such a radical change, the employer might want to suggest that the

employee make use of a 'Job-Coach' to help them to cope with the new demand, and that might be 'a reasonable adjustment' to make.

- **Getting additional support**

If the employee with Asperger Syndrome has 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 additional needs of both the employer and the employee. If however the individual does not have the support of an appropriate scheme then it's still possible to get additional support through government schemes aimed at promoting equality for people with disabilities.

The scope and breadth of all the available schemes is fairly complex and the way schemes are administered will vary depending on each individual's situation. The best way for the employee to obtain a comprehensive overview of the support available and the likely impact employment will have on them is for the individual and their advocate (if appropriate) to make an appointment with the Disability Employment Advisor at the Jobcentre.

For the employer the following schemes may be of interest: *Please note that there are terms, conditions and eligibility criteria that apply to all the schemes that are mentioned below.*

### **Access to Work**

In addition to giving advice and guidance to employers, the Access to Work scheme pays a grant to the employer to cover additional employment costs that result from the individual having a disability.

You can apply for funds to cover a number of measures including the cost of hiring an advocate to support someone with Asperger Syndrome through the interview process or the cost of a Support Worker to help with Job-Coaching or care needs. Funds can also cover the cost of specialist equipment, adaptations to buildings or equipment and travel for people who are unable to use public transport.

### **Job Introduction Scheme (JIS)**

JIS provides a discretionary grant to the employer for the first six weeks of employing someone with a disability. It may be available to employers that would like to employ someone with a disability but who may also have a genuine concern about the individual's ability to be able to do the job.

## **WORKSTEP**

WORKSTEP is a more structured scheme that is run by a range of organisations that are contracted to Jobcentre Plus. If you have a vacancy to fill you can contact the Disability Employment Advisor through your local Jobcentre, who will then put you in touch with one of these organisations. They will then match potential candidates with the job and develop a package of support that suits the employee and the employer. The general idea of the scheme is to enable disabled people to make the transition to working in a commercial environment and then possibly into open employment.

For more information about any of these schemes, either contact the Disability Employment Advisor at your local Jobcentre or Jobcentre Plus. Details are also available on the Jobcentre Plus Website: [www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk](http://www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk)

### • **Useful contacts and addresses**

Berkshire Autistic Society

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)