



*Berkshire Autistic Society*

# ***Support Into Employment Project***

***Helping Someone With Asperger Syndrome  
To Find Employment***

***A Practical Guide for Parents, Carers  
and Advocacy Services***

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- ***Introduction***

This short guide is intended for use by a range of people such as parents and professionals, or anyone who is actively supporting someone with Asperger Syndrome or High Functioning Autism to find employment. The guide can be used as a starting point and addresses some of the topics that people contacting Berkshire Autistic Society's 'Support Into Employment Project' have commonly requested advice and guidance about.

It is not intended to be a comprehensive guide to employment for people with Asperger Syndrome, as there are a number of books on the market that have been specifically written for this purpose, a list of which is provided at the end of this guide. As far as practical the guide is intended to be impartial and accurate however, its development forms part of Berkshire Autistic Society's 'Support Into Employment Project' and therefore to a certain extent, its content reflects the knowledge and experiences gained during the life of the project.

- ***When to start thinking about future employment***

If you are a parent of, or someone with the responsibility of supporting someone with Asperger Syndrome it's probably wise to start thinking about employment as early as possible. In the case of young people this could be as early as fourteen as this is when they will be beginning the process of considering their options in relation to further education, work and the transition to adult life.

Your Local Authority will have a transition policy and it's worth asking for a copy, as this will help you to understand the process and the options available. The process itself should follow a 'Person Centred' approach, or in other words, it should put the young person at the 'centre' of the decision making process. Having said that, this model often creates conflict, as decisions about an individual's future have to be made within the context of available services.

People with Asperger Syndrome are often ready, willing and able to work and if there are services available to support them, then this option is worth pursuing as early as possible. The outcome of not considering future employment during the early stages of transition could lead a young person to consider employment only after having participated in other services such as day opportunities or residential college places, by which time they have often become embroiled in systems from which it is difficult to become untangled.

If you are supporting someone that has left school or college sometime ago, it can be more problematic for him or her to find suitable employment. This can sometimes be because they are caught in a 'benefits trap' or maybe they need to be 'untangled' from other services before employment can become a realistic option.

The greatest barrier however is usually one that could have been overcome at an earlier stage and that is the individual's mindset about what they could be employed to do. Older people with Asperger Syndrome often develop deeply entrenched opinions about preferred employment and this rigidity of thought and an inability to consider other options can make finding employment a failing experience. Had they been supported to 'discover' a really suitable career option at an earlier stage, then their inability to consider other options at a later stage in life would be less significant because they would have chosen a job or career that was realistically attainable.

- **Where to start**

Having painted a slightly bleak picture of employment for older people with Asperger Syndrome it is important to note that many do, despite having rigid opinions about employment, go on to gain sustainable and successful employment. It could be argued that in fact, their determined approach to gaining a preferred job or career can and often does result in success and this can lead to a moral dilemma; do you intervene to elicit a change of career option or do you support their decision and hope that their determination will pay off? There's no easy answer, however it is important to consider how difficult it might be to sustain long term successful employment if the job, for whatever reason was never really suitable for them!

To illustrate this point, consider the possible outcome of a person with a communication difficulty being employed in a sales and target driven retail environment. Without adequate support, a failure to reach targets could easily lead to dismissal. The employee might be driven to work in this kind of environment and may love the product and enjoy talking to customers, however without the ability to understand the nuances of social interaction, it's unlikely that they will be successful in the long term.

A good starting point is to support the individual to find out as much as possible about the job they want to do prior to making applications. If for example, the person has expressed an interest in becoming a hairdresser, encourage them to observe a hairdresser at work and make notes about all the tasks that they are expected to perform. It's not unusual for the individual to 'discover' very quickly that there are aspects of the job that they could never do. This can be a painful process and having to abandon a career option will almost certainly cause distress to the individual.

The process and possible outcomes need to be carefully considered. Unfortunately there is no easy way around this, however it is worth making enquiries with the Disability Employment Advisor (DEA) at your local Jobcentre to find out which local organisations run employment courses that are designed to support the individual through this process.

- **Employment Training 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 the individual with Asperger Syndrome is 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 clients despite knowing little or nothing about Autistic Spectrum Disorders!

Courses that provide careers matching and work experience are helpful as they give people the opportunity to discover employment options that are suitable for them. If however the course concentrates on the generic skills needed in the workplace, such as social skills and coping with the environment, it's worth considering whether the individual is likely to be able to transfer the skills they 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 the local labour market and labour market trends is vital before embarking on a career choice. If the individual doesn't want to, or cannot travel then pursuing an option that is not supported by the local labour market is likely to become a failing experience. For example, someone living in a rural community who wants work as an office administrator will have limited opportunities for employment. That might seem obvious, but to someone with Asperger Syndrome it might not be!

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 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. The point is that once the disclosure of information about Asperger Syndrome has been put on the application form, the individual has to rely on the integrity of the employer not to discriminate against them. 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 some may consider their Asperger Syndrome to be disabling, whilst 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 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 the individual is undecided as to whether to make a declaration about their Asperger Syndrome or worried about being discriminated against, then unless the individual requires a 'reasonable adjustment' to be made to enable them to participate in the recruitment process, it may be advisable not to make a declaration at the point of application.

During the development of Berkshire Autistic Society's 'Support Into Employment Project' staff were constantly asked if they kept a list of local employers who were sympathetic and willing to employ people with Asperger Syndrome. The truth is that there are employers who generally have a positive attitude towards employing people with disabilities and in the case of Berkshire Autistic Society a database of those companies and organisations is maintained. However, simply attempting to place people with Asperger Syndrome with these few employers does not provide a sustainable solution to the problem. In the long term, finding the right choice of job is a pre-requisite to being successfully employed.

*NB: 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. 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 the interview process without any direct support and this is often because they do not want to be seen as being 'disabled' or needing support. Again, this is a matter of personal preference and with appropriate training and practice in interview techniques, people with Asperger Syndrome can, and do, perform competently. There are however some people that will always struggle and ultimately fail time and time again and these people should be encouraged to think of having support as being a positive way of helping them to highlight their strengths rather than their difficulties. With or without support the person with Asperger Syndrome is likely to seem odd or different and a recruitment panel may have reservations about employing them. However, if there is someone available to translate ambiguous questions or, for example explain that certain behaviours such as lack of eye contact do not imply lack of interest, then the candidate has a much greater chance of success.

The choice of who should support in the interview is of paramount importance and is best made by the individual and the decision should ideally be based on which person or organisation is most likely to help them to sustain long term employment. If you are helping someone with Asperger Syndrome with this choice then there are some key points to consider.

If you are a parent, despite your best intentions you may be inadvertently transferring your relationship to the employing organisation and in effect, encouraging them to think of the person with Asperger Syndrome as being a child rather than as an adult in their 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 every-time that there is an issue at work, rather than attempting to support the individual 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.

If you are a Social Worker or someone who is responsible for the provision of services to the individual, again there is the possibility of the relationship encroaching on, or interfering with the opportunity for the individual to be treated with respect as an adult employee with equal status. If employment is part of a 'package' of services then this may be unavoidable, however it may be advisable to enlist the help of someone else to support in the interview.

Ideally this person should be someone who understands the individual in relation to their Asperger Syndrome and is able to support them to advocate for themselves 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 the person 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 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 the individual and their advocate (if appropriate) to make an appointment with the DEA prior to the individual taking up employment.

If possible encourage the individual with Asperger Syndrome to register with any supported employment schemes that have experience of supporting people with Autistic Spectrum Disorders. Even if they are not able to support them through the whole recruitment process, they may be willing to give advice and guidance or support in the workplace once the individual has 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 someone with Asperger Syndrome is likely to receive will be minimal.

When looking through local newspaper or job-paper adverts, people with Asperger Syndrome may have difficulty in interpreting written adverts which are often too ambiguous for them. The skill of 'reading between the lines' is not one that comes naturally to most people with Asperger Syndrome and they are often tempted to apply for jobs that are inappropriate for them.

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 the individual has a good idea of what job they would like to do or career path they would like to follow, it's often a worthwhile exercise for them 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.

### • **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)