

'Difficult Employee' or Asperger's Syndrome?

By Barbara Bissonnette



They are bright, sometimes exceptionally so, capable and sought out for their expertise, but just do not seem to “get” the people stuff and often alienate co-workers with their quirky behavior. Their managers complain about rudeness, insubordination and poor team work. You listen incredulously as the employee in question expresses shock and disbelief that there is any problem at all.

What you do not know is that this apparent “attitude problem” might really be a communication problem caused by a neurological disorder called Asperger’s Syndrome.

The prevalence of Asperger’s Syndrome is estimated to be as high as one in every 250 people in the United States¹, yet most employers are unaware of what it is, how it impacts productivity and turnover, and what can be done to assist employees at risk of derailing.

Although only officially recognized by the medical community in 1994, Asperger traits have been observed in many prominent individuals throughout history. It’s been speculated that Isaac Asimov, Johann Sebastian Bach, Albert Einstein, Bill Gates, Vincent Van Gogh, Thomas Jefferson, Mozart, Isaac Newton, Carl Sagen, Vernon Smith (Nobel Laureate, economics), Andy Warhol and Ludwig Wittgenstein had/have Asperger’s Syndrome.

While theories about the etiology as well as the diagnostic criteria continue to evolve, it is generally agreed that these individuals are on the high-functioning end of the autism spec-

trum. People with Asperger’s vary widely in their abilities, challenges and need of support; however, difficulties generally arise in the areas of social and communication skills, organization and sensory/motor functioning. Communication presents the biggest hurdle to competitive employment because the social communication problems of people with Asperger’s Syndrome so often look like behavior or attitude problems.

Its prevalence is estimated at one in every 250 people, yet most employers have never heard of it and lose skilled workers as a result.

“Allan”² is a brilliant programmer who forgets to make eye contact and to smile. He irritates colleagues by interrupting them and by making painfully blunt but usually accurate assessments of their ideas (“That’s dumb and won’t work!”). Despite being “a genius with numbers and investing,” Jason nearly lost his job for jogging around the office, talking loudly to himself throughout the day and routinely bringing the entire stack of documents from the shared printer back to his desk. Doreen has lost over a dozen technical writing jobs for asking too many questions

and being “rude.” Famously, she tried to empathize with a colleague by observing, “I can tell that your diet isn’t working because you’re still fat.”

Remarkable as it seems, these individuals are intending to be friendly, helpful and efficient and simply do not understand the unspoken rules of social interaction that most people take for granted.

I. SOCIAL AND COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES

It is estimated that 93 percent of human communication take place non-verbally via body language, facial expression, tone and volume of voice and even physical proximity to others. People with Asperger’s Syndrome have great difficulty understanding nonverbal cues often equate navigating the social world with living in a foreign culture or hailing from a different planet. Imagine not being able to tell whether someone’s facial expression or tone of voice is happy, sad or angry. Or hearing language very literally and thinking, for example, that a “bad hair day” at work is a grooming issue. Suppose you wanted to join your colleagues for lunch but did not know how to make small talk, or found looking someone in the eye to be distracting or painful?

Unlike their “neurotypical”³ peers, who intuitively learn to recognize idiomatic expressions, sarcasm, social “rules” and nonverbal cues in childhood, Asperger individuals must learn these things intellectually, which often becomes a lifelong process of trial and lots of error.

Another impediment concerns “theory of mind,” which is the ability to understand another person’s perspective. Managers use theory of mind skills to recognize that what motivates one employee does not motivate another, for example, or that a new hire does not know to give the division vice president sales forecasts by 4 p.m. every Thursday.

To varying degrees, people with Asperger’s Syndrome have impaired theory of mind abilities that can lead to poor decision making. David, overhearing the company president talking to a colleague in the hall, thought that he was being helpful by walking up to the pair and correcting a factual error that the president made. It did not occur to David that it was rude to eavesdrop or that his comments were inappropriate in that situation.

II. ORGANIZATIONAL CHALLENGES

For the individual with Asperger’s Syndrome, organizing and prioritizing information can be difficult due to a weak drive for central coherence and problems with executive function.

Central coherence is the ability to assimilate information from various sources and see “the big picture.” Typically, this means integrating what one hears, sees, remembers and what one knows about other people’s motives or desires.

Asperger individuals, with their weaker drive for central coherence, focus on specific details. This makes it hard to distinguish relevant from irrelevant facts, or to integrate data from multiple information streams. Thus, Mark suggests that his company can save money by eliminating the entire marketing department. He correctly concludes that editorial staff can write marketing copy but fails to consider the many other tasks performed by the marketing personnel or how they will react to his suggestion!

Executive function, which governs a person’s ability to organize data, prioritize tasks, manage time and resources, predict likely outcomes and change course if necessary, represents another problem area for most Asperger individuals. Their monotropism, or tunnel-like focus on one item, typically results in difficulty with multitasking. The individual may also need explicit assistance with managing time and duties.

III. SENSORY CHALLENGES

People with Asperger’s Syndrome may experience extreme sensitivities to light, sound, smells and touch (such as the feel of certain fabrics on the skin). Some individuals can actually see the cycling of fluorescent lights, for instance, or hear a co-worker’s keyboarding as a cacophony of utterly distracting noise.

Auditory processing problems can make it hard to follow spoken directions, especially if there is a sequence of more than two or three steps. Following conversation in a group setting can be challenging and the individual may not recognize that he or she is speaking too loudly, too softly or in a monotone.

Sensory anomalies can make it difficult or impossible for some individuals to pay attention to input from multiple sensory channels at once – for example, making eye contact and listening to what someone is saying. Visual-spatial problems can make it hard to find items on a desk or to notice that one is standing too close to others.

Asperger’s Syndrome can also affect fine and gross motor coordination. The individual may have trouble writing and need a laptop for note-taking, or be unable to fold and stuff papers neatly into an envelope.

STRENGTHS OF THE “ASPERGER MIND”

Asperger’s Syndrome confers specific strengths that make these individuals particularly well-suited to jobs requiring attention to detail and prolonged focus. Careers in computer programming, technical documentation, academic and scientific research, engineering and academia are among the choices that make good use of their logic and analytical skills, excellent memory for facts, vast knowledge of specialized fields, tolerance of routine and creative problem solving.

Specialisterne, a Danish software company, specifically hires people on the autism spectrum because, according to its founder, “...they are methodical and exhibit great attention to detail.” He also notes strengths in “motivation, focus, persistence, precision and ability to follow instructions.”⁴

It must be stressed that individuals with Asperger’s Syndrome vary widely in their abilities and challenges; however, generalities can be made about the types of jobs and work environments that are most conducive to their success.

Difficult jobs/work environments tend to be those that require lots of multitasking or responding to frequent interruptions, quick decision making, significant social interaction, the management of other people and high rates of speed.

Optimal jobs/work environments are usually those that require concentration on one task at a time, accuracy and quality versus speed, minimal or scripted social interaction, and offer structure and clear performance expectations.

HOW TO WORK WITH PEOPLE WHO HAVE ASPERGER'S SYNDROME

The diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome must be made by a qualified medical professional (usually a neuropsychologist), and it would be inappropriate and illegal (under the Americans with Disabilities Act) to imply or ask an employee whether they have any medical condition. However, if you know or suspect that someone has Asperger's Syndrome, here are some suggestions for maximizing their productivity and success.

1. Be patient with training and break instruction into small segments. If the individual is asking an excessive number of questions it could indicate anxiety or confusion about assignments. Provide specific, quantifiable expectations whenever possible ("a four- or five-page draft is due on the 10th" or "13 entries or more must be made per hour"). Regular feedback about performance is beneficial to any employee, but particularly to one with Asperger's Syndrome.

2. Encourage the use of checklists, electronic reminders and a personalized "rule book" that outlines processes, procedures and where to go for help. Simple accommodations like written instructions, color-coded filing systems and a quiet work station can have a profoundly positive impact on performance.

3. Regarding the all-important area of social skills, remember that usually what looks like a behavior or attitude problem is a communication problem. People with Asperger's Syndrome often do not know what they have done to offend or anger someone and can become quite anxious and confused by general statements like, "You're rude," "You're not a team player," or "How could you say that?"

Do not take their blunt remarks or social gaffes personally. Use clarifying questions to understand the individual's intentions. Be specific, direct and matter-of-fact in pointing out inappropriate or unacceptable behavior ("When you tell people to 'be quiet' it is considered rude. Instead, ask them if they would mind lowering their voices.")

4. Assign a "work buddy" or mentor to explain social norms, encourage social interaction and answer questions.

People with Asperger's Syndrome may hesitate to ask questions fearing they will appear "stupid," likely a by-product of being bullied or ostracized in school.

5. Educate human resources personnel, managers and employees about Asperger's Syndrome. Remember, its prevalence is estimated to be as high as 1 in every 250 people, so chances are you have interviewed, hired, managed, worked with and maybe even fired someone with Asperger's. Increased understanding is directly proportional to increased employment success, and retaining even one employee at risk of derailing more than covers the investment in training.

6. Provide coaching for the employee and his or her manager (ideally with a coach who is familiar with conditions like Asperger's). The pragmatic nature of coaching combined with a personalized action plan based on organizational and individual goals assures that performance objectives are addressed along with skill development.

In the right jobs with the right supports, people with Asperger's Syndrome are terrific assets to your organization. If you currently have employees who are struggling with social, communication and organizational skills, you can begin implementing low- and no-cost accommodations to prevent derailing. If your organization is facing a talent shortage, the Asperger community could be a source of skilled, educated and loyal workers. ■

Barbara Bissonnette is the principal of Forward Motion Coaching. She may be reached at forwardmotion@charter.net.

FOOTNOTES

¹ *The Complete Guide to Asperger's Syndrome*, by Tony Attwood

² All client names in this article have been changed

³ Within the Asperger community "neurotypical" refers to people whose neurological development is normal.

⁴ "A Danish IT consultancy is using the special skills of people with autism to improve the quality of its software testing," *ComputerWeekly.com*, Feb. 8, 2008, Reed Business Information

SOURCES

Coming Out Asperger, Diagnosis, Disclosure and Self-Confidence, edited by Dinah Murray, © Jessica Kingsley Publishers 2006, Philadelphia, PA

Developing Talents, Careers for Individuals with Asperger Syndrome and High-Functioning Autism, by Temple Grandin and Kate Duffy, © 2004 Autism Asperger Publishing Company, Shawnee Mission, KS

Employment for Individuals with Asperger Syndrome or Non-Verbal Learn Disability, © Yvona Fast and contributors 2004, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London and Philadelphia

Solutions for Adults with Asperger Syndrome, © 2005 by Juanita P. Lovett, Fair Winds Press, Quayside Publishing Group, Gloucester, MA

The Complete Guide to Asperger's Syndrome, © 2007 Tony Attwood, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, Philadelphia, PA