

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

What Does It Take to Make It in the NT Workplace, Anyway?

I am not aware of any reliable employment statistics for adults with Asperger's Syndrome (AS). An often quoted statistic is that 85% are either un- or under-employed. Whether that number is accurate or not, clearly there are too many intelligent, college-educated individuals who are not able to fully utilize their talents in the workplace.

Kevin summed up a big part of the problem. He was crushed after losing his first post-college job in just six weeks. "At school it was about getting good grades," he said, "at work it's about figuring out what people want."

If you are a person who has Asperger's Syndrome, figuring out what people want probably seems like an impossible task. No matter how hard you try, you just don't "get it" like everyone else does. At work, people can say one thing but mean another. They accuse you of not listening, yet won't tell you exactly what they want from you. When you guess, you usually guess wrong.

It is exhausting to be anxious every day about saying or doing the wrong thing. You want to interact with your co-workers, but don't know what to say. Sometimes, their conversations seem so trivial or boring that you don't even try to join in. Other times, you think that you're being friendly and helpful but are accused of being "rude" or "hard to get along with." Why all the emphasis on socializing, anyway? What is more important: chatting in the lunch room or getting your work done?

Speaking of getting your work done, the continual interruptions make it so hard to concentrate! You lose track of what you were doing, or

forget altogether. The pressure starts to mount. You're getting confused. Soon, you become paralyzed. You are not sure what you should be doing, so you abandon the current project and return to an earlier task. Later, your supervisor says that you need to prioritize better.

On top of all this, you are assaulted by sights, sounds, smells and textures that are uncomfortable (even torturous) that no one else seems to notice. Why can't people turn down the lights, be quiet and stop eating noxious smelling food at their desks?

It is all very frustrating and sometimes makes you really angry, particularly if you have been fired once, or more than once, or many more times than once and you don't really know what went wrong before. What are you supposed to do differently now? It keeps getting harder to explain the employment gaps and short-term jobs on your resume. You shouldn't lie, but if you tell the full truth, no one will want to hire you.

Perhaps you are employed, but struggle to carry out job duties, or are bored in a position that doesn't make use of your intellect. Maybe you have earned a promotion where you are required to show "leadership" and have no idea what to do. Or, worst of all, a new supervisor has changed all the rules leaving you once again to frantically try and figure out what is expected of you now.

At times you wonder whether you should disclose your Asperger's Syndrome to your employer. Technically, the Americans with Disabilities Act protects people from discrimination, but this is the real world. It is hard to predict how your manager will react, and proving discrimination can be difficult, time consuming and expensive. Still, disclosure means that you can request accommodations, which you are certain would enable you to improve your performance dramatically.

If you can relate to any of the above, then you have a lot in common with the clients in my coaching practice. They are men and women who, like you, are smart and skilled. Most have college degrees, and some have master's degrees or doctorates. They are young people who are just entering the workforce, and they are people in their 30's, 40's, 50's and even 60's who have spent years at work in all kinds of