

# Getting Hired: A Primer for Individuals with Asperger's Syndrome & NLD

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**F**or many individuals with Asperger's Syndrome and NLD, the job search process is confusing, frustrating, and anxiety-inducing. Even those who earn college degrees can find themselves overwhelmed by the realization that simply sending out resumes isn't enough to land a job.

Sometimes the problem is confusion about what jobs one is qualified for. The tendency to focus on details can cloud the broader context of job responsibilities. One woman with eight months of part-time job experience applied for director-level positions, not realizing the difference between executing tasks and developing a company-wide strategy.

Holders of liberal arts degrees in areas like sociology, anthropology or political science may have difficulty sorting through the many career options to find a good match for their abilities. Those seeking entry into competitive fields can be at a particular disadvantage if they lack internships, or fail to develop networking relationships with professors, college career counselors or classmates.

Finding work has also become much more of a social event. According to one estimate, from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, only 5% of people find jobs by responding to posted openings. Nearly 25% find work by making direct contact with a company. Staffing firms and recruiters are the conduit for another 25%. The biggest percentage – almost half – finds their job through networking.

Interviewing requires a sophisticated level of interpersonal communication. One has to introduce oneself to the interviewer (remembering to simultaneously make eye contact, smile, shake hands and deliver a greeting); make small talk; figure out where to sit; decipher the meaning of ambiguous questions (does “Where do you want to be in 5 years” refer to geography?); convey enthusiasm via body language and tone of voice; notice and interpret the interviewer’s body language; and remember what was discussed after getting home.

Whew!

Creating and managing a job search utilizes many of the executive functions. There are job boards to visit, online groups to join, company research to complete, customized cover letters to write, and follow-up inquiries to make. Choosing which jobs to apply for involves big picture thinking, differentiating must-have from negotiable skills, and noticing pertinent details. Flexibility is required to decide when to compromise. Forward thinkers, for example, realize that a less than ideal job may provide experience that is needed for a better position in the future. Preparing for an interview involves anticipating questions, selecting relevant information from past experiences, and the ability to summarize qualifications. If current efforts are not getting results, then it is time for a new plan.

This guide is designed for individuals with Asperger’s Syndrome or Nonverbal Learning Disorder, their family members, and professionals. The suggestions are based on my experience coaching people seeking all types of jobs and careers. If you, or someone you know, have been trying unsuccessfully to find work, I encourage you to try at least one new technique and see if it makes a difference in your results.



▪ **Interests Can Lead to a Successful Career ... or Not**

Personal interests can be the basis of a rewarding career. One of my clients with a love of numbers became a Certified Public Accountant. Another who is fond of children is an early education teacher. When I coach people who are uncertain about the type of job they want, we begin by exploring their interests.

Let’s suppose that your passion is video games. Jobs in this field include concept development, drawing characters and scenes, programming, testing and marketing. Similarly, a person interested in teaching can choose from traditional classroom teaching, academia, tutoring, corporate training, or adult education. Writing instructional manuals and textbooks is also a form of teaching. So is developing a curriculum. Love animals? You could teach canine obedience classes or train assistance animals.

It is also true that personal interest in a subject may *not* translate into work that you will enjoy or be able to make a living doing. You could discover after researching available jobs that you are not suited to the tasks or the working environment.

Rick wanted a career related to his passion for baseball. “What I want,” he explained, “is a quiet, low stress, behind-the-scenes job.” Initially, Rick’s idea of a “behind-the-scenes” job was managing team travel for a major league ball club. He based this choice on one detail: it would involve working in an office rather than amid the chaos of screaming fans in a stadium. After researching the actual job tasks, Rick realized that managing team travel involved deadline pressures and a degree of multitasking that he simply couldn’t handle.

Ed’s story illustrates how the wrong career choice can lead to years of frustration. When we met, he had spent nearly a decade in the legal profession. After graduating *cum laude* from law school, he passed the bar exam on his first try and became an attorney at a small law firm. He was asked to resign after a few months, and quickly found work at another law office. Two years later, he was fired from this job, and then went on to hold 4 more positions that ended in his being fired or asked to resign. In total, Ed had 6 different jobs over the course of 10 years.

*If you are not sure what type of job you want, or have not had success in a particular occupation, be open to exploring several possibilities.*

Ed initially started coaching with the intention of finding yet another attorney’s job. However after reviewing his career history, some telling patterns emerged. During his tenure at each firm, Ed did not socialize with his fellow attorneys, preferring to eat lunch by himself every day. His abrupt manner and refusal to follow office rules that he thought were “stupid” alienated him from the administrative personnel. The life-long discomfort Ed felt in social situations kept him from attending professional events, where he was expected to make new contacts. He lacked awareness of the cultural norms of a law firm. Once, he was reprimanded for stacking empty soda cans in his office.

As he described each job, a greater and greater fatigue seemed to engulf Ed. “Do you like practicing law?” I asked. “No,” he admitted. His real love was research; his father had wanted him to be a lawyer.

If you are not sure what type of job you want, or have not had success in a particular occupation, be open to exploring several possibilities. Your post-secondary education is *not* wasted if you end up working in a different field. There are many job skills that can be transferred to a different line of work.

A career interest inventory is an assessment which suggests potential professions based on activities and subjects that you find interesting. This tool can provide you with options to

explore in more detail. Note that interest assessments do not measure whether you have the aptitude to succeed at a certain job.

There are many sources of information about jobs and careers. Two of my favorites are the Occupational Outlook Handbook ([www.bls.gov/oco/](http://www.bls.gov/oco/)) and O\*Net (Occupational Information Network, <http://online.onetcenter.org>). These Web sites describe various occupations, including educational requirements, work environment, responsibilities, required skills, salary range, and the hiring outlook. You can also review job postings on Web sites like Monster.com and Careerbuilder.com to get information about tasks and responsibilities as well as the skill sets that employers are seeking.

One of the best ways to learn about an occupation is to talk to people who are employed in the field. Informational interviews and job shadowing are two ways to get “insider information” about daily activities, how to break into a field, and the attributes needed for success.

#### ▪ **Hiring Decisions are Made Based on Your Skills and Your Ability to Fit In**

Employers evaluate job candidates based on their skills, experience, accomplishments, education, and their ability to “fit in” to the organization.

In order to know whether or not you are qualified for a particular job, you must determine whether your skills and experience match the employer’s needs. Some people send out dozens of resumes, for all kinds of different jobs, “just in case” they are qualified. This wastes precious time and effort that would be better spent targeting companies and openings that you know are a match. If you have spent several months sending out your resume and are not getting interviews, chances are that you lack requisite skills, or have a resume that does not adequately communicate your value to an employer.

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Eric wanted to be a graphic designer, but did not know HTML or CSS, both of which are basic computer competencies. Joe presumed that his degree in communications meant that he was qualified for jobs in broadcasting, multi-media, social media, marketing and editorial. He spends many hours sending resumes without even reading the job descriptions. Bill changed careers and became a paralegal. However the first entry on his resume described his temporary job as a night watchman, which was completely irrelevant to his stated objective.

Before you apply for a job, carefully read all of the requirements, not just one or two. Certain skills may be implied instead of expressly stated. “General receptionist duties such as answering incoming calls and greeting customers” presumes the ability to operate a multi-line telephone system, and to acknowledge customers with eye contact, a smile, and a friendly greeting.

Job listings include a mix of required and desired abilities. Employers don’t expect candidates to match *all* of the criteria, but they do expect them to meet the critical ones. Here are some clues about primary responsibilities:

- ♦ Key skills are emphasized with words and phrases such as: *extensive experience ... strong knowledge of ... proven track record ... expert ... exceedingly ... excellent ... take charge of ... heavy contact with*
- ♦ The most important skills and responsibilities are listed first
- ♦ Non-negotiable items are identified with phrases like: *“extensive/verifiable experience in ...” “must include ...” “do not apply unless you meet these requirements”*
- ♦ Negotiable items are identified with phrases like: *“preferred ...” “desired ...” “the ideal candidate will have ...” “is a plus ...” and “should be familiar with ...”*

*What about teamwork, people skills and multitasking?*

*“Good teamwork and people skills” and the “ability to multitask” have become ubiquitous job requirements. These terms can mean very different things depending on an industry, the type of job, and even a particular company. Look for indications of how much multitasking is required, or how sophisticated the level of interpersonal communication will be.*

### **Two Categories of Job Skills**

Job skills are divided into two categories. *Hard skills* are job-specific, such as writing computer code, using spreadsheets, operating machinery, writing a feature article or developing a marketing campaign. *Soft skills* are related to interpersonal communication and include collaborating, leading, motivating, directing, listening, counseling, mentoring, persuading and negotiating.

“Fitting in” means that you are able to make your co-workers feel comfortable when they are working with you. The skills needed to do this are soft skills, such as respecting others’ ideas, participating in group meetings, and maintaining cordial relationships. Soft skills can be more important to your vocational success than your intelligence or technical abilities.

Your body language, way of speaking and other forms of nonverbal communication send powerful messages about your ability to fit in to a group. An unkempt appearance, weak handshake, blank expression, monotone speech or lack of preparedness to answer interview questions send the message, no matter how unintentionally, that you don’t really want the job.

▪ **Getting Hired Requires Marketing Yourself to Employers**

Many of my clients are anxious about the idea of marketing themselves. They worry that they will have to lie on interviews in order to get an offer. Or that it is conceited to talk about their skills and accomplishments. Others don't give it much thought, and usually emphasize the wrong information on their resumes and cover letters, and in their responses to interview questions.

Dan summarized two years of writing experience in one brief sentence on his resume. "Employers know what writers do," he said. I explained, "They don't know that you researched topics, found experts to interview, wrote feature articles, or that you won a writing award unless you tell them." Despite having only 14 months of work experience, Susan's resume was 2 pages long, and included the name of her middle school. It was hard to find her qualifications amid all of the irrelevant details.

*Marketing yourself is about clearly communicating – on paper and in person – how your skills and experience fill the employer's need.*

During interviews, Mike's response to, "Tell me about yourself," was a rambling monologue that included where he grew up, why he changed college majors and a description of his difficulty interacting with others. What the interviewer really wanted was a summary, in 4 to 6 sentences, of his qualifications for the job. Similarly, Anne didn't realize that "Where do you want to be in five years?" referred to her career ambitions, not where she wanted to live.

Marketing yourself is about clearly communicating – on paper and in person – how your skills and experience fill the employer's need. This involves *editing* information about your abilities and accomplishments, and selecting data that is relevant to the job you are seeking *now*. Winning resumes and interviews highlight skills used and results that were achieved. Did you save money or time? Increase efficiency? Exceed quota? Produce highly accurate work? Say so!

***Which is More Impressive?***

<i>Operated cash register</i>	<i>Accurately handled ~35 transactions per hour</i>
<i>Install commercial wiring</i>	<i>Troubleshoot complex systems for efficient installation of telephone and data wiring</i>
<i>Responsible for marketing campaigns</i>	<i>Created direct marketing campaigns that increased sales 16%</i>

Marketing also involves putting yourself in front of people who are in a position to hire you, or who can refer you to others who might need your skills (in other words, networking).

If you are like 95% of my clients, just the idea of networking makes you queasy. Yet this is an incredibly efficient, and logical, way to find opportunities. Everyone knows other people. The more people who know what kind of job you are looking for, the more likely it is that one of them will refer you to a company that is hiring.

There are several ways to network that don't involve walking into a room full of strangers. Informational interviews, one-on-one job networking, and online professional groups are examples.

One way to assess your job-search readiness is to describe, in no more than 4 sentences, the job you want and your qualifications. If you are not able to do this, you have more to learn about how to effectively market yourself.

▪ **Understanding Your Strengths and Limitations Helps You Make Better Decisions**

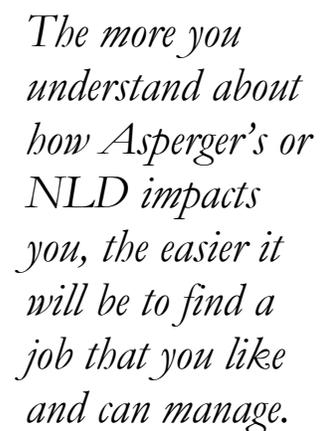
Self-knowledge is powerful. The more you understand about what you do well and where your challenges are, the easier it will be to target good job matches and avoid bad ones.

Jobs that utilize your talents and develop skills that you like to use will be the most satisfying. Talents are what you are naturally good at, for example analyzing, inventing, writing, drawing, painting, building or calculating. Skills are specific things that you learn how to do. Writing code, operating a printing press, entering orders into a database, nursing and carpentry are examples of skills. A graphic designer combines artistic talent with skill using graphic design software.

What do people say that you do well? What comes easily to you? What things do you know how to do? The answers to these questions will reveal some of your talents and skills. You can also view lists of skills in many job search books and Web sites. You cannot write a powerful resume, or conduct an effective interview, until you know your primary talents and skills.

People sometimes think that admitting weaknesses makes them "less than" others, or reduces their opportunities. I believe that the more you understand about how Asperger's or NLD impacts you, the easier it will be to find a job that you like and can manage.

There are two categories of limitations. In the first category are limitations that can be mitigated, either by learning new skills or adaptive techniques, or by utilizing assistive



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technologies. In the second category are limitations that cannot be changed. Awareness of these can steer you away from jobs or careers that would be frustrating or impossible.

Paul came to see me because he was getting many interviews, but no job offers. He was trying to find work as a tour guide. It didn't take long to identify Paul's difficulty. In addition to speaking in a monotone, he showed very little facial expression. Even though he *felt* enthusiasm, his body language and voice created the impression of disinterest and low energy. One of the primary responsibilities of a tour guide is to convey enthusiasm.

After being laid off from her job as a newspaper reporter, Casey (who like Paul has NLD) decided to capitalize on her writing skills by becoming a freelance copywriter. Thanks to her strong verbal ability, Casey had little trouble getting clients. Understanding how to *sell* their products and services was a different story.

Casey needed to quickly grasp each client's business. She had to understand why prospects would want to buy the product or service, how to differentiate it from competitors, and how to edit copy for Web sites, advertisements, social media and brochures. Figuring these things out requires big picture thinking, and the ability to make inferences. Within a few months, Casey was overwhelmed. She realized that she needs a job with structure, and where she can focus on one industry. Today is happily working at a non-profit organization, concentrating on outreach, blogging and teaching workshops.

#### ▪ **Work Environment Can Be More Important than Job Tasks**

It is my experience that the work environment can be as or even more important than specific job tasks for individuals with AS or NLD. Although each person is different, it is possible to make some generalizations about surroundings that are most conducive to success.

Optimal work environments:

- ✓ Allow concentration on one task at a time, with minimal interruptions
- ✓ Emphasize accuracy and quality versus speed
- ✓ Involve working with facts, data and things, versus people and abstract concepts
- ✓ Require limited multitasking (rapid attention shifting)
- ✓ Are quiet and free of distractions (sounds, strong odors, bright lights)
- ✓ Provide structure and clear performance expectations
- ✓ Offer a relaxed pace and supportive co-workers
- ✓ Include some elements of routine
- ✓ Do not require sophisticated levels of interpersonal communication

## ▪ **You Need a Plan**

Successful job seekers create a plan that enables them to take consistent action, over a reasonable period of time, to reach their goal. If your job search consists only of sending out your resume in response to posted openings, you will have a hard time getting hired.

To create an effective plan, choose three to five different strategies, at least one of which involves networking. Set weekly goals for each activity. Schedule a reasonable amount of time every day to devote to job seeking. Hint: one or two hours per week is *not* enough. If you are currently unemployed, you should be spending three to four hours *per day* looking for work.

Job search strategies include:

- ★ Visiting job boards and responding to openings
- ★ Posting your resume on job boards
- ★ Creating a profile on LinkedIn
- ★ Participating in online professional groups (e.g. LinkedIn groups)
- ★ Registering with a recruiter or staffing agency
- ★ Temping
- ★ Strategic volunteering
- ★ Making direct contact with employers
- ★ Joining a job seeker support group
- ★ Attending career fairs
- ★ One-on-one job networking
- ★ Informational interviewing
- ★ Contacting your college alumni and career offices

## ▪ **If At First You Don't Succeed...**

... be willing to move outside your comfort zone and try something different. Do not become stuck repeating actions that have not worked in the past. You will not get a better result.

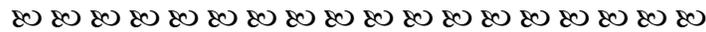
Signs that you are stuck include: looking for the same type of job that hasn't worked out in the past; preparing for interviews the night before; "winging it" on interviews and hoping for the best; refusing to consider other job options; responding to any job that catches your attention; not understanding what skills are required; ignoring people who tell you that your expectations are unrealistic; sending many resumes and not being called for interviews; spending more time on hobbies than your job search; sleeping until noon; not taking consistent action every day because you are overwhelmed, discouraged or angry.

Finding a job requires a commitment. It is hard work. It can be boring and discouraging at times. I will never forget a young man who had been searching for a full time job for nearly three

years. He was unwilling to try anything new. “I’m going to keep doing what I’ve been doing,” he said, “and hope for the best.”

Whether you are just starting your search or have been at it for a while, do not be like that young man. Spend the time to thoroughly research occupations and understand the employment criteria. Develop the skills you need to communicate your abilities to employers. Know what you do well and where your limitations are. Try one new thing. If you need help, ask.

Here’s to your employment success!



## About Barbara Bissonnette and Forward Motion Coaching

Barbara Bissonnette is a certified coach and the Principal of Forward Motion Coaching. She specializes in career development coaching for individuals with Asperger’s Syndrome and Nonverbal Learning Disorder. She is the author of the award-winning *Complete Guide to Getting a Job for People with Asperger’s Syndrome*; the *Asperger’s Syndrome Workplace Survival Guide: A Neurotypical’s Secrets for Success*; and *Helping Adults with Asperger’s Syndrome Get & Stay Hired; Career Coaching Strategies for Professionals and Parents of Adults on the Autism Spectrum*.

Coaching services for individuals are customized based on a client’s needs and can include career exploration, interviewing skills, resume development, communication skills, time and project management, and workplace disclosure and accommodation strategies. Coaching is available in-person, and long distance via telephone and Skype. A free, 1/2 hour session is available to prospective new clients.

Barbara offers consultations for parents and professionals. **Getting a Job When You Have Asperger’s Syndrome** is a weekend workshop for individuals that describes every step of the job search. **Finding Employment that Works for Individuals with Asperger’s Syndrome** is a seminar for career counselors, vocational rehabilitation specialists and transition specialists.

Prior to coaching Barbara spent more than 20 years in business, most recently as Vice President of Marketing and Sales. She earned a graduate certificate in Executive Coaching from the Massachusetts School Professional Psychology and is certified by Institute for Professional Excellence in Coaching.

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