

# EMPLOYER'S GUIDE TO ASPERGER'S SYNDROME



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SOLUTIONS FOR EMPLOYEES WHO ARE BRIGHT, TALENTED  
AND SKILLED, BUT HAVE TROUBLE "FITTING IN."

*"Learn what you are and be such." -Pindar*

*This guide is intended to show employers how to utilize the talents of a capable, intelligent and underutilized work force: individuals with Asperger's Syndrome and similar autism spectrum profiles.*

*The business community benefits in three important ways from understanding how to effectively manage Asperger's individuals.*

- If you currently have employees who are struggling with interpersonal communication, recognize that the cause may be Asperger's Syndrome. There are effective interventions and accommodations that can address problems among individuals who are at risk of derailing.*

- In the right job with the right supports, individuals with Asperger's Syndrome are dedicated, loyal contributors and answer the on-going need of businesses for skilled, educated workers.*

- Absent an understanding of Asperger's Syndrome, legitimate accommodation requests may be brushed aside as bids for special treatment ("Everyone wants a quiet cubicle"), resulting in violations of the Americans with Disabilities Act.*

*This guide provides an overview of Asperger's Syndrome, describes common challenges that individuals experience, and offers suggestions for how employers can take advantage of the many strengths that these employees bring to the workplace.*

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**A**sperger's Syndrome is a mild form of autism.<sup>1</sup> It affects interpersonal communication, cognitive flexibility, and the ability to organize information. The individual may make blunt or inappropriate comments, have difficulty shifting attention or seeing options, or miss the big picture. He or she may be unusually distracted by noise, smells or physical sensations. Each individual is unique and does not share all of the traits of Asperger's Syndrome or experience them to the same degree.

While these individuals face a number of challenges, Asperger's Syndrome also confers specific strengths that make them particularly well-suited to jobs requiring attention to detail and prolonged focus. Many have above-average intelligence and enter the workforce with college degrees. Although represented in all types of jobs and careers, the fields of computer technology, academic and scientific research, writing, engineering, technical documentation, and academia make particularly good use of their logic and analytical skills.

The business community is beginning to recognize that people with Asperger's Syndrome can be terrific assets when they are in the right jobs, and receive the needed supports. In 2004, an organization called Specialisterne (Danish for "the specialists") pioneered a radical concept: create jobs that utilize the intellect and skills of those on the autism spectrum. Founder Thorkil Sonne, whose son has Asperger's Syndrome, introduced a model where individuals are trained in software testing. Services are outsourced to firms like Microsoft and Oracle.

Software testing requires focus, attention to detail, and precision ... traits of autistic individuals. Specialisterne has expanded throughout Europe, into Canada and the United States. The Specialist People Foundation was established with the goal of creating one million jobs around the world for "specialist people." (See [www.specialisterne.com](http://www.specialisterne.com).)

SAP AG, the global software company, announced in May, 2013 a partnership with Specialisterne to employ people with autism as software testers, programmers and data QA specialists. SAP's goal is that 1% of its workforce will be people on the autism spectrum by 2020. The company stresses that this is not a charitable initiative. It is a way to fill STEM openings with skilled, educated workers.

SAP is not the only corporation reaching out to people on the spectrum. Ford Motor Company, Freddie Mac, Hewlett Packard, Microsoft, and Willis Towers Watson have similar initiatives.

<sup>1</sup> Although Asperger's Syndrome is no longer an official diagnosis, the term continues to be used as a descriptor to identify individuals on the high-functioning end of the broad autism spectrum.

### **The strengths of individuals with Asperger's Syndrome include:**

- Attention to detail and sustained concentration  
*Benefits: ability to spot errors; not distracted from the task at hand*
- Excellent long-term memory  
*Benefits: recall facts and details others have forgotten*
- Tolerance of repetition and routine  
*Benefits: perform the same tasks without getting bored or burned out*
- Strong logic and analytic skills  
*Benefits: ability to see patterns/ connections in data; objective view of facts*
- Vast knowledge of specialized fields  
*Benefits: develop in-depth knowledge and expertise*
- Creative thinking  
*Benefits: different way of processing information can lead to novel solutions*
- Conscientious  
*Benefits: accurate, high-quality work*
- Perseverance  
*Benefits: stick with a job until it is done*
- Honesty and loyalty  
*Benefits: not afraid to tell the truth; stay with an employer long term*

### **Common Workplace Challenges**

Individuals with Asperger's Syndrome vary widely in their abilities, challenges and need of support. Some appear awkward in their interactions with others, neglecting to make eye contact or to smile, or speaking too loudly or quickly. Others are charming and talkative, but may ask too many questions, or alienate others with unusual behavior or unintentional social gaffes.

Workplace challenges fall into three primary categories: interpersonal communication, planning and organization, and sensory/motor processing. Communication deficits typically present the biggest hurdle, since they appear to be attitude or behavior problems.

## Communication Challenges

Figuring out what the social rules are depends on the context of a particular situation, and the type of relationship you have with the person to whom you are speaking. To the degree that an individual has trouble grasping situational context, he will struggle to say and do the “right” things. It is also critical to understand that other people have thoughts, desires, knowledge and motives that differ from your own. This so-called “theory of mind” ability enables you to predict how someone is likely to react to a situation, and what he expects you to do.

The ability to infer another's emotional state is another component of effective communication. This information is often communicated nonverbally, through a person's facial expression, body language, and tone and volume of voice. Research has shown that only 7% of what people communicate about their attitudes and feelings comes from their spoken words. The vast majority – 93% – comes from facial expression and the way that words are spoken.<sup>1</sup>

Many individuals with Asperger's Syndrome have trouble noticing and/or interpreting nonverbal signals. They may not realize that someone is upset with them, or understand an implied request from a supervisor. They may miss jokes or sarcasm. An individual may not be aware of the nonverbal messages *she* is sending by not making eye contact, standing too close to others, or speaking in a monotone.

Difficulty with interpersonal communication can cause people with Asperger's Syndrome to behave in ways that seem willfully rude or insubordinate. They may offend others with candid remarks, which they consider to be honest and factual. The literal interpretation of language can lead to serious, sometimes comical, misunderstandings: “How come you're not using the new scheduling software?” asks Kevin's manager, “I told you to take a look at it two weeks ago.” “I *did* look at it,” replies Kevin, “and didn't think it was useful so I deleted it off my system.”

Most people can subconsciously process contextual clues within a fraction of a second. Those with Asperger's Syndrome must make a conscious effort to notice and interpret such clues. This takes time and mental effort. They may not be able to discern another person's motive, or know what is expected, based on inferences and previous experience, in time to react to the situation. Things that are obvious to most people are not obvious to those with Asperger's Syndrome.

Common communication challenges:

- Literal interpretation of language, misses implied meaning or sarcasm

<sup>1</sup>Mehrabian, Albert (1981) *Silent Messages: Implicit Communication of Emotions and Attitudes*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth (currently being distributed by Albert Mehrabian, [am@kaaj.com](mailto:am@kaaj.com))

- Too honest and direct, unintentionally offending others
- Neglecting to make eye contact or to smile (even though the individual is friendly)
- Does not know how to engage with co-workers (e.g. make small talk)
- Talks at length about areas of interest; doesn't notice that others want to end the conversation
- Speaks to a supervisor in the same way as to a peer
- Interrupts (can't tell when someone is done speaking, or doesn't want to forget a point)
- Speaks too quickly or slowly; too loudly or softly

It must be emphasized that individuals *want* to interact with others, and are often surprised to hear that they have offended or confused someone.

### Organizational Challenges

*Executive function* refers to a broad array of cognitive processes needed for the effective management of time and resources. These processes serve as an “inner CEO,” enabling an individual to establish goals and a realistic plan to achieve them; prioritize tasks; see options; monitor progress; and change course, if needed. Multitasking requires strong working memory, which is one of the executive functions. The ability to shift between the big picture and the relevant details is another.

Asperger's Syndrome can impact executive functioning in various ways. The employee may not see how his tasks fit into the larger whole, unless this is explicitly explained. He may need assistance to establish priorities, and utilize written notes and checklists in order to remember multi-step processes. Co-workers, who are aware of the person's talent and intellect, may brush aside appeals for help with comments like, “You should know what to do; it's obvious!” or, “At your level, you should know what the priorities are.”

Common organizational challenges:

- Not knowing how to begin an assignment
- Difficulty estimating how long a project will or should take
- Too much focus on details; loses sight of the purpose of a task
- Unsure of what the finished product should look like

- Forgets verbal instructions
- Needs help prioritizing tasks
- Difficulty shifting attention between several tasks
- Appears not to take initiative, because the next steps aren't clear
- Asks too many questions, in an attempt to clarify assignments or expectations
- Acts impulsively, or based on too little information

### Sensory and Motor Challenges

Many individuals with Asperger's Syndrome experience hyper- or hypo-sensitivity to various sensory stimuli, and for some, this can interfere with job performance. The person may be able to see the cycling of fluorescent lights. The sound of a co-worker typing in the next cubicle may be heard as a cacophony of utterly distracting noise. The smell of tobacco smoke on a colleague's clothing made one woman so ill that she had to quit her job.

It may be difficult or impossible to pay attention to input from multiple sensory channels at once. The person may not be able to look someone in the eye *and* listen to what they are saying; or speak with a customer while simultaneously typing information into a computer database. Auditory processing problems are common, and can make it difficult to follow group conversations or grasp verbal instructions.

Problems with fine motor (muscle) control may result in illegible handwriting, or an inability to write quickly enough to take notes during meetings. The person may find it difficult to fold and stuff papers neatly into envelopes. Faulty gross motor control can result in clumsiness or an awkward gait.

Common sensory and motor challenges:

- Hyper- or hypo- sensitivity to noise, light, odors, and tactile sensations
- Difficulty integrating stimulus from multiple sensory channels (e.g. cannot listen and look simultaneously)
- Sensory overload that requires a break
- Problems interpreting group conversations and verbal instructions
- Poor coordination, difficulty with intricate tasks

## Optimal Jobs & Work Environments

Asperger's Syndrome exists on a spectrum and individuals can vary widely in their abilities and challenges. There is no "short list" of suitable jobs or careers. Individuals are represented in all types of occupations, as evidenced by this sampling of Forward Motion Coaching clients: technical writer, creative writer, editor, production manager, graphic artist, fine artist, teacher (toddlers to graduate students), physicist, project manager, sales manager, consultant, computer programmer/other IT, engineer, analyst, actuary, accountant, lawyer, paralegal, administrative assistant, retail sales associate, warehouse worker, electrician, physician, nurse, librarian, library clerk, and meteorologist!

These same clients have been remarkably consistent about the work environments that are most conducive to their success:

- Allow concentration on one task at a time
- Favor accuracy and quality over speed
- Offer structure and clear performance expectations
- Have at least some elements of routine
- Emphasize technical tasks, facts and information
- Do not involve the management of others or sophisticated levels of interpersonal communication

## Managing Employees Who Have Asperger's Syndrome

There are many things that employers can do to help individuals with Asperger's Syndrome to be productive and successful at their jobs. If you know or suspect that someone has Asperger's Syndrome:

- Be patient during training, and break instruction into small segments. If an individual is asking an excessive number of questions, it could indicate anxiety or confusion about a task.
- Explain how tasks and assignments fit into the whole (the "big picture") and why particular steps or processes are important.
- Encourage the use of written notes, outlines, and checklists. Icons and color-coded filing systems will help with organization. People with Asperger's Syndrome are visual, not auditory, learners.
- Assist the individual with creating a personalized "rule book" that contains processes, procedures, and where to go for help.
- Check for understanding by asking the individual to summarize an assignment.

- Make expectations specific and quantifiable: “The draft is due in 3 days, and should include at least 6 ideas for improving efficiency;” or “30 entries or more must be made per hour.” Avoid abstract directives such as, “Take the data and run with it,” or “I want you to take ownership of the project.”
- Use clear, explicit language when discussing a performance problem as hints, inferences, and sarcasm will not be understood. Be direct: “You must limit emails to four paragraphs;” or “The priority is to complete the data entry by noon.”
- Be mindful that *what looks like a behavior or attitude problem is usually a communication problem*. Don't take blunt remarks or social gaffes personally. Clarify the individual's intentions. Be specific and matter-of-fact in pointing out inappropriate or unacceptable behavior. General statements such as “You're rude,” or “You're not a team player,” or “How could you say that?!” are confusing to these literal thinkers. Explain the problem and what to do: “When you tell people to ‘be quiet’ it's considered rude. Instead, ask them to lower their voices.”
- Assign a “work buddy” or mentor to explain social norms, encourage social interaction, and answer questions. Individuals with Asperger's Syndrome often hesitate to ask questions, fearing that they will appear “stupid,” or that the wrong question will result in job loss.
- Relax the standards for “teamwork” where possible, and allow these individuals to focus on the technical aspects of the job.
- Take sensory difficulties seriously. An individual who is hyper-sensitive to noise may require a quiet workspace, or the use of noise cancelling headphones or a white noise machine. Someone with an auditory processing problem may need to use a TTY (text telephone) or other assistive technology. Olfactory sensitivities can be addressed by the use of personal air fresheners, or by limiting the consumption of food to the lunch room. Many individuals favor natural light or lamps with incandescent bulbs to fluorescent lighting.
- Give an individual permission to take short breaks during the day to avoid sensory overload.
- Heightened levels of anxiety are common, and may cause a person to panic over a minor mistake or insignificant disagreement with a co-worker. Typically, she will not know how to correct the situation. Do not dismiss such concerns as trivial, or something that the individual should know how to handle. Listen, acknowledge the distress, and brainstorm an action plan.
- Educate human resources personnel, managers and employees about Asperger's Syndrome. Increased understanding is directly proportional to increased employment success. Retaining just one employee at risk of derailing more than covers the investment in training.

▪ Provide a coach who is familiar with conditions like Asperger's Syndrome to work with an employee and his or her manager. The pragmatic, goal-oriented nature of the coaching, combined with an action plan based on organizational needs, assures that performance objectives are addressed. (Although in most cases it is illegal, under the Americans with Disabilities Act, to ask an employee about a disability, you *can* discuss performance issues.)



### **About Barbara Bissonnette and Forward Motion Coaching**

Barbara Bissonnette is a certified coach and the Principal of Forward Motion Coaching ([www.ForwardMotion.info](http://www.ForwardMotion.info)). She specializes in career development coaching for individuals with Asperger's Syndrome and similar autism spectrum profiles. 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*; and *Helping Adults with Asperger's Syndrome Get & Stay Hired: Career Coaching Strategies for*

*Professionals and Parents of Adults on the Autism Spectrum*.

Barbara provides training to organizations on how to utilize the skills of individuals on the autism spectrum. Consultations are available to address the performance of a specific employee. Employer-sponsored coaching can be offered as a personal development initiative to enhance interpersonal communication and organizational abilities.

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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