

# EMPLOYER'S GUIDE TO ASPERGER'S SYNDROME/AUTISM



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

UTILIZING STRENGTHS OF  
AN UNDERUTILIZED WORKFORCE  
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***T**his 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 individuals who are on the autism spectrum.*

- If you currently have employees who are struggling with interpersonal communication, recognize that the cause may be Asperger's Syndrome/autism. There are interventions and accommodations that can enable individuals to interact effectively with others.*

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

- Absent an understanding of the autism spectrum, legitimate accommodation requests may be interpreted 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/autism, describes common challenges in the workplace, and offers suggestions for how employers can utilize the many strengths of these employees.*

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Individuals with Asperger's Syndrome, and similar autism spectrum profiles, have difficulty with interpersonal communication, cognitive flexibility, and organizing information. They may make blunt or inappropriate comments, struggle to shift attention or see options, miss the big picture, or be unusually distracted by noise, smells or physical sensations. Each person is unique and does not share all of the traits of Asperger's Syndrome/autism or experience them to the same degree.

While these individuals face a number of challenges, Asperger's/autism 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 high technology, academic and scientific research, writing, statistical and data analysis and engineering make particularly good use of their logic and analytical skills.

The business community is recognizing that people with Asperger's/autism can be terrific assets when they are in the right jobs, and receive the needed supports. Several major corporations have developed initiatives to recruit and hire individuals on the spectrum. These are not charitable programs. Rather, they are designed to help companies fill the need for skilled, educated workers. The organizations include EY, Ford Motor Company, Hewlett Packard, JP Morgan Chase, Microsoft, SAP, and Towers Watson.

### **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*

- Conscientiousness

*Benefits: accurate, high-quality work*

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- Perseverance

*Benefits: stick with a job until it is done*

- Honesty and loyalty

*Benefits: not afraid to tell the truth; long term employee*

## Common Workplace Challenges

Individuals with Asperger's/autism 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 one has with the person to whom he is speaking. To the degree that a person has trouble grasping situational context, he will struggle to say and do the "right" things.

Good communication is dependent on being able to infer the mental state of others. This so-called "theory of mind" ability means that we recognize that people have different thoughts, desires, knowledge and motives than ourselves. This information is used to predict how a person is likely to react to a situation, and how we are expected to behave.

Inferring someone's mental state requires the ability to notice and correctly interpret nonverbal cues. Research has shown that over 90% of what people communicate about their feelings happens nonverbally. This is often via facial expression, body language, and tone and volume of voice.

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 *he* is sending by not making eye contact, standing too close to others, or speaking in a monotone.

Difficulty with interpersonal communication can cause individuals on the spectrum 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 and nonverbal cues within a fraction of a second. Individuals with Asperger’s/autism must make a conscious effort to notice and interpret this information. It takes time and mental effort. There is often a struggle to discern another person’s motive, or to know what is expected, based on inferences and previous experience. 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
- 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 develop a realistic plan to achieve them. This involves prioritizing tasks; seeing options; monitoring

progress; and changing course, if needed. Multitasking requires strong working memory, another of the executive functions. Cognitive flexibility is necessary to shift between grasping the big picture and focusing on the relevant details.

Asperger's Syndrome/autism 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 to utilize written notes and checklists 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 on the autism spectrum 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 slower processing of auditory information can make it difficult to follow group conversations, or to grasp verbal instructions. The smell of a co-worker's lunch may trigger the gag reflex.

There may be problems processing and integrating input from two or more sensory channels. 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.

Difficulty 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. looking *and* listening)
- Becoming overwhelmed by sensory stimuli
- Problems interpreting group conversations and verbal instructions
- Poor coordination, difficulty with intricate tasks

### Optimal Jobs & Work Environments

Individuals on the spectrum can vary widely in their abilities and challenges. Because of this, there is no “short list” of suitable jobs or careers. In fact, 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, chemist, project manager, sales manager, consultant, computer programmer/other IT, engineer, analyst, actuary, accountant, lawyer, paralegal, administrative assistant, retail sales associate, warehouse worker, bus driver, 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 high levels of interpersonal communication

## Managing Employees Who Have Asperger's Syndrome/Autism

There are many things that employers can do to help individuals to be productive and successful at their jobs. If you know or suspect that an employee is on the autism spectrum:

- 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 on the spectrum 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/autism 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 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, to use of noise cancelling headphones or place a white noise machine in his work area. An employee 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, he 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/autism. 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/autism to work with an employee and his or her manager. The pragmatic, goal-oriented nature of 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.)

### Services from Forward Motion Coaching

A variety of training and consulting services are available to assist organizations with the recruiting and management of employees on the spectrum.

- **Leveraging Asperger's/Autism Strengths in the Workplace training.** This half-day program is for human resources and diversity/inclusion personnel as well as hiring managers. It describes how Asperger's Syndrome/Autism impacts adults in the workplace, and provides tips on modifying the interview process and creating a work environment that is conducive to success.
- **Customized consultations based on your specific needs.** Topics can include: improving the performance of a specific employee; on-going mentoring for managers; implementing an employment or internship program.
- **Employee coaching.** Individualized sessions focus on improving interpersonal communication skills, organizational abilities, and productivity of an employee. The process includes goal setting, assessment, individualized coaching sessions, progress reports and a future development plan.

### About Barbara Bissonnette



Barbara Bissonnette is a certified coach and the Principal of Forward Motion Coaching ([www.ForwardMotion.info](http://www.ForwardMotion.info)). Since 2006, she has specialized 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*.

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 (now William James) and is certified by Institute for Professional Excellence in Coaching.

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