

## Working with a Person with Asperger's Syndrome

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People with Asperger's Syndrome can be excellent employees as they are often reliable, punctual, have a professional attitude to work, a high level of attention to detail and are good with routine and repetition.

However, in order to reap the benefits that an employee with Asperger's Syndrome can offer, it is important to put in place some strategies to ensure success.

People with Asperger's Syndrome often have difficulty changing from task to task, multi-tasking, difficulty with learning new tasks and transferring skills from one situation to another. Things we assume a person learns from exposure and experience have to be specifically taught to the person with Asperger's Syndrome and constantly reinforced to reduce the stress, confusion and frustration which may lead to behavioural difficulties, or withdrawal and depression.

Understanding the difficulties of an employee with Asperger's Syndrome is important, as is providing routine, structure and predictability.

Not everyone with Asperger's Syndrome will excel in every job but where they do find a niche they are generally well regarded and

with support and understanding, make reliable and productive employees.

In the workplace, the person with Asperger Syndrome may have difficulty:

- interpreting instructions
- in noisy situations
- in unstructured situations
- starting work
- organising tasks



### Strategies

- 1. Keep instructions brief and precise**
  - use simple, concrete language
  - written instructions are preferable
  - confirm that the person has understood
  - use peers/workmates to provide cues
- 2. Give the person time to process the instruction**

- be sure you have his/her attention and that you allow them enough time to absorb each instruction
- 3. If practical, make use of visual cues and procedures**
- a written schedule or task sheet is preferable to verbal instructions
- 4. Break work into smaller steps**
- check progress regularly
  - be prepared to negotiate with the worker



### Organisational Skills (Planning)

People with Asperger's Syndrome have difficulty with:

- organising themselves and their belongings
- listening to multiple instructions
- coping with changes – room, times, workmates
- distractions – being easily sidetracked
- interpreting abstract instructions
- sequential instructions
- focussing on the important part of instruction
- planning how to tackle a task
- fine and gross motor skills

### Strategies

- use visual cues and instructions
- colour code the instructions
- use concrete language

- allow the worker to mark off each task as it is finished
- point to the starting place
- show an example of what you are requiring
- daily briefing re changes, targets etc
- formal peer support system
- verbal reassurance

### Communication

The expressive (spoken) and receptive (listening) language skills of the person with Asperger's Syndrome have particular characteristics: they

- may have a foreign or odd intonation
- may show concrete interpretation
- may show one word/one meaning use of words
- may show unusual linkage of thoughts
- be confined to narrow topics of conversation
- may feature learned phrases in particular situations
- may be out of synch so that their receptive skills are not necessarily in line with their expressive skills
- often shows misinterpretation of what was said
- often hear only the beginning or end of an instruction or comment
- are not able to interpret the real meaning of colloquialisms, metaphors, similes, sarcasm or wit
- may have feelings of inadequacy and isolation from peers because they cannot understand what is happening



## Strategies

- use visual cues where possible
- explain if you are joking or teasing
- reassure that it is OK to be wrong and be supportive
- keep your language simple and direct
- talk through situations...what could you say?
- Refrain from using sarcasm

## Social Skills

People with Asperger's Syndrome are often socially "blind". The big problem is that they do not know how to behave even though they may know they are different and do want to interact. They:

- don't understand rules of social behaviour
- may talk about inappropriate subjects
- lack empathy...don't understand their own feelings let alone those of others
- can be very outspoken and tactless
- may develop a fixation on certain individuals
- have a strong sense of justice, but see things in black and white terms
- have difficulty making friends
- lack the idea of personal space
- misinterpret the behaviours of peers
- may dislike being touched
- can appear naive and are vulnerable
- don't interpret body language or facial expressions
- have poor conversation skills

## Strategies

- "debrief" situations by discussing what he/she could have done
- encourage self control by providing a 'timeout' period and location to enable them to de-stress and relax without any

social expectations or demands placed on them.

- use written reminders to support proposed actions
- be very aware of how vulnerable the person may be to peer pressure and being set-up



## Conclusion

**Individuals with Asperger's Syndrome need**

- **consistency**
- **predictability**
- **a calm and controlled supervisor**
- **an organised workplace**

## Useful Reference Books in the Autism Victoria Library:

ATTWOOD, T., *The Complete Guide to Asperger's Syndrome*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006. This book is essential reading for those living or working with a child or adult with Asperger Syndrome. It is written in a clear and concise manner, with plenty of examples, practical suggestions and resource lists.

FAST, Y., *Employment for Individuals with Asperger Syndrome or Non-verbal Learning Disability*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2004. This book is a handy guide to gaining employment. It includes actual case examples written by adults with Asperger Syndrome. This book would be useful for

adults with AS, employers, career counsellors and employment agencies.

HAWKINS, G., *How to Find Work That Works for People with Asperger Syndrome*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2004. Gail Hawkins is a vocational consultant, having specialised in Autism Spectrum Disorder for the past 15 years. This book is aimed at people with Asperger Syndrome who need information on how to find and maintain employment. The book covers topics such as choosing appropriate careers, building a resume, educating employers and how to disclose necessary information to the employer.

MEYER, R., *Asperger Syndrome Employment Workbook*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2001. This workbook has practical activities for individuals with Asperger Syndrome to explore their talents, strengths and difficulties in past work experiences in order to identify the best suited jobs and work environment.

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