

information & advice for employers of

People with Autism
Spectrum Disorders



PURPOSE OF THIS LEAFLET

This leaflet has been designed to give much needed information and advice to employers who have employed or are considering employing people diagnosed with Aspergers or other Autism Spectrum Disorders. The leaflet has been developed in consultation with Borders Asperger and Autism Group Support (BAAGS) and sponsored by Integrated Children's Services.

WHAT IS AUTISM?

An Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a lifelong condition that affects how a person communicates with, and relates to, other people. The word 'spectrum' is used because, while all people with autism share three main areas of difficulty – communication, social interaction and imagination - their condition will affect them in very different ways. Some are able to live relatively 'everyday' lives; others will require a lifetime of specialist support. Around 1 in 100 people in the UK have an ASD; four times as many males as females.



FINDING A JOB

Having a job and earning a wage is a fundamental part of most adults' lives. It brings an income, independence and respect. Many people with an ASD share this wish to work but National Autism Society research has shown that only 6% of all people with ASD have full-time paid employment, and only 12% of those with high-functioning autism or Asperger syndrome have full-time jobs. People with ASD often find it hard to get and keep a job because of the challenges they face as part of their condition, and because most employers don't have any knowledge of autism.

There is a lack of available information, advice and practical support that is ASD-specific. In many instances ASD is a hidden disability which can lead to misunderstandings in the workplace by those unaware of their colleague's diagnosis.

BENEFITS FOR EMPLOYERS

Employers can benefit from the skills and qualities a person with ASD might bring to a job in their company. People with ASD are often reliable, hard working and motivated. Their attention to detail can be very good; they can often maintain a high level of accuracy, and can perform well on repetitive tasks. Their approach is often straightforward and honest. They may have technical skills of a high order and a good knowledge of facts and figures.

A sound business case can be made for employing more people with ASD. The firm can gain reliable and effective employees, can progress towards meeting its commitment to diversity and can raise awareness of diversity among its staff. Managers, who have gained an understanding of the communication difficulties people with ASD experience, have commented that they have learned to communicate more effectively with all their employees.

DIFFICULTIES FACED BY PEOPLE WITH ASD

People with autism or Asperger syndrome can do well in a structured and well organised environment and may have many strengths that benefit an employer, such as accuracy, a good eye for detail, reliability and the meticulous application of routine tasks.

However, they may have varying difficulties with the following:

- **Communication** both verbal and non-verbal. They may take words literally, repeat the last words heard, fail to understand abstract concepts. They find it difficult to read body language, facial expressions, idiomatic language etc.
- **Building social relationships** they can appear aloof, can lack social skills, behave inappropriately. They find it difficult to start and maintain conversations on general topics that have no particular interest to them. It isn't easy for them to make or sustain friendships.
- **Imaginative activity** they may have narrow interests and find it hard to think in abstract ways. They can't always understand how other people think or feel, or see another person's point of view. Their literal interpretation of the world means they are usually much more comfortable with facts. Change is difficult to cope with.
- **Sensory stimuli** they may have high or low sensitivity to light, noise, smell, etc. especially when stressed.

RECRUITMENT

Employers may find that changes, which would make it easier for people with ASD to apply for a job, could easily be made to their current recruitment practice. These changes would, in fact, benefit a wide range of people.

- Simplify and clarify adverts: job adverts often contain confusing jargon, or stipulate unnecessary qualifications or exceptional communication skills which are not needed for the job. Clearly worded adverts listing only the skills/ qualifications that are absolutely essential would be better.
- Work trials: most employers use an interview for selection. This relies on communication and social interaction skills, areas of difficulty for a person with ASD. A work trial instead of a formal interview could be a fairer alternative.
- Extra time for tests: some people with ASD have problems in processing information and would benefit from extra time in selection tests.

INTERVIEWING TECHNIQUES

During an interview candidates with ASD, and perhaps other candidates, will be encouraged to answer more productively if the following adjustments can be made:

- **Ask closed questions** and avoid open questions. For example, the question 'Tell me about yourself' is very vague and the candidate may not be able to judge exactly what you want to know. A better question would be 'Tell me about any jobs/voluntary work you have done in the last five years'.

- **Ask questions based on the candidate's real/past experiences**, for example 'In your last job, did you do any filing or data input?' 'What procedures did you use to do this effectively?'
- **Avoid hypothetical or abstract questions**, for example 'How do you think you'll cope with working if there are lots of interruptions?' A better question would be 'Think back to your last job. Can you tell us how you coped with your work when people interrupted you?'
- **Be prepared to prompt the candidate** in order to extract all the relevant information or gather sufficient information.
- **Be aware that the candidate may interpret language literally**. Asking 'How did you find your last job?' may result in the answer 'I looked on the internet', 'I looked in the A-Z' or 'I looked in the paper, sent for the application form and completed it'.
- **Be aware that eye contact may be fleeting or prolonged**, depending on the individual.

ADVICE FOR EMPLOYERS AND TRAINERS

People with ASD are all different and so there is no uniform way of supporting them. However, the following advice should be helpful.

- Some people with ASD may process information more easily if written down rather than spoken, so learning the job can be made easier by supplying written guidelines rather than verbal ones or using visual prompts to support what you are saying. It would be worthwhile checking.
- Be unambiguous and avoid figurative language. It's good practice to check that the person has understood you.

- Clear guidance on what is expected of the employee is essential. Many people with ASD prefer a timetable indicating what to do when, and a plan of the order in which tasks should be done.
- Structuring the job by breaking it down into parts, providing clear and structured training, and keeping to timetables is helpful to people with ASD and many other workers!
- A plan of who sits where in the office could be helpful.
- Giving regular feedback that includes the positives, as well as advising on how to do things differently, is important.
- Provision of a mentor to discuss problems can help. A mentor or manager can give guidance on the social or unwritten issues/rules in the workplace, as these can cause much confusion to someone who does not pick them up intuitively.
- Introduce change in a gradual way.
- Be patient and understanding: these people have genuine difficulties. But don't expect the person with autism to empathise with you!
- With some people ASD can be a hidden disability, and the difficulties in communication and social interaction they have could result in others misunderstanding them, so training in disability awareness for colleagues is a good idea.
- Some people with ASD, especially those with Aspergers, can be undiagnosed and in many workplaces there will already be people with ASD working successfully and leading independent lives.

Local information and support can be obtained from:

Borders Asperger and Autism Group Support

tel: 01896 668961 | www.baags.co.uk

Autism Information Point

Hawick Public Library | North Bridge Street | Hawick TD9 9QT

tel: 01450 372637 www.scotborders.gov.uk/libraries

ASD Borders

www.onlineborders.com/site/microsites/asdborders

Other good sources of information and advice can be found at:

www.nas.org.uk

www.autism.org.uk/scotland

www.autism-in-scotland.org.uk

www.actionforadvocacy.org.uk

www.autisminitiatives.org

www.number6.org.uk

www.scottishautismnetwork.org.uk

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