

Valuing the Expertise and Qualities of Individuals on the Autism Spectrum

People who have autism have a serious social and communication disorder that makes interactions with others difficult. So, why would you hire a person with this disabling condition? Actually there are plenty of good reasons.

Talent, Focus, and Creativity

Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) see the world in a unique and interesting way. They think “outside the box” which can sometimes lead to creative and innovative problem solving. People with ASD often have excellent rote and long-term memories. They pay attention to detail, are task-oriented and have high professional standards. They work well with routines and repetitive tasks.

Personal Characteristics

Individuals with ASD also have personal qualities that employers appreciate. They are dependable and dedicated. They value integrity, kindness, and honesty. Managers who look for high-quality, detail-oriented results will find the upfront effort of hiring, training, and accommodating individuals with ASD worthwhile personally and economically.

Suggested Websites for Further Information on Autism Spectrum Disorders and Employment

www.ausm.org -- Autism Society of Minnesota

www.autism-society.org -- Autism Society of America

www.asperger.org -- The Asperger Syndrome Coalition of the U.S.

www.mnaspie.net -- Minnesota Asperger's Network

www.udel.edu/bkirby/asperger -- Online Asperger syndrome Information and Support

www.adaminnesota.org -- ADA Minnesota

www.adagreatlakes.org -- The Great Lakes ADA and Accessible IT Center

www.mnbln.org -- Minnesota Business Leadership Network

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Employment Strategies

Understanding
People Who Have
High Functioning Autism
and Asperger Syndrome

What is an Autism Spectrum Disorder?

It is a lifelong developmental disorder that affects the way a person communicates, interacts socially, and processes complex information. Underlying conditions in the brain interfere with a person's ability to "read" and interpret messages that are sent by facial expressions, gestures, and other types of body language. Individuals with autism may not hear differences in voice tones. Because of these deficits in social cognition, they often miss out on the implied intent of what others really mean to communicate.

Not all people are affected in the same way. In fact, it is referred to as a "spectrum" disorder because the term covers several related disabilities. Symptoms can range from mild to severe, although persons with high functioning autism and Asperger Syndrome have average to well-above average intellectual and language abilities.

What Causes Autism?

A specific cause has not yet been established. Current thinking is, rather than a single cause, there may be a set of triggers. Evidence strongly points to a genetic link, differences in brain structure, and a predisposition for it to develop in early childhood due to exposure to viral infections or environmental toxins. It is *not* a form of mental illness or caused by poor parenting during a person's upbringing.

Why am I Hearing So Much About It?

Autism has been attracting increasing attention in the media over the past decade. In 1994, the pattern of behaviors now recognized as Asperger Syndrome was first published in a manual that medical personnel use to diagnose a range of conditions. Called the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual IV*, this manual also lists another subgroup on the spectrum often referred to as "classic autism." Classic autism has been recognized for several decades. It is a more severe and rare form which affects roughly 4 in 10,000 births.

Typical Characteristics of High Functioning Autism and Asperger Syndrome

A person with autism *may*:

- ✦ Avoid eye contact
- ✦ Speak with a flat, monotone voice
- ✦ Have one-sided conversations
- ✦ Stand too close to others
- ✦ Repeat words or phrases
- ✦ Misunderstand jokes, slang, or teasing
- ✦ Dislike being touched
- ✦ Seem over-sensitive to sounds or lights
- ✦ Display anxiety
- ✦ Have a few intense interests
- ✦ Wave hands, rock body, or "flick" fingers

Asperger Syndrome is more common than classic autism; it affects an estimated 1 in 166 births.

Two physicians first described the characteristics of both types of autism nearly 60 years ago. The description of the more common type was written in German by Hans Asperger (for whom the syndrome was named). His paper was translated into English in the early 1980s. Since then researchers, clinicians and educators have attempted to understand its causes, various symptoms, and meet its challenges.

Famous Faces on the Spectrum

You may have also seen characters who have played someone with the traits of ASD in movies or on TV including Dustin Hoffman in *Rain Man*, Leonard Nimoy on *Star Trek*, Vincent D'Onofrio on *Law and Order*, or Jon Heder in *Napoleon Dynamite*. Other characters with similar traits (obsessive/compulsive disorder) include Jack Nicholson in *As Good as it Gets* and Tony Sahloub in *Monk*.

Autism spectrum disorders are not new. In fact, biographers have pointed out that such luminaries as Thomas Jefferson, Albert Einstein, Charles Darwin, Gregor Mendel, and Orson Wells may have been diagnosed with it had they lived today. While not everyone with ASD has savant skills or genius qualities, many do have attributes that, with some accommodation, will be valuable to your organization.