

Autism in the Workplace

Untold Stories, Untapped Talent

Edited by Jonathan Andrews



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Introduction

It's tempting to think that autism is not something employers need to worry about – that people with an Autism Spectrum Disorder are either super-smart and hyper-capable, able to excel in their “special interest” area (almost exclusively STEM-based) without any adjustments or understanding, or too “low-functioning” to work and not worth worrying about. It's through this prism that autism is often viewed in the media – but it is far too simplistic, and most do not fit these extremes.

Rather, autism is a spectrum, with differing levels of ability, and with autistic people being skilled in, and attracted to, many different roles. I felt it important to emphasise this wide range of talent and interest within the autistic spectrum because it's something all employers need to look out for and be aware of – there really is no sector which someone with autism won't be interested in.

As such, this booklet is a collection of a diverse group of people throughout the UK, each from a different walk of life; all have an Autism Spectrum Disorder, but no two could be called identical and all have worked in very variant industries to each other. In the pages that follow they discuss how they feel about being open in the workplace, the kind of adjustments they feel they need and whether they can access these, and their hopes for the future.

I very much hope that this booklet can help raise understanding of autism, firstly among employers but also among readers in general. Autism really is an area recruiters in all fields need to get on top of, given that, due to increased diagnosis of autism over the past 20 years, there will very soon be many more diagnosed autistic people applying for jobs at their companies than there ever have been before. Understanding the condition in advance is crucial if companies want to make best use of the talents of these potential future employees.

Georgia Grainger

Georgia is autistic and disability advocate in Northern Ireland. She is also a political activist and studies Linguistics at university, focusing on political and socio-linguistics, with her academic studies, activism and advocacy benefitting from special interests in politics and linguistics. She has worked in several jobs during her studies at university.



I'm a twenty year old autistic student at Queen's University Belfast, studying a BA in English and Linguistics. My autism was missed when I was younger so I did my entire education through mainstream schools with no extra support, and I got 5 A*s and 5 As at GCSE and 37 in the International Baccalaureate and got into my degree programme where I'm on track to get a high 2:1 or a First and I hope to go on to do post-graduate study of some sort. I've done multiple internships and work placements in different settings, and do volunteering and activism for as much time as I can give to it, usually at least a few hours every week. I have hyperfocus, enjoy repetitive tasks such as copying data or filing things, am really good at researching, and often find solutions that other people don't see. These are all good things that I achieved or experience because of my autism, not despite it — my autism has helped me a huge amount in academia and it has meant that I have really strong interests in certain areas that I am able to volunteer. I also have sensory processing issues, general anxiety, chronic pain and very limited energy levels, again, because of aspects of my autism. My autism affects every aspect of my life, sometimes positively, sometimes negatively and most often neutrally — it just makes things very different for me than they might be for other people.

My way of working is often intense, with hyperfocus for hours on end and then (necessary) long breaks to recuperate. With hyperfocus, I am able to focus similar to how people are expected to work in exam settings, with high levels of concentration to produce high quality work, but I can do it for a whole day with very few breaks, and without getting distracted or losing momentum. It comes very naturally to me and was something I did automatically as a child when interested in something, but it also ends up with my brain struggling to focus at all the next day. It's great for meeting deadlines and for being able to deal with multiple tasks quickly (I can spend a morning dedicated to one, finish it, then dedicate the afternoon to another), and I am happy to use it in work settings since it's such a high level of productivity that also has really good quality results, but I can only do it if I know I'll be able to take the time I need to recover from it — usually the same length of time I was focused for, without any requirements for social or intellectual engagement.

This is one of the ways in which my autism can be difficult to navigate in a workplace, as I constantly have to balance how much effort and energy I put into something with whether I'll have the time to recover from it, obviously I want to give my best to any job but I can't do that level of focus on finishing a project if I know I have to come into work the next day, or if my work day isn't long enough for me to finish the project — it's really difficult for me to start and stop something I'm working on while that focussed. If I was able to work with flexible hours, it would be much easier for me to be able to put that level of effort into work and be able to get the best results rather than feeling like I'm giving 30% effort to a task, just so I can be able to come in the next day to also give 30% effort, instead of giving 100% one day and taking some time off the next day. I don't need time off every day, and not every task benefits from hyperfocus, but it is a very useful tool that I'd like to be more able to use.

The sensory landscape of the workplaces I've been in has also been very difficult for me to deal with. The work I've done so far has been in offices, doing different kinds of computer-based work. The offices I've worked in were open-plan, where even if I wasn't required to do phone work and didn't have a desk phone,

there would be phones ringing and people speaking on them all day — my brain can't "tune out" other noises around me, it always focuses on them and it means I can't really do anything else but listen to them — and in one office, I was told that I couldn't put earbuds in, even without music playing, because it didn't look like I was working even though I was still doing the task I had been assigned of writing content for a website. Office lights quite often make me feel anxious (a sign for me that I'm getting close to a sensory overload) because I'm hypersensitive to light levels and they are usually a bright blue-white light, whereas I work best in dim lighting or with warm-coloured lights. Natural light is also quite difficult for me because of it changing throughout the day so I can't work next to windows. Most office chairs make me fidgety because I prefer sitting cross-legged on the floor, and I find it really difficult to work at a regular desk if I'm doing computer work as I'm much more able to focus if I have a laptop on my knee or at least a keyboard because then it feels like I have a tactile connection to what I'm meant to be doing. I can work in places with unfriendly sensory environments (and since most places have unfriendly sensory environments, I do work in them on a very regular basis), but the consequences are that I will find it difficult to focus at all, I'll potentially be slightly distracting for other people (through fidgeting or getting up to walk around because I can't focus), my work won't be of as high a standard as it should be and I may even have an autistic shutdown which is where I become unable to do anything (including any verbal communication) and would probably have to leave the workplace for a few hours to recover — working in that kind of place is unpleasant for me and it's also not good for my employer as they don't get anywhere near the kind of work that I'm capable of and aren't getting what they hired me for.

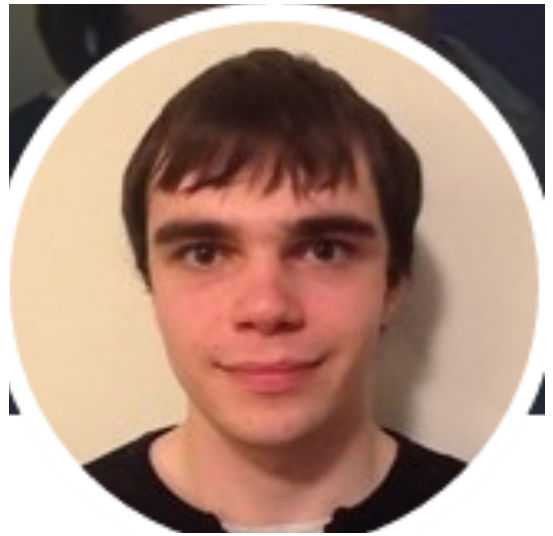
The same as most non-autistic people, I want to do my best at a job that fulfils me and that I'm good at, in a place I enjoy working in. However, almost any employment for me means working in a way that is contradictory to how my brain works, in a setting with sensory input that my brain struggles with processing, and dealing with a set of social expectations that are for someone with a different type of brain to me; that's a challenging thing to deal with for something you do every day, and means that I will already be making

quite big compromises between what feels comfortable to me and what my employer wants, but I'll do what I can to make sure I get the desired end goal, it's just that my steps to get there might be a bit different.

I've lived with my autism my whole life and I know it pretty well. If someone is impressed by my CV and chooses to hire me based on it, then they need to recognise that I did everything on that CV while being autistic. All of my references complement the work I did while being autistic, and all of my academic grades were awarded to me because of the things I did with my autistic brain. Choosing to hire me based on my autistic accomplishments and then expecting me to work in a non-autistic way doesn't really make much sense.

George Harvey

My name is George Harvey. I am 21-years-old and I have been diagnosed with Autism since I was 3. My condition has made life challenging for me, but I've always strived to do my best despite my limitations. In recent years, I've been very ambitious about using my skills in Creative/Professional writing to raise awareness of Autism and give motivation to others like me. In the past, I've written for the NAS 'Communication' magazine (Summer 2013), and made contributions to books such as Successful Studying (2013) and Making Our Mark (2015). My dream is to one day write a successful children's book series that touches on disabilities and personal issues.



My name is George Harvey. I am 21-years-old and I have worked as a checkout operator for almost three years now. I've personally never had an experience where my Autism has caused me discrimination at work; the people I work with are respectful and treat me the same as any other colleague. However, I think it is important for managers (and the like) to be aware of their employees' Autism, if they have it. This isn't to say the condition should be made a big deal of and it should never affect how fellow colleagues see or treat that person. But it will help them to remember that certain colleagues need additional help sometimes.

Whilst it's never happened to me, personally, I have heard cases where somebody was turned down for a job, because of their Autism. In other cases, people have applied for things like driving lessons and only informed their instructor about their condition later, which then harmed their relationship. Naturally, not everyone understands the effects of Autism and not everyone feels they can deal with a condition they have no experience of. Sometimes there are only certain driving instructors who specialise in teaching Autistic students. However, the fact that somebody has Autism should never determine whether they'll be given a job or not.

The misconception is that because Autism gives a person learning difficulties, they won't be able to handle the pressures/requirements of a certain job. But if this were true, why would they apply for the job to begin with? If anything, **they have better knowledge of their Autism and what their limitations are.** So if they're still passionate about applying for the job regardless, they clearly don't think their Autism will be much of an issue.

Of course, **it is still important to inform managers (and the like) about having Autism.** Just because there won't be as many issues as they might think, it doesn't mean there won't be any at all. If a person with Autism knows their limitations, **they'll know if there's something that could pose a challenge to them in a role.** If this is the case, they should be given the opportunity to tell managers, recruiters, etc. about what they might need - preferably during their application process. Usually these requirements are very small and don't affect a job (or management) too greatly. **The slightest thing, like one-to-one support or being reminded regularly of how things work, will make all the difference** to somebody with Autism. And soon they'll be settled enough into a job that they won't need additional help or support anymore.

Everyone's worried about making mistakes, but **sometimes having Autism makes a small mistake seem big.** Managers (and the like) should be aware that Autistic employees may be more stressed when starting out, which is why they sometimes need additional help. They should also be aware that just because an applicant requests additional help with some things, it doesn't mean they won't have the skills to do a good job. They just want to be assured that they'll be supported during their early days/weeks and can settle in easier. It's not like they'll come into a job and request it be drastically altered just to better suit themselves. If they knew there was too much about a role they couldn't handle then they wouldn't have bothered applying for it.

In my opinion, any kind of application should allow people to say if they have a condition, like Autism, and note down some additional requirements they may have. But I don't think this should affect whether somebody will be given a job. That's why I think information about disabilities should be given at the end of an application form, so the people making the decisions can judge people on their work skills first - after all, this is what they're looking for in an application. If the applicant really wants to make it clear they have a condition straight away then they can mention it in their profile/summary - in addition to the section at the end. If application forms were completed this way, the beginning would have to mention that applicants will have the opportunity to mention their disabilities and requirements at the end, but it won't affect their chances of employment.

One final thing worth mentioning is that **I feel managers (and the like) shouldn't tell other employees about certain colleagues having Autism.** This should be left up to the people themselves, so they won't feel like they're being singled out and others won't treat them differently because they know about their condition. People should be given the opportunity to settle into their new workplace and establish themselves on their own. Then they can let fellow colleagues know about their conditions when they feel it's appropriate. Even to this day, there are people at work who don't know about my Autism. But I prefer it that way, as I don't always like to make a spectacle of my condition. I only bring it up when I feel it's necessary.

In summary, what I'm saying is this. Employability should be decided on a person's work skills and (sometimes) their experience. Although an applicant still has the responsibility to tell employers about their Autism, how much it's made an issue of should be left up to them. They will know their limitations and requirements better than the employer, and they'll know how often they want their Autism brought up in conversation. It's up to the managers, employers, etc. to be prepared and offer additional help when, and only when, it's requested.

Some workplaces have the things I've mentioned in place already. But if all of them did, people with Autism would feel less concerned about their ability to be employed and the community would be a better place.

Anonymous

Things that are helpful: - Being able to **listen to music and have headphones** this helps me absorb myself in tasks and **minimise office distractions**.

- Having the option to move round the office to different desks and areas such as sofas as helps to refocus and helps with senses.

- Having **clear points of contact** for any queries or questions I have.

- Being involved at the heart of decisions about me and being listened to about what I need **rather than people assuming the types of things I need or being afraid to ask me**. Then things go undone and doesn't help me be productive as people close down rather than just asking.

- By listening to me as I always say I am open to questions but despite that people stereotype as aren't confident to ask so I end up being held back sometimes in roles on the basis of people's stereotypes. So instead businesses need to get confident at just asking! And **involve the individual** rather than meeting about them without them the expert!

- Misconceptions can also lead to people making ill thought out judgments about a person's performance and abilities instead speak to the person! Ensure a buddy is in place who is open to hearing direct answers to things. This is a big struggle as when adjustments go unimplemented frustration builds then get told off for saying how I feel about it or for saying I'm entitled to have something. So having a buddy to say how it is without having to worry about, "Oh no! What if I come across as too frustrated or emotive" can help prevent managers thinking someone is badly behaved when actually their just upset by not having their adjustments in place. **Buddies also help with office politics understanding**.

- **Perhaps get training in ASD awareness from the NAS but again don't make assumptions off the back of being told what autism is, as all people are different so should be consulted individually.**

Although sadly firms won't always allow this and is harder to fund with access to work cuts.

- Don't make assumptions about facial expressions sometimes people think I'm cross as I frown when reading but actually this is because one of my other learning disabilities I find reading hard so am just concentrating.

- **Don't assume we can't interact with people:** I'm in a client role and love it as actually if anything we care more about people and the best for them than sometimes non-autistics do.

- Hardest relationships are with team members and bosses as these are more intense than the business relationships as your team are around a lot! **So allowing us space to go somewhere else to work in the building can help ease the pressure.** Also allowing us to express concerns and how we feel without treating it as naughty can help us be honest about what we want to achieve in our career and air things that need to perhaps be changed.

Gareth Rayner – Autism in the Workplace:

Unconventional thinking in a conventional environment

Gareth is a recent graduate of Computer Science at the University of Kent.

Autism has always been a word that disrupts conversation– be it a lack of understanding of what autism is or that it's a “disability” and should be swept under the carpet, never spoken of again. So how does autism take its place in the workplace? It doesn't.

At least, that's the opinion from most modern workplaces – few employers seem to take the effort to understand autism and despite legislation to prevent autistic applicants being rejected due to their diagnosis, it can make the process much more difficult. However, as with all things, there's more than one refraction of the subject through the prism of perception – more than just a black and white answer.

Autism in the Application

Applying for jobs, in my own experience, I find myself learning about the interviewers rather than the company. Before even meeting them, I try to craft a mask in order to give the best impression – as most would do. At the interview, nerves often get the better of me and this mask begins to warp, showing cracks. So when the interview begins, most can see the attitude I adopt, the mask I craft always honest to myself but selective to the situation. However they can also see the cracks and things slip through... This can cause different reactions, from disbelief to amusement, though more than once the word “unprofessional” has been included in a rejection.

Some employers look past it, concentrating on what I've demonstrated rather than the mistakes – after all, nerves are natural. I'm treated as a "normal" person. Others politely and often with fake sincerity try to explain that I interviewed well but I'm just "not what they're looking for". Some try their best to understand and smile, stating the fateful words "This just isn't the place for you". Oddly (or not), I'm more offended by that last reaction. That's rejection however – and there's no good method even if the potential applicant is autistic or not. Still, there are better ways to reject someone – for me, I'd rather be told straight. Then there are the successful applications – but even then, you're a risk. **No matter the behaviour, autism seems to colour employer's perceptions more than they'll admit.** During applications, autism can make a frightening task that much more difficult, especially when companies reduce potential employees to facts and figures.

Autism in the Environment

When an application is successful, the trials often don't end once the contract is signed but it's the time when I can put the advantages my autistic traits provide to the road and get some traction. So what's the most important thing about the first day?

The team. The people. This isn't always the case– there are environments where they just expect you to do your job and for someone autistic, this is a lot easier. However in other workplaces, particularly in industries such as computing, employers are often more concerned with how well you integrate.

So the first day... that's when the masks are dusted and shuffled, ready for the poker game of "I'm new." How integration happens doesn't bother most employers, though it does concern other team members –

being several people at once to different people isn't normal social behaviour. My first days on the job involve adapting or creating masks, resulting in a flexible identity to use – though this can take several months to polish. Even so, you can't get along with everyone and I'm often particularly sensitive to rejection from others during this time. As such, I find I'd prefer my employers understand at this point as too often I'm criticised for being chatty, regardless how much work is completed. Once the social aspect becomes easier, there's the job. This is usually easier and something that I tend to enjoy but I've found in my experience that some employers can make this difficult.

As I am, I'm fairly honest and slow to get traction but frequently a perfectionist. Depending on the job, this can be ideal but an element of playing fast and loose with the truth is too often involved in the workplace and working quickly is something managers like. This is usually where friction develops for me – no matter how I adapt, I'm stubborn with my own beliefs and this can mean I become disobedient. I can be too honest or I take too long at a job and nobody understands that what I've made is so polished you can see your expression in it. So this is an area I believe employers need to have more understanding – from my knowledge, a lot of people on the spectrum have their own ways of accomplishing tasks and, if left to do so freely, end up achieving better results. Employers find that very hard to understand and I have once had to leave a job because of it.

Disclosing Autism

So after all of this, what is my opinion on disclosing autism to employers or in the workplace? **The frank answer is that I tend not to. Officially written down, the condition escalates as those higher up in the hierarchy see the dreaded word and pass judgement.** My usual tactic is to let my employers judge for themselves – let them witness what I can do and how I do it and only disclose it to a few if I feel they really need to know the reasons for what I do. This tactic has a failure rate however... and it can be high. It would

be simpler and easier to be able to disclose that I'm autistic and explain what that means. This is where employers would benefit from knowing more about autism and would certainly help prevent over-reactions. Autism doesn't define me; it just means I follow different paths to most. After all, there's a reason my first name on the application form is "Gareth".

Craig - Working with Autism

My name is Craig, I'm 35 years old and have a diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome. I've been exceptionally lucky in that my condition has actually helped me find a niche for my employment.

Like many people who register high on the spectrum I often find that I view the world slightly differently to other people, often much more simplistically, but sometimes I'm aware of far more of the detail than others.

In my role as a software developer this has been quite a useful tool. On the down-side, I frequently find it really hard to understand new programming concepts. However, when it comes to building an interface for people to use I'm much more capable than most to recognise what's confusing and what feels natural to an end-user.

I only received my diagnosis a year and a half ago so understanding how Autism affects me in the workplace is still an on-going process for me. From my late teens to early twenties I've been variously treated and medicated for extreme anxiety and depression. Having a diagnosis of Autism has made such a wonderful difference to how I view my mental health and outlook on the world.

One of the most tangible benefits I've felt is in the work-place. I no longer feel so angry at myself for being able to pick one thing up far quicker than others, whilst finding something apparently similar being permanently out of my reach. This has really helped me focus my efforts in my career towards more attainable goals.

For the past 17 years I've been a generic 'Web Software Developer', being responsible for all aspects of making programs, from gathering requirements, designing databases, configuring security systems to constructing the front-end (the bit the user actually sees and interacts with).

By understanding my strengths and weaknesses and how my condition directly affects them I've realigned my career path towards a focus on the front-end. Since making this realisation a year or so ago, my daily

anxiety of going to work has lifted considerably. I still struggle with the noise and social interactions required to hold down a full time position but by being confident that I'm capable of the entirety of my role rather than being strong in some areas and not others, I can face these challenges much easier.

As well as making internal changes to my outlook on working, receiving a diagnosis has given me the confidence to discuss my challenges with my employer. I hope that some of the really simple adjustments that have been made for me may be useful for others.

- I offset my hours from 9:00 - 17:30 to 09:30 – 18:00. This small change means I have less traffic to deal with on my commute in the mornings and so I can concentrate better when I arrive.
- I moved to a quieter part of the office so that the background noise of the sales team was not so intrusive (I have a lot of trouble filtering out noise, especially voices).
- I got my employer to agree to give me a reserved parking space. This way I can spend my lunch break in my car where it's quiet and I can give my internal 'social interaction batteries' a chance to recharge for the afternoon.

Even with these adjustments in my attitude and working environment, I still find it extremely difficult to hold down a career at times. My urge is all too often to escape to solitude and away from working to timescales and complex specifications. However, by understanding that I'm not perfect but I have real worth in my role I still make it into work each day, and when I have a good productive day at work it still feels great.

Jack Welch

Employment and Disability: An Insoluble Barrier?

A 22-year old graduate in English and Creative Writing, Jack has been an active advocate for causes in greater inclusivity of people with learning disabilities in society and for young people to have a role in decisions that affect them. Working with charities like Mencap and Ambitious about Autism, he has a great motivation in looking at how lives for people with disabilities can be improved, as well as a pleasure in meeting the many inspiring people wanting to make a difference too.



His interests beyond social action include current affairs and politics, mixed with reading and travelling for relaxation.

Throughout my education, where I was placed for that entire period in a comprehensive setting, it is from hindsight that that having the support mechanisms tailored for your needs is a much easier request compared to what is needed in transition to adulthood. Whether it may be assistance in the classroom or extra time in examination, those provisions change somewhat in employment, but access as an adult is a more daunting prospect. As a 22 year old graduate from university, which sadly still stands as a limited opportunity for many of those diagnosed with a learning disability; the assumption may be I have no exceptional considerations for employers to take into account. I am perfectly mobile and with sufficient communication skills that would not need close monitoring.

However, the process of applying for roles can often become a draining process in itself. For many graduate vacancies, some roles require shortlisted candidates to attend assessment centres and partake as any other

person in the various tasks throughout the day. Not only having to travel outside of your home area, you will be thrown into group exercises with complete strangers. For many autistic people, such an idea like this will immediately cancel their potential out of the process, whereas I tried to feel more able in coping with such a challenge. What I was most regretful of was when in an assessed interview, I had only 15 minutes to plan a response to a scenario which would form the basis of a test by interviewers. If I had perhaps spoken up that I needed more time or found processing new information, as well as responding, in such a short space of time beyond what I can excel at, than perhaps I may have stood a better chance of success.

Returning back to hindsight, it is easy to recognise now that the jobs market is a hostile field in comparison to the care received in education. Being on the mild autistic bracket can make it more difficult to declare what may look like your 'limitations' as opposed to going into an environment where you are equal among the others, with an equal right for consideration. It is the job of recruiters to emphasise the desire for inclusivity and how they believe having the skills of someone with a learning disability can benefit an organisation.

Beyond having adjustments or being viewed as 'high maintenance', your contributions and talent that are on offer are greeted with open arms, regardless of the means to make that a success.

Across the UK, a disproportionate number of people with learning disabilities are currently in employment, with just 7% of adults according to the Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities with a full or part time role. For autistic people, that figure counts as little as 15%. It stands as a scar in society which those with more disadvantages than most in life, many employers are just not clearly equipped to facilitate the adjustments of a person with additional needs. More than that though, both teachers and employers are not sufficiently accounting for the further demands when employment brings a possibility of greater independence for a young adult just starting life in work, but the many situations attached to that. From responsible management of wages to finding a work-life balance, the pastoral care of those with learning disabilities are more serious when they have moved away from home and adapting to a new routine in a workplace.

From my own experiences, I like to think myself as adaptable and comfortable within a fast-paced work environment. My typical requests for those that manage me, like not loading excessive tasks when previous ones are still incomplete or sending work documents in an electronic format so I may be able to process them in my own time and if working from home feel to me appropriate adjustments which should create a conducive situation that will benefit all parties in the long term. Equally, it is easy to imagine yourself burdening what could be an already over-stressed and rushed colleague to support on a personally tailored level.

Being in work is the principle of pushing yourself further and to bring new skills that advance your working life, but when it is easy to feel discriminated by employers or faced with prospects of working in both low skilled and low paid roles, the impression of employers not wanting to expand their diversity of workforce can only be intensified. In a Masters dissertation from a former school teacher and adult volunteer in projects I am involved with, her focus on barriers to employment for those with learning disabilities in forms of welfare, bullying and physical capacity. Action on all sides by government to employers can change this – it is not as steep to embrace inclusivity as it may seem and when the potential is not undermined by the disabling factors in disability. An environment which hosts employees from all backgrounds can breakdown those perceptions which poisons society today. Until then, employers will never know of the real assets brought to the development of their organisations.

Morag Fraser: Autism and Adjustments

Morag graduated with an MA in Literary Studies from the University of Glasgow in 2005 and has since meandered between teaching, sales work and Bookselling. She can now be found working at the Careers Centre at the University of St Andrews as Student Connections Facilitator.



Diagnosed at 29 with Aspergers Syndrome, she is beginning again as an Aspergirl. Every day is an education, and Morag openly shares her experiences through her blog, sharing to aid self-reflection and increase awareness of Women and Aspergers to all who will listen, amongst lengthy diatribes on Film, TV and Comics.

Having gotten my diagnosis later in life, every day has been a learning process. Trying to understand my own needs in general has been difficult, least of all expressing them. In trying to apply this at work I have been equally plodding along.

People do have some pre/misconceptions of what someone with ASD is like – nominally they look to what examples they have spotted in the media; predominantly masculine, good at numbers, bad at people, emotionless. That certainly is not the case with me – numbers and I have a mutual loathing for one another. I like people, but in small groups, ideally speaking one at a time. If anything I am far too sensitive full stop, feeling more and more like a Betazoid in Star Trek, with my mood mirroring that detected around me. It's new to others as well, which is rough – women with Aspergers have a SOLID game face. To the point where some don't believe you, until you publicly flip out and go mute and scare the bejeezus out of people.

Policies around reasonable adjustments are left truly vague, with no examples of what this might relate to for anything other than physical ailments. The legislation they feed from is equally so, so with “Invisible Illnesses” there really isn’t much in the way of reference points. A good chair is fine, but it really doesn’t go far in reducing anxiety or stress, nor does it stave off a meltdown triggered by being over stimulated and painfully sensitive to sensory issue.

I have been very lucky, in that I have a manager and director who have been wholly supportive, not just generally, but in helping me to suss things out. Trying different things, learning to express myself in order to get to what might actually work have only come through conversations. With ASD, though two people may have similar side effects or tics, no two people are alike. I didn’t know what might be helpful or unhelpful, I didn’t understand, so how could they be expected to. Conversations and being able to speak freely has been massively important. The solutions I have in place have been very much collaborative in foundation. Being comfortable with speaking up about this is also challenging, so ensuring that you have someone consistently to talk to, and also who is willing to listen and learn alongside you is important. Just because they know someone with Autism, or have worked with Aspies before does not mean they know you and how your Autism affects you. What works for one is not universally effective, sometimes even the opposite.

I have also had support from a local Autism charity, who were kind enough to come in and run a session about Aspergers and work for my office. When you work closely with colleagues, or in an open plan situation (not ideal – too many people, voices, sounds, smells, lights) you sort of feel as though you need to settle into your Game Face. It’s one way of coping, but it takes a lot out of you and is asking for trouble. When I’m tired, or hungry, I’m more likely to boil over. You need to be ok, when things are not ok. And comfortable enough to find a safe space to cool off when things pile up. Your colleagues are naturally going to want to pitch in, help, or try to do what they think is helpful. If they understand what is going on, they are less likely to intercede and worsen the situation. I find being open about my AS makes sense; Neurally Typical folks scare easy.

By far, the best thing to do is to take each day as it comes, and try to plan for it. Think logically and bust down what you need to do into little steps. This works when dealing with new things. I had a great example of this in action. I have to go to a conference tomorrow. I was really worried about it, had no idea how I would manage. My Director suggested I speak to the organiser, so I sent an email. The person was really helpful. We worked through the day together, and thought about things in terms of logistics. She organised to meet me just ahead of the start, show me around so I could see the spaces. She has also made a quiet room available for me for the day, so that if I get overwhelmed I have somewhere to go that isn't me locked in a toilet. She also has arranged with the caterers to put aside a little bagged lunch, and planned out the whole day.

I suppose everything comes down to communication for me. Working life is so very different, until you have been in it, and can understand where you fit in, and what would make you feel more comfortable, it's really hard to put into words what you need. Something as simple as toys at your desk, being allowed space of your own, the ok to use headphones, considering flexible working – I get to work from home for part of the week. Being ok with not being ok, being ok with people knowing. Understanding yourself and being understood in turn makes a world of difference. It frees you up to get on with things, work and make a contribution.

Yes, work is made more stressful and anxiety-ridden by the way I'm wired. Adjustments don't need to be big. Simple things, little things make a world of difference. None of it is silly, there isn't a wrong answer really. Some things might be less feasible than others, especially if you are client-facing. But there is no harm in asking, trouble-shooting together. A 30 year old with a teddy bear on her knee? Not a good look. Fine now I am in a different role and any weepiness and bear grasping happens out of sight.

Conclusion

This is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to autism in the workplace. With at least 1 in 88 people now estimated to have some form of Autism Spectrum Disorder, and almost 30 million UK workers, that's over 3 million autistic people in the UK alone who either work, or are able to. Unfortunately, the latter is true far too often – only 15% of people with autism are currently in full-time work, despite the great benefits we can bring to the workplace. Beyond qualities such as high attention to detail, honesty, loyalty, working longer hours on average and punctuality, each person is different and can bring unique skills to the workforce – as the stories above have outlined.

It's important not to fit autistic people into a rigid box. Many of us are skilled in IT and computing, for example, but this should not be taken to define the entire spectrum – others can bring skills to academia, law, business, teaching, and many other areas too. Our skillsets and personalities are as varied as any other group of people – there really is no sector autistic people can't contribute to.

More needs to be done to raise awareness of autism in the workplace, especially since – with diagnosis rates having increased exponentially in the past 20 years, and the rate of autistic people attending university rising incredibly fast – companies will soon have many more people with autism applying to them, and hopefully working for them, than they have done.

Autistic people did (and still do!) exist in older generations, but went largely undiagnosed – millennial autistic people, by contrast, will have likely grown up with the diagnosis, understand it and themselves better, feel more comfortable discussing it, and not be afraid to ask for what they know they need to work at their full potential. Em