

Introduction

While I was researching my book *22 Things a Woman Must Know If She Loves a Man With Asperger's Syndrome* (2009) I discovered a strong recurring theme: the majority of adults with AS I spoke to had great difficulty earning a living. Most were on unemployment, welfare or disability; some were still living off their parents; others were surviving only because they were married and their spouse had a good job and health insurance. Many were self-employed, some successfully, but most in that category were jacks-of-all-trades scraping out a living through a variety of odd jobs. It became clear that there needed to be a comprehensive resource book listing all the factors involved in determining whether or not an employment experience is successful for both parties—employer and employee—and providing strategies for reaching that elusive goal.

After extensive research, interviews and living with Aspergers, I've come to the conclusion that there are *cultural differences* between those with the syndrome and those without. Those differences are felt most keenly in the workplace where a person is essentially held captive for a large portion of their day. Differences in communication, different physical needs, different needs in instructions and supervision, different outlook on time constraints; when you add in to the mix the person with AS' social anxieties and their independent spirit there is a lot of potential for failure. Yet, those with Aspergers possess some extremely useful, important, creative and marketable skills that employers are missing out on. Likewise, employers hold the paychecks and those are what people with AS are largely missing out on. With the autistic population on the rise the way that it is there's going to have to be some kind of compromise. Times are tough, and while the economy of people with Aspergers has always been bad, it's just going to get worse in a competitive job market. It is thought that over 85% of people with AS are without fulltime employment. That is an outrageously high percentage. This situation is bound to have dire consequences on the health and security of the individuals affected, as well as their families and their communities.

This book is a resource to help employers accommodate this growing population, and for this growing population to find and keep gainful employment. The only way that we can do that is to know what our strengths are and use them productively. A lot of us with Aspergers don't always realize what our strengths are because we are told throughout our lives that these characteristics are flaws—or worse we receive mixed messages. For example, we are told to work hard and when we do, we fail because of our social skills. We also need to know where we are sabotaging our own best interests.

Employers and corporations have been going down a certain path for a long time now. With cost-saving techniques being implemented, whether in the form of lay-offs, cramped open-plan offices, energy-efficient fluorescent lights in windowless rooms, or no fully-subsidized health care plan, things are becoming less secure, less pleasant for all. The rise of stringent hiring procedures and screening in the form of personality tests has given rise to an atmosphere of conformity and play-it-safe behaviors. As one AS interviewee described it: *"Welcome to the Borg, Resistance is Futile."* I think it is safe to say that for many the situation has us feeling a little dehumanized, like cogs in a wheel,

and that's bad for non-ASD people, but even worse for AS people who are socially and environmentally sensitive; who have a hard time coloring inside the lines or thinking inside the box.

This book looks into all aspects of employment— because going to work isn't just about work. It's about what you wear, what you eat, what your environment looks like, what it feels like, how your boss behaves, how your coworkers treat you. There's so much more to a job than what the tasks are. Most people with Aspergers would just like to do the work and go home, but it's not that simple. I wish I could say I have the magic formula to ensuring a harmonious experience for all, but people are people and is it very difficult to mandate human behavior except in its most obvious and extreme forms. Much of the difficulties we will discuss are subtle in nature—subtle but insidious at times, and with real and often serious consequences. It is very important to recognize our differences and to become aware of some of the injustices this population has experienced, from ostracizing to verbal abuse to physical assault on the job, often with management turning a blind eye to these events because of inherent prejudice towards those who are different.

Aspergers Syndrome: An Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism is not a disease; it is a neurological disorder that is now largely considered to be the result of genetic and environmental factors. While there is much debate over exact cause, one thing is certain: there is no doubt that the number of people affected by autism has risen dramatically. In just under two decades, prevalence has grown from one in 10,000 to one in 150 (CDC 2009). Only some of this increase is due to changes in when and how autism is diagnosed. These numbers include everyone on the *autism spectrum*, from the more severe and obvious classic autism, to the milder form known as Asperger Syndrome (AS). AS is an autism spectrum disorder (ASD). It means that someone has autistic qualities but that they are not as severely affected; they are on the “higher end” of the spectrum.

You can find the clinical description of Aspergers taken from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Edition, Text Revision (DSM-IV) at the back of this book, but it's not really going to bring it to life for you in human terms. Generally, people with Aspergers are highly intelligent, usually with an above average IQ. They frequently have savant skills or abilities in one or more areas. They are generally uncomfortable around people because of a fight-or-flight reaction to social contact that can make them seem anti-social, unfriendly or intimidated. They often have difficulty communicating verbally, and are socially awkward. They sometimes talk to themselves or echo what has been said to them. They may suffer bouts of mutism and shyness. Conversely, if they are talking about a subject they are interested in they can speak at great length and because they have difficulty understanding social cues, may go on when no one is really interested. There are physical hallmarks of AS, such as low muscle tone or poor posture, and trouble with eye contact. The reasons for all these things will be discussed in this book. It is important to mention that while Aspergers is often called the ‘geek syndrome’ that's not always the way a person with AS appears,

they may appear quite cool at times, attractive, artistic; they may just seem quirky or eccentric. It presents differently between individuals and also between genders.

Dr. Barbara Nichols, founder of the Southern Arizona Association of Adult Aspergers further describes it for us in easy to understand terms:

“Aspergians usually want to be social but find it nearly impossible to figure out how to behave in a social setting or how to maintain social relationships. They have trouble reading and understanding body language, facial expressions, voice tones, or idioms. It is as if they were from an alien culture and were never taught the meaning of subtle gestures and nuances of conversation. They can't figure out the rules of engagement in a social exchange. It is awkward for them to jump into a conversation and they report that they can't figure out how to add to the discussion without taking it off the track. Add to the above list of characteristics a long list of symptoms such as anxiety, depression, obsessive compulsive disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, tic disorders, and learning disabilities, and you are getting closer to what it is to be an Aspergian. They struggle with sleep, eating, digestive, and sensory problems, all of which make melding into the social environment difficult. In addition, many, if not most, Aspergians had been bullied in school and have trauma-related disorders as a result. Most often, they are rejected, or worse, made fun of in the work place and in school. Loneliness is their constant companion. Asperger's has its advantages. (They) can hyperfocus on one topic and have a tenacity that is matchless. They can store huge amounts of information, learn languages easily, and are talented scientists, musicians, technicians, and historians. While they are not comfortable with people, they love information. Aspergians are in good company. Albert Einstein, Alexander Graham Bell, Thomas Edison, and Sir Issac Newton, just to name a few, are now thought to have had Asperger's syndrome. More recently, actor Dan Aykroyd has announced that he has been diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome. Once they have learned that they are not inferior, but rather exquisitely different, they begin to appreciate themselves and their considerable talents. The culture at large has not accepted them as yet. Finding a niche in the world is what is needed and those lucky enough to find it excel and contribute significantly.” (2009)

Despite these positive traits, people with AS often have difficulty obtaining and keeping jobs, While there are no exact figures possible, unemployment rates for those with ASDs are thought to be between 75% and 90%. The main reasons boil down to:

- Awkward social skills
- Difficulty communicating
- Environmental sensitivity
- Not being able to utilize their natural strengths and inherent interests.

In the workplace “their failure to adhere to social rules often results in ridicule, aggression or exclusion” (Hendrickx 2009) until they are literally driven out—either fired

or ostracized until life at work becomes unbearable and they quit. Consequently, many with AS have a patchwork quilt for a resume: an inordinate number of jobs, gaps between jobs, or a long history of self-employment in one or even several fields. Yet, this kind of track record can be a boon for both employer and AS employee, for a varied history usually makes for a wide variety of useful skills. It is important that a potential employer does not assume that this history stems from a lack of desire to work. There may not be a harder-working segment of the human race. The AS person simply may not have had:

- a) the diagnosis and understanding of AS to know what they needed from an employer, or
- b) an employer who was willing to listen and to make the easy but crucial adjustments to accommodate them.

This book will help the person with AS understand and ask for what they need and it will show the employer how easy it is to give them what they need—which often involves doing *less* rather than more.

More than fifty adults with Aspergers were interviewed for this book over a seven month period, hailing from all over America, and as far away as Japan, Ireland, England, France and Australia. They were asked to describe in their own words their work experiences; their successes and their failures; and what they felt they needed to succeed in employment. They all had very similar experiences and wishes, regardless of whether they barely made it through high school or had postgraduate degrees; no matter what color their collar was. In addition to this anecdotal information, many others were contacted: psychologists, autism 'cause-and-cure' researchers, government disability benefit agencies, university disability offices, as well as founders of Asperger education/work-study programs. They provided information on the latest research, statistics, laws, rights, programs and other such information pertaining to all aspects of Asperger syndrome, most notably, employment. I would like to thank all of them for their participation, with a special note of thanks to Dr. Nichols.