



Intelligent, but doesn't quite "get it".

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Have you experienced anyone in your workplace who fits this description – 'intelligent, but doesn't quite "get it"'? Perhaps this person seems overly pedantic or sticks to rules and regulations without contextualising the situation. Or, do you sometimes feel that you can do your job well, but you don't quite fit in and you don't quite know why? It is possible that you, if you feel this way, or your employee might have Asperger Syndrome (AS) or experience similar difficulties; difficulties, which actually can be made easier to cope with if you and those around you understand the condition?

Below are some possible identifiers of someone who has AS¹. These are only indicators and it is important to stress that an individual may exhibit some of these traits and not have AS and that each individual with AS will experience different elements of these indicators and in different combinations. It is probable, however, that they will experience an element from each of the three categories:

Communication

Difficulties in -

- engaging in or understanding 'small talk';
- understanding body language and facial expressions;
- understanding sarcasm, jokes, irony (those with AS might have a tendency to be very literal in their understanding);
- understanding verbal communication without corresponding verbal cues, for example: notes, diagrams.

Social understanding

Some people with AS could have some difficulty with the kind of social understanding that many others may take for granted, for example:

- experiencing empathy and understanding others;
- keeping eye contact;
- speaking untruths in order not to offend;
- understanding personal space;
- understanding social rules which are not based upon logic;
- understanding the complexities of inter-personal relationships.

¹ based on various research carried out by Simon Baron-Cohen, Uta Frith, Judith Gould, Francesca Happé and Lorna Wing



Flexibility of thought

Flexibility of thought is the ability to hazard a guess at the unknown, to cope with the unexpected, to act upon a whim. The sense of security brought on by the known can lead to the following:

- becoming obsessed with an interest, place or person;
- becoming anxious by change, spontaneity and unplanned events;
- experiencing difficulties in coping with the unknown (new people, new places, new situations);
- experiencing difficulties in remembering sequences without prompts, such as: diary, personal planner, alarm;
- experiencing difficulties in comprehending abstract concepts (e.g., 'formality', 'spontaneity', 'fun', 'anxiety');
- reluctance to use own initiative.

The results of having to deal with some of the above hurdles is that people with AS or similar characteristics can sometimes appear abrupt, absent-minded, aggressive, anxious, disorganised, eccentric, lost in their own world, rude, self-centred or thoughtless. As a consequence, some employees with AS, or similar, can experience a greater incidence of complaints and disciplinary procedures which could be a mystery to them, thus adding to their difficulties.

Whether a person actually has a diagnosis of AS or experiences the same hurdles, the most difficult aspect of this way of being is the lack of understanding of the people around them. AS is a lifelong condition and although people with AS might have some learning difficulties, such as dyslexia or dyspraxia, they are often of average or above average intelligence. Asperger Syndrome itself is not a learning disability, although it can present obstacles to aspects of social and communication learning. The difficulties lie in the lack of understanding the social nuances of communication and behaviour, dealing with unknown situations and people, problems in thinking through sequences of consequences or actions, inability in forming overarching concepts from detailed information, inability to see things from another's perspective, and dealing with sensory differences.

AS affects every individual differently. Every individual with AS has their own personality, their own strengths and weaknesses and they have their own difficulties to overcome – just like everyone else.

Like anyone, those with AS can have particular strengths and qualities and it is important to look at some of the attributes which someone with AS could bring to the workplace. These can be as follows:

- excellent memory;
- precision and attention to detail;
- mathematical and technical skills;
- a preference for following instructions and abiding by rules;
- sticking to structured programmes;



- direct, open and honest;
- discriminatory sense of hearing, vision, smell, taste and touch (People with AS can be either hyper-sensitive or hypo-sensitive. If they are hyper-sensitive then the senses can be more honed than usual and, therefore, sounds can seem louder, lights brighter, smells and tastes stronger; and touch keener; thus, the person can receive environmental information at a much greater intensity. If they are hypo-sensitive, they cannot process sensory input as effectively);
- reproduction, imitation and mimicry;
- high level of vocabulary; and
- dealing with projects which have a clear beginning, middle and end.

This means people with AS thrive in jobs which require precision and detail, such as accountancy, computing, engineering and architecture to name but a few. Because of the mathematical nature of music, they can also be quite musical. In addition, they can blossom in environments which provide clear structures and parameters and few unknowns.

What can be practically done to help these employees, who are quite often excellent at the technical component of their jobs? There are some suggestions on the page opposite.

With these strategies, hurdles can be overcome, anxieties and resultant absenteeism can be reduced and management time can be focused more on enabling and empowering the individual rather than disciplining them.

You will have noticed that this article has been written in a more bulleted form than a prosaic one. This is to make it easier for people with Asperger Syndrome to read if they happen to find a mass of words difficult to process. This is an example of a small and simple strategy that can be incorporated in every day working life to enable an employee with AS to give of their best.

If you feel that you have an employee who fits into this category, or if you feel that you might be experiencing some of these difficulties, it is important to seek support and information. The Baobab Centre would be pleased to discuss any issues you might have on this or related matters. Manar Matusiak, one of the Baobab Centre team, has worked in providing services for young people with Autistic Spectrum Disorders for the past 12 years and helped to set up the first transitional residential service for adolescents with autism in the north of England 7 years ago. Asperger Syndrome is classed as an Autistic Spectrum Condition, although it only affects higher-functioning individuals, as previously mentioned. More recently Manar has worked as Director of Personal and Professional Development for an organisation providing specialist care and education with a staff group of approximately 1,000, ensuring that staff who deal with the Autistic Spectrum have a clear understanding of the condition and that they have a clear knowledge of how to reduce the high anxieties that can ensue.



Tool	Example	Benefit
Planners Planning software	Diary Calendar PDAs Mobile phone reminders	Help to reduce anxieties brought on by not knowing what has been planned or when events are taking place
Lists	To do lists Shopping lists Daily task lists Aide-memoires Written instructions Written directions	Help to remind of tasks to be completed and in which sequence
Timers	Alarms on watches, mobile phones egg timers etc	Help to indicate when things start and when they end. This is particularly helpful if a person has difficulty stopping before a project or task has been fully completed
Training in communication	Understanding body language Understanding social communication, e.g., the differences of communicating in a meeting and at a party. Understanding how to 'soften' factual information/ communication, e.g., opening and closing of conversations, emails, letters etc	Enhances 2-way communication Helps social integration
Training for others to enable them to become aware of difficulties	Home Work Community	Helps reduce anxieties brought on by others' ignorance of difficulties Helps social integration
Training in understanding others		Helps to reduce anxieties brought on by not understanding others Helps social integration



Training in overcoming anxieties	Stress management Dealing with unplanned events Dealing with emergencies How to avoid and what to do about sensory overload	Helps to reduce anxieties
Training in transferring learning from one context to another		Helps reduce anxieties brought on by previously unexperienced situations

Suggested further reading

Attwood, T; 2006. *The complete guide to Asperger's syndrome*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Bogdashina, O; 2005. *Theory of mind and the triad of perspectives on autism and Asperger syndrome: a view from the bridge*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Edmonds, G and Beardon, L (Ed); 2008. *Asperger Syndrome and Employment. Adults Speak Out about Asperger Syndrome*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

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Frith, U; 1989. *'Autism': Explaining the enigma*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Happé, F; 1999; Autism: cognitive deficit or cognitive style? *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 3,6:216-222.

Wing, L and Gould, J; 1979. Severe impairments of social interaction and associated abnormalities in children. Epidemiology and classification. *Journal of Autism and Childhood Schizophrenia*. 9: 11-29.

