**Autism Employment**

*There is a will, we will find a way.*

When I started looking at this subject, the more I read the more I wanted to know. The topic has been an issue for me for so long, and I didn’t know why until our family’s and my autism spectrum traits were realised after our son’s diagnosis 2 years ago.

I am a stay at home Mum with 2 kids, a 3 year old neurotypical girl and a 5 year old lad on the spectrum. After his diagnosis, I gave up work and all short term plans of a career, to wait until he was well settled into primary school. In that time I have missed many aspects of my nursing and naturopathic calling, but was also relieved to not be daily plunged into the wolf’s den of working life. Yes, I found it very abrasive.

I loved working with clients, but found working with peers pretty tough. Usually I would make one good friend, and stick with them. Generally I found the social complexity bemusing, and not easy to navigate.

I have built a website called spectrumsquare.net, which is the beginning of a directory for ASD services, products and services. I am adding blog posts to the site, and also information that will hopefully be helpful.

The below was my exploration of autism spectrum disorders (ASD) in the work place, looking at spectrum traits as both challenges and strengths for employers and employees. At the diverse support needs at various points in people’s lives, and how unemployment can compound existing physical and mental health issues for those with ASD. Then how innovative programs are being created by both organisations and from those living with ASD, and how they can provide relevant skills and sustainable opportunities for prosperity and fulfilment.

It is a topic close to me. I want to offer my perspective as a self-diagnosed adult, and also as a mother who does not want her son to have to face the same challenges that I have. Additionally as an advocate for the children of my friends and family with ASD, who require the policy makers of today to predict their future pathways and create an easier path for them tomorrow.

There is a job to be done, thank you for starting it.

**Autism Spectrum In the Work Place**

Unemployment figures for those with an autism spectrum disorder have been suggested to be 35% to 85%, with consistently less hours worked and lower earnings than the overall population. These are bleak prospects for our unique and talented community, who offer many professional and personal skills and insights.

Many people on the spectrum can have difficulty in finding and maintaining stable employment. Either they don’t perform well at interviews; or if they do get a job it may be hard to keep, due to issues often not related to job tasks. Then some may find themselves being passed over for promotion, due to a lack of social and team skills.

ASD can also be an invisible disadvantage with a bundle of unseen challenges. There may be few physical signs so peers or managers may not predict potential issues, which may increase the chances of miscommunication and misunderstandings. In her book *Coming Out Asperger*, Jane Meyerding refers to this invisibility and offers that ‘people ask why we need accommodation, rather than what accommodation we need.’

Frequently in jobs, there are unintended differences between role descriptions and what is actually required to perform a position well. It may be that the tasks are straight forward, but rely on effective networking, relationship building or the selling of oneself, a product or philosophy.

**Finding Work**

In job adverts employers often state they are looking for a flexible team player who can multi task, while thriving under pressure. If you are on the autism spectrum, you may not relate to these skills and feel unsuitable and not even consider applying.

With my traits, when I see those statements; I assume I wouldn’t want to be there and that employers would see my style and approach as undesirable. I may be able to create a mask for the interview, but certainly not thrive long term or be seen as a success. It’s just not a good match.

Also one possible ASD trait is to not conform to socially accepted personal dress style, or have sensory issues with certain attire. This may be at odds with conventional ‘fitted’ clothes that are usually worn to an interview. Women in particular may be expected to present themselves as traditionally feminine, and there may be less flexibility around a preferred personal presentation.

It can also be difficult to answer why you left your last job. Was it due to bullying, a personality clash, overwhelm or sensory discomfort?  These issues are not easy to explain, and may not be understood or well received.

**Working with People, not Tasks**

Work has been one of my biggest challenges. From my first job I was diligently keen, and was praised for my efforts. However my social short falls always became an impediment, as I was not a ‘team player,’ and worked hard at *tasks* not socialising. I thought this was why you went to work; but then realised that Friday night drinks and lunchroom conversation was also important for productivity and conforming. Being socially motivated I wanted to connect, and always gave it a go.

My chatting attempts generally felt child like, until I ended up with one or two people talking about deeper things, not working the room with small talk. At times it worked, but mostly it didn’t. I either didn’t know what was expected of me; and if I did, I didn’t feel normal, witty, interested, clever, ‘cool’ or cynical enough. I was happy to stick with a little quieter crowd.

People cottoned on quickly, and I think my internal discomforts were uncomfortable for others also. I was often a target of exclusion or bullying, and generally left jobs when they became too socially uncomfortable. Every job I’ve been in.

**Tricky Spectrum Traits**

I have great compassion now for my efforts; and know that like others with ASD, I really did try hard to manage my overwhelm, stress, anxiety and social interactions. That I was fighting hard to manage my wobbly organisational skills and auditory processing delays and however else my brain is not typical. I was trying to read people and groups in complex unstructured situations, while being very aware of my shortcomings and attempting to navigate all of this with my employers and peers.

I tried to choose jobs where there was flexibility about how a task was done, so I could achieve expectations with my own processes. I didn’t drive so that reduced my options, and I didn’t want to take on high-pressure multi tasking roles. I only worked part time to ensure I had enough time to be replenish for work and myself. Open plan offices left me feeling over stimulated, and I aimed to work in environments where I could have sensory quiet so I could function and perform.

It’s then easy to state that some work places may present multiple barriers such as non-conducive physical, social, and sensory environments; and insufficient supports to manage any or all of these.

The anxiety of a new job may also reduce the ability to self regulate to comfortably manage the steep learning curve of new tasks, processes, organisational culture and structure. These factors may then be compounded by common ASD traits of rigidity, and not reading faces and unspoken social rules and cues well. They may also not understand what their employer or co-workers expect from them. Some with ASD, might find it difficult is to be able to manage organisation impacting deadlines and group prioritised tasks.

For some, reduced eye contact and social errors may be interpreted as rudeness, unfriendliness, or insubordination.   Possible outcomes of these and the complex interplays of individual traits can lead to misunderstandings and confrontations leading to formal complaints, disciplinary action, or even loosing a job. Painfully, these events are often unexpected and can come as a surprise; then unfortunately people may not have the skills or support to remedy or turn these events around.  This can lead to a devastating cycle of seeking employment, disappointment and rejection.

It’s tricky when initial success at a job may lead to heightened expectations from self and others, then possibly increase internal stress and overwhelm. The longer you are at an organisation, the more you see and experience the complexity of spoken and unspoken hierarchies and influencers. This may lead to a role becoming easier to manage, or get too much and lead to disappointment of another failure.

**Unemployed On the Spectrum**

When neurotypical (‘normal people’) loose their jobs, the long-term impact can be more ongoing unemployment with long-term earnings losses, and poorer job options. There can also be a reduction in psychological and physical health; with reduced coping abilities, social withdrawal, family disruption, and lower levels of their children’s outcomes and well-being. While reemployment lessens some of these consequences, it does not eliminate them.

These prospects would be the same for those on the spectrum, and possibly be compounded by the effects of life long discrimination. As these ongoing experiences can also have a significant negative impact on both mental and physical health. Moreover, associated stress responses can lead to unhealthy behaviours and addictions, which can further deteriorate health and employment outcomes.

Another layer to consider, is that many people on the spectrum already have a pre-disposition to anxiety and depression. This may be caused by a neurological susceptibility, or a lifetime of teasing, rejection and social isolation. Possibly both. This may result in low confidence, due to continually trying to be appropriate and not knowing how. Recurrent failed employment, could perpetuate and hasten an existing spiral of low self-esteem and unstable mental health.

A known social determinant of health, is wealth. Economic status has a very strong influence on physical and mental health outcomes. Furthermore, as 80% of the population with ASD move from youth to adulthood, public policy makers will need to create life span strategies that go beyond early intervention and school services. They must attempt to optimise employment skills, participation and success for individual and collective economical prosperity for improved health and wealth capacity.

Also there must be an attempt to identify and support an ageing underemployed group of self or late diagnosed adults, as they attempt to navigate the health system as they age and their health provision needs becomes greater and more complex. This must start with an affordable diagnostic process, in Australia this can currently cost $600 to $1000; an unacceptable barrier to accessing tailored and critical services. Also supporting sustainable housing opportunities, to ensure families and individuals that live with ASD have a secure base from which to create stable employment and social connections.

**Challenges and Needs Across the Lifespan**

Employment issues faced by individuals on the spectrum are different at every stage of life, diagnosis, self-awareness and career. The challenges and needs of an older self diagnosed adult, are different to that of a teenager at school preparing to select the recommended subjects to get into their desired university course or vocational training. To that of a young person getting their first job and negotiating terms, conditions and salary.

Career preparation can be a challenge for any teen, but may be made more difficult if you are a girl with a recent diagnose with possibly low social confidence and competence, having had little support for cognitive processing or organisational impairments. This may impact what they believe they are capable of, and diminish their personal dreams and vocational aspirations to below their actual ability.

If the teen gets into University, then they may require support to self manage their timetable and course deadlines, and also guidance as to know where and how to find companions to explore campus life and the new experiences it can offer. Some may find new worlds at this time, but others may need support to manage course expectations, stress and new social dynamics. It is key to keep them enrolled so they can achieve their goals and make their unique contribution.

The needs and supports for the young adult who was diagnosed young, may already be being met at a special support school, and are building skills for their next step of meaningful activity and inclusion. But where is this next step, what are the pathways to ongoing vocational and social participation? If the family are the key careers, how can they be fortified long term to support their child to achieve their best potentials and fulfilment?

Another early-diagnosed person, who is now a university graduate, may require guidance and skills to help them face numerous interviews and begin mapping their future career. Once a job is obtained, then support must continue so they *stay* employed and learn how to best manage social and organisational expectations and dynamics.

All of the above people, would have had varying levels of funding and supports from families, friends and services; which would lead to very different understandings of themselves, how they fit in the world and what to expect from it. Thus, all needing different types, intensities and frequencies of vocational and personal programs and interventions.

To start any successful career requires guidance and support from educators and families, to steer youth along complex and precise pathways to enter and thrive in any industry.   Then needed is flexible and mindful social and vocational support by employers, to cater to individual strengths and challenges, and compassionately foster personal best. This scaffolding is generally offered to those who are considered to be good future leaders; who may be calm, flexible, organised, liked, good networkers, ‘team players,’ and have the self belief to ask for this and more.

For the older or younger person with ASD, individual traits and a life of social or organisation rebuffs; does not always lead towards the path or benefits of organisational leadership programs. It is possible, but employment statistics tell of what many people with the challenges and traits of ASD generally experience.

The importance of a career in personal identity and happiness is individual, and it takes strength and an established autonomy to be able to comfortably manage our experience of someone asking ‘what do you want to be?’ or ‘what do you do?’ A high powered career is not a priority for everyone, but most people want to earn their way, contribute and engage in pursuits that bring them inspiration, fulfilment, and self-worth; at any level. Being positively appraised by our society makes it easier to feel good about our selves, and the earlier this starts the more resilience can be built.

It is imperative that those who enter the path of employment or meaningful activity, have responsive and considered supports to build the skills to achieve what motivates them and gives them fulfilment. We should all have the opportunity, choice and access at every life and diagnosis stage to participate in what we love.

**ASD Strengths at Work**

There are real and difficult challenges for many on the spectrum at work. I know I have had awful experiences and interactions, but I’ve had some great ones too. There is a population of ASD people doing great work in great places, and delivering unique and critical outcomes, and enjoying themselves. Everything is a double-edged sword, and some challenging ASD traits can be turned into tangible, valuable and constructive positives.

As our global economy leans towards instability and roles become more specialised; the detailed, determined and persistent traits that can come with ASD are a valuable and needed.

It is heartening and inspiring to know that many ASD traits are of great benefit in life and in the work place. The following traits discussed are based on typical clusters of qualities, however our spectrum community with all its unique individuals will offer much more than just these. All have different capacities and projections of education, employability and contribution. Strengths can be found in everyone, and they should be seen, utilised and celebrated.

One current employment trend is that people start and leave jobs quickly, in contrast to staying at a job for many years. This fast turn around does not oblige the employer of ongoing depths of knowledge and experience to support and nurture new and existing staff, processes and innovations. Some useful ASD traits remedy this, with people on the spectrum often being very loyal, reliable and persistent.

When I managed staff, I found fast turn around times and unreliability to be detrimental to productivity, but also to a cohesive sense of group goal and camaraderie. Even if it is sometimes difficult being in a group, sticking to a shared goal with a shared strategy and seeing it through can offer fulfilment and connection. Connection can create a sense of belonging, which can enable people to feel important and a belonging.

Longevity in a role, also adds advantage to other possible spectrum traits of having a big learning capacity, great memory and detailed factual knowledge. The longer people stick around with deep, thorough and critical information; outcomes can be achieved faster and in context of past successful and unhelpful strategies. So when someone knows why existing processes exist, they can either build more with knowledge or modify them with understanding.  This may enhance other possible strengths of accurate visual and pattern detection and an ability to identify errors. Seeing anomalies is critical to remedy current problems or prevent future issues.

An underlying enthusiasm, conscientiousness and a professional attitude goes a long way at work. What a team member may lack in social skills, can be greatly counteracted by always being there and positively committing to group values or tasks. Being able to focus for extended periods of time, also greatly enhances productivity and shows a dedication that can be greatly esteemed. If you readily and diligently work with your boss or group to achieve gaols, good thoughts can come your way.

Some jobs can also be routine and repetitious, and some on the spectrum like this. They may not get bored or frustrated, and again contribute and stick with the collective agenda. Working 9 to 5, with it’s order and predictability can be a place to ease into and thrive.

Those with ASD can be considered different for their lack of interest in office politics, gossip or pre-occupation with non-work issues. But this can also be a welcome change. Focusing on tasks and not people, can sometimes work to everyone’s advantage.

As with all people, if you find a niche to settle and develop in; and are supported for your unique strengths and challenges, the fulfilment and pride that comes with engaging in your chosen meaningful activity can be life changing. Spectrum employees can be positive, refreshing, reliable and well regarded for their unique and beneficial strengths and contribution.

**Vocational Support Programs**

Discrimination in isolation can hinder a person’s professional access and progression, which may lead to economic, social, health and emotional issues. Which is what many people in the ASD community have had to manage alone.

Interestingly it is said that personal discrimination negatively impacts self-esteem, yet being in a group that is discriminated against, increases it. So providing an often isolated community with a place to be apart of a group, may not only assist their employment opportunities, but also their connectedness and whole well being.

The merits of any society are how its treats it’s most vulnerable, and the supports currently available to many marginalised people is not a good reflection of the potential capacities and priorities of many countries. Governments globally are trying to reduce services, and it is often those with the least power and influence that are further estranged from equal opportunity and access to fair inclusion.

Along with current limited employment opportunities and vocational supports for those with ASD, there is also a lack of literature and studies to guide best practices to remedy this. So the existing small number of services may not be able to draw on a broad body of information to guide how to best deliver evidenced based interventions.

There are however many economic, cultural and moral benefits to have a valuable population earning an income, rather than being dependant welfare recipients. To facilitate long term and rewarding employment, vocational support programs must play a key role in predicting issues along the life and career span; and be accessible, flexible and individualised in their provision of needs assessments and support services. Their commitment and expertise must use evidenced based approaches to plan and facilitate greater capacity, prospects and outcomes for their participants.

It is appropriate to consider eligibility of access to employment programs. If you have an ASD diagnosis, you may be funded to participate. However if you are a self diagnosed adult or have been labelled too high or too low ‘functioning,’ your eligibility for any services may be slight. The issues of those considered ‘high functioning,’ may not be recognised by unskilled health professionals, and may have to compete with those whose who appear to have a greater need.

So individual and program outcomes of employment services, would be optimised if they were tailored to specific and all ASD life stages and diagnostic levels; in suitable locations and formats that are responsive and accessible. Mental health, physical health, housing and social supports should all be assessed and addressed. Supporting life style and self-care practices could optimise whole person capacity, functioning and thus, employability.

Also improving employability is personal and emotional awareness. Reflecting on how we are experienced by others can be difficult to face or do, but it is imperative. Knowing your own skills and challenges, gives everyone useful insights on how to manage their conduct at work. Emotional intelligence does work at work, and everywhere else. All people could benefit from being taught to reflect on their own decisions, motivations, reactions and interactions.

Considering questions such as what is okay to say when and to whom, what inspires me and where do I actually want to work? What suits my sensory and psychological needs and how can I manage these when faced with stress, bullying or conflict? How do I manage my anger, when can I be rigid and how can I relax outside of work?

To create cost effective delivery; intensity of support could match individual need. So as competency increases, contact decreases. Though also being aware that new situations arise, so educators could stay accessible and responsive to changing needs.

Modes of delivery could also be responsive or scheduled online modules, individual face to face or phone sessions, or group presentations. Addressing general employment topics such as tax, industrial relations, interview skills and employee rights. To clearly highlight conventions of work place culture and teach conflict resolution, public speaking, meeting conduct and presenting may also be of use. To explore how a person might approach a colleague or manager about an issue or idea, and how to find out and navigate organisational processes.

These modules could also be adapted to be a resources for employees wanting to understand and make accommodations for spectrum employees.

Self-managing peers lead groups could be established for support, information and problem solving.   Creating mentoring opportunities for successful and skilled spectrum adults, to share and build on collective wisdoms and learning. The ‘I Can Network’ is doing this for youth, and this model could be used to support and inspire more from within the ASD community. Self-determination and advocacy is persuasive and credible for effecting personal change and group influence.

Theory of mind has been asked of those with ASD, but nuerotypicals could also get into the thoughts and experiences of those with ASD to understand individual needs and strengths, to create group and individual guidance and guide work place accommodations.

**Innovative Solutions**

Larger autism organisations like Autism Speaks and the Autism Research Institute are creating online employment programs, and if credible and globally scalable, partnerships with these could be cost and outcome effective.

Supporting engagement in existing organisations is vital, but there is also the possibility of creating entrepreneurial and inventive enterprises. New business ventures from those on the spectrum or their carers, is one way to build capacity and prosperity.

There are some not for profit organisations creating sustainable employment for those on the spectrum, by using their innate talents. One is Aspiritech, a Chicago-based company that trains people with autism as testers for software development companies.

Specialisterne or the specialists, is a global venture based in Copenhagen, who teaches people on the spectrum to be consultants that are contracted to clients on an hourly basis for data entry work, filing, general office tasks and assembly work. This was created a man whose son has ASD, and wanted to create a viable opportunity for him and others.

In Melbourne, TestIT is a software testing firm that offers IT testing services, whose employees may benefit from long-term employment opportunities for those with high functioning autism of Asperger’s.

In North Carolina, Extraordinary Ventures (EV) Inc. was started by parents of young adults on the spectrum. They pooled funds and bought together recent university graduates and entrepreneurs interested in creating businesses. They rebuilt a struggling start-up, into five effective ventures that include a university laundry service, a transit bus cleaning operation, a conference and meeting centre, scented candle making and office solutions service.

Associated with EV is AutonomyWorks, a business of 40 adults with autism who creates websites, provide quality assurance, analytics and database reporting. They say they do this more quickly, thoroughly and affordably than their competitors. Probably so.

Frustrated by long waiting lists for services and few job opportunities, a parent John D’Eri created Rising Tide Car Wash. Founded as a work place for his son and other ASD adults, he says that he sees the ASD traits of being good at detail as very valuable in their job of detailing cars. Other parents Ray and Janet Steffy of Kansas, helped create Poppin’ Joe’s Gourmet Kettle Korn. It is a popcorn business that is run by their son with downs syndrome and ASD.

The merits of any society is how its treats it’s most vulnerable, and there is now the interest and opportunity to create new programs and opportunities to harness the strengths and talents of the ASD community, and those who collaborate with them. We cannot wait for society or organisations to be ready to accept and accommodate spectrum traits. We need to offer them and those with ASD clear evidenced based pathways of mutual reward and tangible strategies for success and prospering. The will is there, now is the time to create the way. The many benefits for all will be surprising and wonderful.

Inspired and able,

Gabrielle

Melbourne

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