

Within the Realm of Employment

By Lois Rosenwald (revised)

Characteristics of Individuals with Asperger Syndrome or High-Functioning Autism

SOCIAL SKILLS

- P Unaware of the unwritten rules for social conduct (i.e. when the boss enters the room, you should try to look busy)
- P Lack of appreciation for social cues (a nod and a smile may mean a 'job well done')
- P Difficulty with interpreting emotions in others (i.e. an angry expression)
- P Self-centeredness (*not* selfishness)
- P Preference for being alone
- P Difficulty interacting with others and limited desire to interact with others
- P Social interactions are generally purpose-oriented (i.e. 'What time is the meeting?')
- P Stiffness and abruptness (lack of subtlety)
- P Lack of appreciation for personal space (may inadvertently stand too close for others' comfort)
- P Body language: limited gestures, limited or inappropriate facial expression, clumsy or inappropriate body posture, poor eye contact
- P Social anxiety; may experience nervousness in groups

LANGUAGE

- P Conversation may follow 'scripts' and often the person has an 'agenda' (i.e. favorite topic, or have a goal of obtaining information)
- P Trouble clarifying or resolving misunderstandings
- P Make irrelevant comments
- P Delays in answering questions
- P Difficulty with conceptual interpretations, expressions, puns, teasing and joking, (i.e. take words at their literal face value)
- P Overly formal speech (i.e. "yes, I will be sure to accomplish that" rather than a simple "OK")
- P Pronounced voice and speech patterns (e.g. too loud or too soft, monotone,

exaggerated pronunciation, etc.)

P Auditory discrimination and distortion; auditory distraction and focus (i.e. may not distinguish a voice among extraneous noise, may be distracted by minor auditory sounds, etc.)

INTERESTS AND ROUTINES

- P Can have highly developed knowledge in the realm of specific interests
- P Interests can be focused and relatively narrow (i.e. types, models and years of cars, train time schedules)
- P Interests often center around the gathering and cataloguing of information
- P Often prefer solitary pursuits and hobbies (e.g. computers, collections)
- P Preference for routines to create predictability and manage anxiety
- P Difficulty with initiative, particularly initiating activities outside the usual routine

MOTOR DIFFICULTIES

- P Locomotion (e.g. can appear clumsy, have an unusual gait)
- P Eye-hand coordination and manual dexterity
- P Poor sense of balance
- P Motor planning (coordinating a series of movements, i.e. walking up stairs)

COGNITIVE STYLE

- P Difficulty conceptualizing and appreciating the thoughts and feelings of another person
- P Have an extensive vocabulary and knowledge of facts
- P Believe that others are thinking what they are thinking
- P Excellent memory for information, often trivia and details
- P May have strategies for reading and math that are out of the ordinary but effective
- P Have a visual style of thinking
- P Difficulty with flexibility in thinking
- P Perfectionistic

SENSORY SENSITIVITIES

- P Feeling of being bombarded by various stimuli – could be visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile (or all)
- P Need for 'down time' (i.e. may need more than one coffee break)

- P Anticipation anxiety (i.e. more anxious before something happens than during the event itself)

Knowledge about the specific issues and challenges people with Asperger's syndrome or high functioning autism face can help us think more critically about the implications for:

- Ü **Job development**
- Ü **Job placement**
- Ü **Job training**
- Ü **Job coaching**
- Ü **Employer/co-worker support**

Some things to consider about a job environment:

- P Size of the building
- P Number of people present throughout the day
- P Number and types of social interactions expected
- P Predictability of the routine (or lack of a routine)
- P Level of supervision and direction available
- P Availability of a 'quiet space'
- P Pace of the work (i.e. too fast and frantic, expectation to multi-task)
- P Inherent noise and activity level in the environment (e.g. 'hustle and bustle')
- P Clarity of the expectations, tasks needed to be accomplished
- P Level of the need for dexterity, good motor planning skills

Considerations in job appropriateness:

- P Does the job description involve the skills the individual excels in?
- P What skills does it require that he/she does not excel in? How often will he/she need to use these skills? Is help available?
- P What is the 'career ladder' attached to the job? Would the individual be suited for the prospective promotions? (i.e. the current position may involve a lot of individualized work, but the next step on the career ladder would involve a great deal of staff supervisory skills)
- P Would the individual be bored or feel he/she is not living up to their potential in this job?
- P Does the job pay a salary that the individual can live on independently? If not, can it be used as a training ground for a better position that could?
- P Is the time of day or location of the job a factor? (i.e. if the individual is not an early riser, would it be difficult for him/her to get to the job on time? Or is the job so far away and not on a public transportation route so that he/she would need to depend on relatives to get to work?

Assets of an individual with AS or H-F autism in the workplace:

- P Honesty/integrity
- P Desire to please
- P Will always follow a set routine (i.e. be on time)
- P Will perform consistently
- P Will not be delayed by social distractions
- P Learn the job quickly, and remember details
- P Perfectionistic in approach to assigned tasks

Good abilities to recall and use visual information