

Asperger Syndrome Employment Workbook: An Employment Workbook for Adults with Asperger Syndrome

by Roger N. Meyer

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A reader's perspective of the contribution this makes to understanding the connection between AS and work life

BACKGROUND TO THE BOOK

Roger Meyer bases this workbook on his own employment experience and the employment biographies of more than 200 adults with Asperger Syndrome (AS). The language is easy to read, in a style similar to a mentoring discussion between author and reader, the purpose being to help the reader 'understand the intimate connection between the unique flavor of AS and your work life' (p.11).

The author makes the point that the book is a first step to identifying both personal qualities and areas that need to be addressed. Work is a crucial aspect of self-definition, since people with Asperger Syndrome often define themselves by their job and interests (what they do) rather than who they are socially. When work fails to meet their expectations or problems arise, including unemployment or under employment, individuals may experience depression, anxiety, frustration or anger. For the individual with Asperger Syndrome, difficulties with expression, comprehension, making sense of these events can lead to a depreciated view of self. The book does not pretend to provide the answers, to enable the reader successfully manage their work life, but opens up a process of self-reflection in order for the individual to identify their own personal strategies and strengths, which may help them to do so.

FORMAT OF THE BOOK

The book is divided into three parts. Part 1 provides information on Asperger Syndrome and its impact on work, covering a variety of topics including diagnosis, disclosure and self advocacy. This is designed to give the reader background information, with examples from the author's perspective, to aid self-reflection. For example, in Chapter 4, the author discusses learning and work styles, inclusive of co-morbid conditions, such as dysgraphia, dyscalculia, and sensory issues which may require consideration (such as the use of assistive technology), within this content the author gives a personal account of his own auditory hypersensitivity enabling the reader real insight into the impact of this. This chapter moves on to consider different types of intelligence as well as ways in which the adult who may have not have achieved satisfactory outcomes within the education system, can access adult training, coaching and learning opportunities.

Chapter 5 in Part 1 of the book comments on interests, skills and talents, which may previously have been considered narrow or 'nerdy' as a young person, but can translate into valuable work skills, such as an interest in road maps developing into a skill valuable as a cartographer. Chapter 6 enters into the debate around labelling and descriptions or characteristics which may be shared by adults with Asperger Syndrome, challenging the way in which we use language and define behaviours, but ultimately leading to awareness of how these can be positive attributes for employment, such as attention to detail and perseverance being valuable in many jobs (such as computer and information sciences,

medical laboratory work) as well as environments such as higher education, where highly educated individuals with specialist knowledge but more basic social skills may have some 'protection'.

Part 2 gives the reader step-by step instructions on how to write an employment biography, through choosing three jobs from their work history (one from their early work life, one from the middle period and one from the later period). The value of this is that the reader is able to reflect upon jobs at different stages of their career, choosing those that are meaningful to them, not just their first and most recent job.

Part 3 of the workbook contains structured questions to help the reader write their employment biography. These questions are broken down into simple, concrete examples, such as; 'when I first got the job I felt... to take on additional tasks assigned to me' choosing from the following responses (I had the skill; I had the training; I did not have the skill; I did not have the training). The questions are largely closed in format, which does present forced choice responses, where the options may not always accurately reflect the experience of the reader at that time. For instance they may have had the training and skill, but may have lacked confidence in executing these in the job. This prescribed format may not appeal to all readers and at times struggles to maintain interest, but for individuals with Asperger Syndrome who may respond well to a logical structured process, it can provide a clearly defined step-by-step plan to follow at their own pace.

By the end of the employment workbook, the reader should be able to identify tools and strategies that have been effective to them in past employment, and which they can utilize and rely upon for future success in employment, culminating in a 'wish list' to the reader, hopes and aspirations and practical goals for their future as a worker.

A READER'S PERSPECTIVE

In the following section of this book review, the comments and descriptions have been provided by James (a co-author of this paper), who was formally diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome approximately 18 months ago. This, he describes, came towards the end of a painful process of watching his son cope with similar difficulties to those he had

experienced growing up, to the point at which his son was diagnosed as having Asperger Syndrome.

Following his diagnosis, James made contact with the Jobcentre Plus Disability Employment Adviser and then the Work Psychologist. Part of this process involved reviewing both past successes and difficulties within the 49+ jobs, which James had held, the book forming an aspect of this reflection in order to influence positive career decision-making. From a personal perspective of someone with Asperger Syndrome, James found:

- Part of the value of reading this book, was that it helped to remove a feeling of isolation. The author is able to describe situations and difficulties, which can arise for a person with Asperger Syndrome, providing opportunity to make sense of past occurrences. Due to the rarity of the condition which affects approximately 36 in 10,000 adults in the UK (National Autistic Society, 2004), and reduced likelihood of meeting or working with other individuals with Asperger Syndrome, it is difficult for the individual to grasp what is a typical or common experience or difficulty beyond the control of many individuals with Asperger Syndrome. James commented that had he considered some of the points raised in the book before, he may have chosen to side-step certain jobs or career opportunities.
- The content in the introduction provides a thought-provoking and excellent backdrop to considering the needs of individuals with Asperger Syndrome. The author presents real life experiences from workers with Asperger Syndrome, for instance, misunderstandings that can arise from not fully understanding the social rules of the work environment, e.g. awareness of others' personal space, knowing what information is private and what can be shared, appropriate topics of conversation and colleague hierarchies. This could give rise to complaints of harassment, being considered to be a poor team player, demands to 'shape up or ship out'. Further results could include demotion, suspension or termination of employment.

The chapter on learning and work styles, highlighted issues that James has experienced in his employment history:

- James relates this to his own experience, where

he describes 'I created for want of something else the label "Aural Dyslexia" to describe my sometimes inability to make sense of verbal instruction – now referred to as CAPD (Central Auditory Processing Disorder). The assumption is made that I am either deaf or not listening, or a bit stupid, and this creates tension particularly when learning something new. The result is often having to play catch up, some bluff on my behalf, hoping that somewhere further down the line it makes sense, or being dropped – the consequence of the latter being that you are sometimes omitted from future learning projects as too much like hard work or a waste of investment. Further are the feelings of professional inadequacy from not being able to progress and be as proficient as those around you. It can make one baulk at progression with the spectre of failure too often at the forefront of the psyche. I find a degree of isolation comes on. It cuts two ways. From the self, I find myself hiding because of a feeling of inadequacy, wanting to work alone so I'm not conscious of the performances of others. Also from the colleague's point, I have found myself excluded on the basis of cliquing among those who have the proficiency and skills that I haven't mastered. The bottom line is that one becomes aware of your expendability as a result of these factors. Prospective notions could be aired such as: was this an experience from which lessons could be learned, avoided in future, or a chance to regroup, evaluate and recover from this, resulting in becoming a bit wiser to enable one to move forward into an engagement of a similar nature or to avoid it at all costs?'

- One criticism of the book, for James, was that the depth and validity of examples of stress at work demanded greater prominence. There is a danger that placed where they are (intermingled within the main body of the text), and their classification as 'examples' reduces their importance and they may become overlooked as items for discourse and comment. When completing the workbook, in identifying three jobs, there is scope to choose any representative jobs from early, middle and late periods of employment. The opportunity, however, to reflect upon one's first job may be worthy of consideration, perhaps comparing the build up to this to the experience of others, for instance in making a decision about type of work, preparing and attending the interview and first day at work.

CONCLUSIONS

A key quality of the book is its potential as a practical guide, which individuals can work through to arrive at their own reflections, thoughts and conclusions. As professionals, we may at times make assumptions about what type of work would suit an individual with Asperger Syndrome, and what support they need to sustain employment. The book goes some way to enabling the individual to arrive at their own conclusions.

As an employment workbook there are, however, some crucial parts missing; in particular the book does not fully cover experiences and concerns relating to unemployment. For any individual, unemployment can have debilitating effects on self-esteem, particularly when this becomes sustained. Where these feelings become compounding and isolating, it may be hard for the individual to discuss and reflect upon. The opportunity to provide practical strategies, guidance and information on sources of support is a real omission.

The book begins from the standpoints of one who is already in work, and overlooks the mechanics of getting there in the first place. It misses the experience of searching for work, the decision-making process of identifying which job to apply for and reasons for this. In addition, it misses the feelings and experience that go with this – tensions, hopes, aspirations and expectations, first day anxieties, and after feelings, with every day having a bearing on the next. Questions could have been put forward relating to the loss of a position and the effect this had on the individual, how to deal with issues of injustice, discrimination or lack of accommodations for the individual's condition.

In addition, the workbook is a reflective guide for the individual, which for some readers, may lead them to generate a vast amount of information, but may then lack a clear conclusion and progression. The book is designed to be followed systematically to build upon personal accounts and responses to questions at different stages of the process. There are many important issues and considerations raised within the text that could potentially be missed, as they are hidden within the main body of the narrative.

APPLICATIONS

In its entirety the book can be used by individuals with Asperger Syndrome as intended, exploring stressors at work, potential adaptations, accommodations and alternative solutions. For professionals, the book adds a valuable opportunity to draw upon the personal expertise of the author in his thought-provoking and considered account of ways in which Asperger Syndrome impacts upon the world of work, and gain a better understanding of the personal perspective. The author deals with the difficulties and 'eccentricities' experienced by many individuals with Asperger Syndrome both honestly and constructively, with some useful chapters on social skills and learning style, offering potential explanation of why such difficulties arise.

As a reference aid to provide general information on Asperger Syndrome and the ways in which this may impact on an individual throughout their working life, based on the actual experiences of people with Asperger Syndrome, the book is a valuable addition for anyone wanting to know more about the condition.

On first sight it is easy to overlook the format of the workbook, in that it is designed for use proactively as a personal project or journey of discovery, with instructions followed methodically without omission. This could be helped by better definition of the text, by using bullet points and highlighting important instructions.

The book includes a reference list of websites and reading material, many of which are American-based sites. Expectedly some of the groups and establishments referred to in the book (for example, junior and extension colleges referred to in the chapter on learning and work style) are US establishments, however enough information is given for the reader to draw a parallel with UK provisions.

Included are some thoughtful questions on disclosure and considerations for why, when and how to go about this process. This is never an easy option for individuals. The book is able to provide some encouragement to explore individual needs associated with AS, learning and work styles, and positive trade off and strengths to balance these needs.

Within the Work Psychology Service, providing additional assessments to customers with a range of disabilities (including Asperger Syndrome), the book first gives an insight into many of the issues faced by individuals with Asperger Syndrome, in order to gain better awareness of likely support needs in employment, such as differences in learning style and effective communication styles. It also provides an additional tool in the process of identifying workplace conditions and environments, which may suit the customer for future employment, and by using some of the questioning in the book or time allowing, opportunity to work through the individual sections, by engaging the customer throughout the process they are involved in a highly active, structured and committed way.

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REFERENCES

National Autistic Society 2004 estimation of prevalence of Asperger Syndrome – from National Autistic Society Website www.nas.org.uk (date accessed on 23 February 2004).