

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

by Roger N. Meyer

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Any Work Psychologist, Personal Adviser or Disability Employment Adviser who does not have this splendid book close to hand on their bookshelf is missing an opportunity. The aim of the book is to enable individuals with Asperger Syndrome to produce an employment biography or work history. By following the steps detailed, and they are detailed, it is hoped the individual with Asperger Syndrome will recognize the lessons from their previous employment or experiences, and use them to advantage in job search and employment.

The prevalence statistics for Autistic Spectrum Disorder/Asperger Syndrome have obvious implications for services providing employment assessment and advice. But as Tony Attwood notes in his excellent foreword to the book: 'New research is suggesting that adults with Asperger Syndrome can achieve, maintain and succeed in a wide range of occupations but the first step on the journey is to identify their qualities and areas that need to be addressed.' Attwood considers that the workbook 'provides that first step'. Individuals with Asperger Syndrome appear to have a different learning style and a capacity to attend to detail. The book attempts to capitalize on these attributes.

Roger Meyer has personal experience. He was diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome and the book is based on his employment experience and an analysis of over 200 employment biographies. Individuals following the guidance to complete an employment biography will be helped to learn the lessons from their employment experience. Employment assessment practitioners working with them will have a spy hole into the learning style of their client and a vault of information to aid advice about job search and job keeping.

The book is divided into three parts, all of which link to the completion of an employment biography/work history. The rationale behind completing an employment biography is outlined in Part 1. Part 2 provides step-by-step instructions, specifically aimed at Asperger Syndrome adults, on how to complete the workbook, and a template of the workbook is found in Part 3. The reader is invited to explore his or her relationship with work through evaluating the job(s) they have held, or non-work experiences which may help to give them insight into their work style. In considering their progression of positions and experiences (paid or voluntary) the idea is for the individual to build up a profile of meaning, patterns where Asperger Syndrome has challenged or enhanced their work. This insight can then help in building strategies and tools that can be used to adapt and achieve a positive contribution in a work setting.

The first part of the book explores Asperger Syndrome and how it relates to work. The evolution of diagnosis of autism and Asperger Syndrome is discussed, as well as the ongoing debate over the origin, definition of the syndrome, and what the author claims is continued misunderstanding by health professionals over what it is and how to best work with it. This part includes some useful criteria and classification of Asperger Syndrome by the World Health Organization (ICD-10, 1992), the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association (DSM-IV, 1994), and awaited revisions. Issues of diagnosis, disclosure, and the importance of self-advocacy are also considered. There is a useful breakdown of steps in the process of diagnosis and disclosure, based on the collation of experiences of more than 200 adults with Asperger Syndrome who participated in an e-mail forum. This is particularly useful information for

both adults with Asperger Syndrome or anyone interested in knowing more about the syndrome.

Other aspects of the syndrome around social skills, learning and work styles, general skills, and talents are also considered in this section, with a view to exploring them more fully in compiling a work history. The reader is encouraged to consult a list of Asperger Syndrome characteristics found in the appendix to help him or her recognize which features connect to their work life. A list of 'multiple intelligences' is also introduced in this section (Gardner, 1983) to encourage readers to consider their different approaches to learning as they complete their work history.

The second part contains a highly detailed set of instructions for completing a work history. As it has been written by an adult with Asperger Syndrome (which Meyer refers to throughout the book as AS), it is sensitive to the needs of Asperger Syndrome readers. It is written in a highly explicit fashion, reiterating instructions for each section to be completed, and includes ongoing illustrations of how materials may be organized on a desktop or workspace, in order to make the task at hand more straightforward to the Asperger Syndrome adult. There are also concrete examples of how listed information can then be written as sentences, with samples of written biographical information for each section of the workbook. While this may seem exceptionally detailed to non-Asperger Syndrome readers (Meyer calls non-AS individuals 'neurotypicals' or NTs and refers to them as such throughout the book), this approach is likely to suit the learning style of an Asperger Syndrome adult undertaking the task.

The third part of the book is made up of the workbook template containing a number of sections. The first of the sections contains a series of questions (73) around, ideally, three jobs of the reader's working life (covering the early, middle, and latest or current period), depending on age and work experience; questions include those relating to Asperger Syndrome characteristics (physical, cognitive, social as well as learning and work styles). The second section explores the social skills of the individual by a series of questions to be completed, where possible, by peers or colleagues from the three work periods. The third covers learning and work styles – the reader is asked to

elaborate on tasks they have undertaken in past or current situations. They are asked to describe the task, determine its learning difficulty (e.g., was it hard (H) or easy (E) to learn), decide if the task was learned (Yes (Y), Partially (P), or No (N)), what the reader did to learn the task, and how they performed it. (The list of 'multiple intelligences' described above could be used here in considering different approaches to learning). The fourth section asks the reader to create a 'master list' of all interests, skills and talents, not only those related to their work. The fifth section covers Asperger Syndrome characteristics, asking the reader to review the list provided and to apply features they recognize in themselves to their own experience of work or study. Section six reviews personal tools and strategies – a 'master list' covering all work periods, which asks the reader to consider how they handle difficult situations, the techniques they use in work and in life to survive and achieve things. Section seven considers the ramifications of diagnosis, disclosure, and self-advocacy for Asperger Syndrome individuals, through a series of questions, and an accompanying section where the reader can reflect and summarize these issues in text form, while the eighth and final section is a 'wish list', a place to pose questions and voice aspirations for the future.

While completing the different sections described above would be time-consuming (though a shorter workbook option is available) and not always possible, particularly with respect to memory of former jobs, tasks, responsibilities, contact with former colleagues, etc. a workbook of this type is invaluable for the Asperger Syndrome adult looking to understand their unique skills and requirements in their search for a job that 'fits'.

It is worth bearing in mind that the aim of this book is not to present research. Although a bibliography is included, some of the information (i.e., the list of Asperger Syndrome characteristics, Steps to Diagnosis and Disclosure) is based on e-forums, collation of discussions with Asperger Syndrome adults, and anecdotal descriptions. The author points out for example, that the characteristics list should not be used for diagnostic purposes, that many of the behaviours listed are also found in NT adults, and that the participants in the collation for the diagnosis steps (via e-mail forum) were Asperger Syndrome adults rather than researchers

or writers. It is also worth bearing in mind that the book was written in the United States, so the discussion of some topics (e.g. self-advocacy and disclosure) relates more to the US labour market. A helpful list of Internet website addresses contains mainly US sites.

Readers are generally left in little doubt about the author's views on the issues discussed. There are some 'clear' words about professionals, particularly those who lack understanding of Asperger Syndrome and those who do not operate with a 'client centred' approach.

By and large the book is readable, informative and thorough, and contains a lot of practical tools designed to help Asperger Syndrome adults in their search for meaningful work. What makes this book unique is its insight of Asperger Syndrome from the perspective of an Asperger Syndrome adult. From his own experience, Meyer aims to empower others by way of better understanding their own work history, through a workbook designed for specifically Asperger Syndrome adults. Individuals with Asperger Syndrome using the workbook do not have to rely on professional assistance. For some, however, there may be advantages in working with an employment assessment practitioner. This is because the book is geared towards helping individuals to learn the lessons from their *employment* experience. In this way, the book may contribute to both the individual's and any employment adviser's understanding of an Asperger Syndrome adult's work-related abilities, interests and needs.

More space could have been dedicated to considering how the learning could be taken forward to job opportunities, and the implications for performing a job successfully. For example, further discussion of work tasks, proposed solutions and how these could be discussed with employers may help readers to see how their hard work on their employment biography could help with future work opportunities.

Could the book be of use to individuals who do not have Asperger Syndrome? The answer is *probably*. There seems little reason why some of the questions that help to develop an individual's understanding of their work experience could not be equally valuable to others, those with dyslexia for

example, and the Level of Social Skill Understanding Questionnaire may have wider potential.

References

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