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An investigation of Asperger Syndrome in the employment context

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Summary

This exploratory study finds that managers identify Asperger Syndrome (AS) employees as having characteristics distinctive from neurotypical employees working in similar roles. High work ethic and IQ were conceptualised by managers as strengths, whereas attention to detail, honesty and directness, flexibility and social interaction were conceptualised variously as strength or as weakness, impacted by job role, working environment and the norms governing HR processes and ways of working. HR specialists are recommended to question how policies and practices may unintentionally discriminate against AS individuals and to consider how best to utilise their skills.

Background

Asperger Syndrome (AS) is a neurodiverse condition lying on the autistic spectrum first identified by Asperger ([1944] 1991) and characterised by difficulties in social interaction, rigidity in thinking and over or under-sensitisation to surrounding sounds, lights and textures which the majority of clinical work has placed as impairments (Wing and Gould 1979; Wing 1981; Frith 1991). AS is recognised in the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* under the general autism heading but remains for many a condition that is distinct from autism. An alternative perspective on neurodiversity views autism as strength, where these same neurological conditions create valid and different pathways within human diversity causing neurodiversity advocates (Silberman 2015; Goldstein-Hode 2014) to confer strengths upon AS individuals rating them as superior to the non-autistic neurotypical population, referred to as the 'normal' majority (Owren 2013, p35) who are, argues Ortega (2009, p432), '*characterised by preoccupation with social concerns, delusions of superiority, and obsession with conformity*'. Approximately 1 in 200 people are diagnosed as AS each year, with numbers increasing (Brugha et al 2012), representing a small but significant minority of the working population. Many working-age individuals are unaware of their condition as diagnosis is often missed, confused with personality disorders, particularly in women (Bargiela et al 2016), or not received until late adulthood. AS individuals frequently decide to keep their condition hidden on account of the various disclosure barriers and individual sensitivities which hitherto have hindered research (Morris et al 2015).

Clinical studies (Frith and Happe 2001; Happe and Vital 2009) have identified that AS people have particular abilities distinct from neurotypicals which are valued by employers, particularly in technology-related sectors, where their skills and preferences have been deliberately sought (Grant 2015; Warnick 2016; Wang 2014). These include intense concentration; independence; affinity with technology; good formal essay writing; attention to detail and precision; original ideas; reliable meeting of deadlines (Griffin and Pollak 2009); capacity to gather and store expert knowledge (Friedrichs and Shaughnessy 2015); and higher-than-average IQ (Assouline et al 2012; Chiang et al 2014; Baron-Cohen et al 2001). Employment-based studies have highlighted average or above-average job performance (Hagner and Cooney 2005; Hillier et al 2007), with common themes emerging, showing that AS individuals are good at tasks involving data and may enjoy tasks disliked by others because of their repetitive nature or social isolation.

At the same time as creating strengths, these characteristics also place AS as a disability protected under the Equality Act (2010) on account of the very real impairments that AS people experience; for example being frequently troubled by loud noises and by feelings of being different from their peers. Haertl et al (2013) and Krieger et al (2012) note adverse impacts upon job satisfaction, earnings and securing meaningful employment. Seeking explanations for these exclusionary outcomes, Richards (2012) concludes that employers lack theoretical knowledge and consequently disregard these innate differences in communication styles and ways of working which have led some to ascribe rudeness or inappropriate behaviours to AS employees (Wallis 2012), which in turn make employment problematic and in some instances result in dismissal from employment.

Methodology

Six organisations of varying size and sector contributed to this study. In total, interviews took place with 14 line managers, 8 HR specialists and 9 AS employees. Interviews with line managers aimed to reveal if or how they used the skills of their AS employees and what might enable or constrain them in doing so. Prompt cards were used, each with a word or short phrase derived from the literature review to help managers recall scenarios, events and behaviours. Care was taken that managers compared these with other team members, as it was the *differences* which AS individuals exhibit versus the neurotypical population which were being explored. Mindful of the heterogeneous nature of AS and the desire to avoid drawing on stereotypes, respondents were asked if they had encountered any surprises in dealings with AS employees. Managers were asked to discuss employees' job roles and working environments, given these are significant for AS employees (Baldwin and Costley 2015; Baldwin et al 2014; Richards 2012, 2015) and relatively little is known about these areas from a line manager's perspective.

Key findings

1 AS characteristics

Working hard

AS employees were viewed by all managers as having a high work ethic, reflecting the expansiveness of the concept described as reliability, trustworthiness (McQuaid and Lindsay 2005), timekeeping (Branine 2008) or as professionalism (Jackson 2009). Managers reported high levels of output, being focused and dedicated to finishing pieces of work, noting that almost all their AS employees were

happy and willing to perform tasks which were repetitive, menial, frequently unattractive or low profile and feeling relief that they did not have to ask or coerce other team members to do so. From a manager's perspective, having such a team member can be extremely useful, whether these tasks are strategically important to the organisation or simply routine jobs. In the workplace, ableist norms predominate in relation to productivity and this may be one reason that disabled employees may choose to work harder than their colleagues (Jammaers et al 2016). It is likely that the hidden nature of AS predisposes this 'working hard' reaction from individuals more so than someone with a visible disability.

IQ

Across a variety of roles the majority of managers rated employees as being more intelligent than others in similar roles, but despite this most of these employees worked in semi-skilled roles involving routine and repetitious tasks. A troubling reality therefore may be that individuals are working in roles beneath their intellectual capability, echoing the findings of Baldwin et al 2014, who reported 'malememployment' and underemployment of AS individuals. Given that some AS people will know that some aspects of their role or workplaces can impede their performance, their decision to choose to work at skill levels lower than their qualifications and intellect would predict is entirely logical and is supported by findings that show many AS employees have made deliberate decisions to accept part-time and casual work (Griffith et al 2011) in the face of concerns about their own capacities to meet expected productivity levels. However, it may be that these decisions are not simply a matter of choice and can be viewed more critically in terms of exclusionary outcomes, where demanding ways of working, noted as 'employment realities' (Richards 2015), create disparities between AS people and their non-AS counterparts of similar IQ or qualifications, earning less and in lower-status roles.

Working with others

Every manager noted that their AS employees had some difficulties with the interactions they have at work, whether these were with customers or colleagues, supporting the findings from clinical and employee-driven accounts (Vermuelen 2011; Müller et al 2008; Morris et al 2015). In describing what they noticed about the ways their AS employees work in teams, managers indicated that sometimes colleagues may find these 'ways' strange, unusual, hard to warm to or work with, illustrated by the 'chat' referred to by these two managers below. Skilled roles with highly standardised administrative content and where volume of work processed is a key measure of performance may be forgiving of an AS employee's intense focus on their work, shown where this manager acknowledges the beneficial effects of having people in a team who do not engage in gossip and relating these to savings in time:

Always sits on own when having lunch. In a way this is better; you get more work out of the person. He doesn't chat to anyone.

The second example shows how in a higher-skill role where the employee is a data specialist working in a project team requiring ongoing group collaboration, this 'chat' is also likely to be very beneficial:

*She is a loner. The team take a long time to get used to her because of the **way** she interacts – it's about getting the job done and passing on knowledge. Not really a chummy, friendly way.*

Empathy

Almost all of the managers stated that their AS employees found it difficult to show empathy, citing difficulties in 'reading body language or facial expressions'; 'often interrupts me when I was talking to clients'; 'approaches every situation the same way, not taking into account how the recipient will perceive the message'. Every AS employee strongly reinforced these observations, noting how hard it can be to recognise social cues and to avoid making points that others can see as disconnected from the specific topic of conversation. In discussing difficulties in empathy, this manager described how he had to explain to his AS employee working on a mental health ward why she needed to be empathetic to a self-harm patient – something he would not have expected to do for others working in similar roles. Later that day the same employee dealt with this same patient, this time in a distressing situation which others shied away from, leading her manager to conceptualise that this level of emotional detachment can also be strength.

We had an incident here where somebody had cut their arms. At one point a staff member walked in and walked back out again as they couldn't deal with that situation. Whereas [AS employee] walked straight in and dealt with the situation. That's a strength in dealing with an emergency. Sometimes you need those people to have those skills to just get on with it.

In the workplace empathy is a frequently cited requirement for individuals working in customer service or management and leadership roles. However, what may be construed as valuable empathy can vary with the level of role itself as well as the context, which in the example above is less about competence in influence and persuasion as might be required in higher-skilled and management-type roles, and more about simply dealing with an unpleasant situation.

Attention to detail, honesty and directness

Attention to detail is a strength which can be constrained or enabled by the role; it may be construed as an asset where work involves checking fine detail, or a constraint where someone working through the detail takes a long time to complete a task. This capacity was viewed as a strength in comparison with others in many roles, including quality assurance, health and safety as well as in caring and customer service related fields, all of which lie outside the stereotyped data and technology roles for which AS have been deliberately recruited. Similarly, using a blunt and direct communication style was also construed as a strength where people are willing to highlight problems with a particular decision or process that others would keep quiet about: 'honesty is refreshing'; 'directness is brilliant' – and it is not hard to see how the same directness can also create problems for managers. It may also impact AS employees as they negotiate progression pathways that typically demand a degree of political and tactful consideration, which may be more difficult to navigate than for neurotypicals.

2 Difficulties

Flexibility

Managers cited lack of flexibility as a major issue for almost all of their AS employees, manifesting as experiencing more difficulty than for others in adaptations to changing role and working environments. In developing staff, some managers wanted their employees to expand their skills and this created tensions where employees wished to keep aspects of their role the same. This AS

employee provides some insight into why doing repetitive work is not inevitably problematic, illustrating that a person's liking for sameness can be welcomed rather than worried about.

Repetition is boring, but if you are an Aspie you tend to think it is perfectly okay. I like a routine setting where I know what I am doing. An NT might do this for a week; I could go happily at this routine task for months on end.

HR policies, processes and practices

Most managers did not draw direct connections between these and the AS condition itself, probably because they lacked accurate knowledge. However, one or two did suggest that HRM policies play a part, particularly competency frameworks which refer frequently to flexibility driven by the need for the organisation's continuous improvement and this indeed featured heavily in what HR specialists said are valued attributes. Frameworks also specify teamworking and empathy, reflecting near-universal positive valuations of these 'soft' skills, particularly in career progression (Giusti 2008, p2; Wolosky 2008; Nilsson 2012; Marks and Scholarios 2008).

Conclusions

Managers notice that AS individuals work hard, often over and above others in similar roles, wanting very much to contribute to their teams, albeit some of the ways in which they do this are different from those many managers consider as 'normal' or 'natural', particularly in relation to the sensitivities experienced by AS employees where environments are overly bright, noisy and heavily socialised. Therefore employers need to understand how social demands and constraints of the physical working environment can create problematic and disabling workplace experiences so they become better equipped to identify which roles ought to be avoided in recruitment, progression and redeployment scenarios.

Employers should question if positive valuations of these 'softer' skills are always appropriate or if they are based upon subjective and arbitrary notions as well as more precisely specify the attributes or skills that are actually required, for example: what attributes or ways of working count as teamworking? Is being empathetic and a 'good' communicator always necessary? When and where might different decision-making styles be best deployed, considering also if everyone needs to attend all team meetings for all of the time. Other areas for review are those workplace activities with high 'social' content – Christmas parties, celebratory occasions and team away days, which demand particular social interaction that does not easily 'fit' with many AS employees. All need active consideration of the extent to which AS employees can be involved, balancing this with recognised benefits in building team cohesion and organisational learning.

Established competency frameworks have a major role to play in how managers conceptualise AS characteristics as well as in shaping their responses and those using them may overlook possible interpretation issues, for example by conflating descriptors such as collaboration and co-operation, both of which are used in generic definitions of teamworking. Similarly, fine distinctions exist where being flexible is equated to being able to identify the opportunities for changing processes when these may be quite different attributes. AS individuals in general do not possess the same capacity for flexibility as do neurotypical employees and so HR specialists need to question how appropriate, fair and possible this insistence on flexibility is.

The actual numbers of AS people in any organisation are likely to be much higher than those who have disclosed their condition, although as knowledge and awareness increases, future applicants and employees are more likely to declare their diagnosis, and so HR specialists need to consider carefully how they create and promote information about AS.

While it is not possible to 'know' categorically that someone has AS unless they have disclosed, those dealing with performance issues connected with working relationships, communication styles, obsession with detail or difficulties in adjusting to change could keep in mind that these may not be a fault of the employee but connected to AS itself. Or, when there are no obvious performance issues yet managers notice that behaviours are a little 'odd', they could be reflexive and keep an open mind as to the most appropriate responses, perhaps by encouraging someone to seek a diagnosis or adapt working environments, both of which may avoid disciplinary procedures.

AS people continue to struggle with very real difficulties which are not simply a product of society's treatment of that individual but of the condition itself, and so HR specialists need to acquire a balanced appreciation of strengths and difficulties associated with the AS condition. Improved knowledge may then help them question the mechanisms by which acceptable standards of behaviour and competence in the workplace are formed, communicated and utilised within organisations by examining the 'tools' used by HR specialists, for example competency frameworks, person specifications and job descriptions. In turn this should reduce the likelihood of unintentionally exclusionary outcomes, where AS employees become trapped in low-skilled, uninteresting or unpleasant roles on account of their preferences for routine. Equally, HR specialists could also consider if the way that progression decisions are made give AS employees sufficient opportunities to shine. These areas are recognised as substantial challenges for those pursuing inclusion in reconciling the demands of a neurotypical majority with this AS minority.

Rolls-Royce Plc was one of the companies who participated in the research and, following the findings, have developed a training package for line managers which builds on the positive perceptions of AS characteristics – high work ethic and IQ – while encouraging open discussion on the characteristics which were conceptualised variously as strength or as weakness – attention to detail, honesty and directness, flexibility and social interaction. The aim of the open discussion is to assess the characteristics in terms of specific job roles and working environments, to actively look for opportunities, and potential adjustments. In parallel they have focused on the relationship between AS and policies, processes and practices, looking at not just HR activities, but including, for example, building refurbishments. This is work in progress and Rolls-Royce Plc is willing to answer specific questions from interested parties.

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