

AUTISM WORKS

When a child is diagnosed with autism, schools, local authorities and universities can sometimes offer excellent support. But when that child becomes an adult, seeking employment can be very difficult. Current statistics show that there are estimated to be 500,000 adults with ASD in the UK. However the paid employment rate for this group is only 15%. That means more than 425000 ASD adults-many of whom will be highly qualified individuals-are unable to find a job.

However, the prospects for ASD young adults leaving school now may not be so bleak. A Danish company, Specialisterne, and Aspiritech in the US, both employ ASD people to test software.

The founder of Specialisterne, Thorkil Sonne, has set a target of creating one million jobs for people with ASD. He has branched out into Canada and Glasgow. These two companies have inspired Autism Works in Newcastle. Here, Morag Maskey talks to Chris Mitchell who is the Operational Manager at Autism Works and who has Aspergers Syndrome.

Why was Autism Works set up?

It was inspired by Specialisterne in Denmark and Aspiritech, based in the US and also by Education and Services for People with Autism (ESPA)

Managing Director Peter Macdonald, had been a computer programmer at Newcastle-based firm Croft Technology, which provided much of ESPA's software. Through this connection, Peter got to know and enjoy working with ESPA students on IT projects. Though he found that students were graduating from ESPA college with excellent skills, qualifications and successful work placements behind them, many were unable to find employment.

After viewing a short film about Specialisterne, a company that employs people with ASC in software testing, Peter was then inspired to replicate that here in the North East.

ESPA felt that Autism Works, as the company was later named, would be the most logical next step in addition to the specialist education and residential services that the company provides, working towards paid employment.

Peter had heard about me through ESPA and initially approached me to see if I knew of any statistics on people with ASC in the North East (e.g. number of people in the region with an ASC diagnosis) and later offered me the post of Operational Manager.

How many people work there?

Presently, there are five of us at Autism Works – Peter, myself, Chris Mitchell, Grayson Cobb (Test Manager), Dan Cottrell (Software Test Analyst) and Chris Neville-Smith (Software Test Analyst)

How do you recruit?

One of my first tasks was to develop an ASC-friendly recruitment procedure. Taking on board the experiences of people diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, including my own, it became clear to me that many conventional recruitment methods needed unlearning. Previous organisations I have worked for had a one-size-fits-all recruitment policy, but one size doesn't fit people with Asperger's Syndrome.

There are many questions asked during job interviews and on application forms that are abstract or hypothetical. One of our software test analysts said that a question he had been asked at several interviews at which he had been unsuccessful at was: "What is it that sets you apart from the other candidates as to why you are the best person for the job". He felt unable to answer it because he hadn't seen or met the other candidates!

Many other job interview questions people with Asperger's Syndrome have often said that they have difficulties with are those that are open to literal interpretation, such as: "How would you describe yourself as a good communicator?", which could mean being able to communicate instructions up three floors using a megaphone!

At Autism Works, within our person specifications, job descriptions and application forms and at the interview stage we have removed ambiguous statements and we ask closed questions specific to the job. A key feature of our application form is that it includes an Individual Needs Questionnaire, which asks candidates if they have any needs or issues that may affect them in the workplace, including sensory issues (eg touch, light etc.). This isn't used to determine selection. Prior to interview, we invite candidates in for a pre-interview briefing where they can discuss any individual needs that they may have.

Once in employment, where necessary, we provide support to employees who experience difficulties in adjusting to the working environment.

What are the barriers to people with ASC working in a neurotypical environment?

Many relate to social issues including misreading non-verbal social cues including facial expressions and eye contact. As well as difficulties in being able to read facial expressions and eye contact, it is also difficult for a person with Asperger's sometimes to be aware of their own facial expressions and eye contact and how it affects colleagues. Eye contact in an employee with Asperger's can appear either prolonged or non-existence. Prolonged eye contact can be interpreted as 'staring' while lack of eye-contact may be interpreted as 'rude'.

People not on the autistic spectrum tend to learn the unwritten rules of non-verbal social interaction by intuition. Many people on the spectrum feel as though they have to learn non-verbal social skills through observation, which can often mean learning through mistakes, which is not the most comfortable way of learning.

Anxiety can also affect a person on the spectrum in the workplace, in relation to coping with sudden or unpredictable demands (e.g. crisis response). Workplace change can also be difficult to cope with, especially if it is sudden. Many people on the spectrum thrive on routine and predictability, when it is removed it can be like the carpet being dragged from under one's feet.

What are the benefits for a company employing ASC workers?

Though there are social challenges that people on the spectrum in the workplace face, there are also many benefits in employing people with ASC in roles that suit their strengths and skills.

Their strengths lie in tasks that are routine and repetitive, including software testing which requires strong attention to detail, excellent rote memory and is rules orientated.

Providing employment to people with Asperger's enhances their quality of life in helping to reduce social isolation and allowing them to become active and valued citizens in their community. Employing people on the spectrum means they have the chance to develop both financial and social independence, and become less reliant on benefits and those on whom they rely for support, including their family, counsellors and social workers.

Has there been any opposition to the company employing ASD workers only?

We don't only employ people on the autistic spectrum. We are open to applications from people not on the autistic spectrum as well as people who have an autism or Asperger's Syndrome 'in progress'. As part of their training, employees at Autism Works work towards the ISEB Foundation Certificate, an industry-recognised qualification for software testing, which aids employability beyond Autism Works.

In keeping with Autism Works' goal of raising awareness of autism and Asperger's Syndrome in the workplace, the more clients work with our employees and get to know people with autism and Asperger's, as well as their personal qualities, the more awareness spreads. One of the most memorable comments that I had when giving training on Asperger's Syndrome and Employment was from a delegate who had enjoyed working with a colleague with Asperger's so much that if he saw on an application that if an applicant said that they were diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, he would be thrilled!

Is the working environment adapted in any way for people with ASC?

As ASC is a largely individual condition, it isn't possible to standardise working practice in a way to meet the needs of all. Where possible, we make reasonable adjustments based on individual needs, including sensory issues.

For instance it could be that an applicant experiences much stress with rush hour crowds or traffic. In which case we could alter start/finish times so that they would miss the worst of it. Just small changes like this can make a huge difference, which can have a positive impact on productivity.

Is it difficult to build a team spirit?

I am not in a position yet to answer this as we are still a small team and in the early stages of development. So far though I guess we have found that having a general awareness understanding of Autism and Asperger's Syndrome in the working environment is a good foundation.

From personal experience though, I have known it to occur where people with Asperger's Syndrome have disagreements and differences of opinion among each other. Though we haven't experienced this as such yet where it has come into work, being aware that it is possible helps and if and when it occurs, we will work on it.