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Autism, employment and disclosure: a personal reflection



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Introduction

- Reflection of my own personal journey and experiences of the workplace.
- Reactions pre and post diagnosis and how this can affect how one experiences the workplace.
- Exploring wider issues affecting autistic people in the workplace, with a specific focus on disclosure.



An enduring issue

- It is often claimed that only 15% of diagnosed autistic adults are in paid full-time employment (NAS, 2014), less than any other category of disability status.
- It is also claimed that 79% of autistic adults would like such employment (NAS, 2014).
- So – one has to wonder to what extent traditional job coaching has made regarding significant differences to the job prospects of autistic people.



My employment history pre-diagnosis

- 1989 – Paper rounds.
- 1991 – Became a student.
- 1992 – Withdrew from course and became unemployed.
- 1995 – Became a student again.
- 1996 – First job in a wool-packing factory (£2.12 an hour).
- 1998 – Graduated.
- 1999 – Gained a Masters Degree.
- 2000 – Started PhD and Teaching assistant at a University (part-time).
- 2001 – Withdrew from course, reliant on money from DJ'ing music.
- 2002 – Cashier in a bookies.
- 2003 – Market research – field researcher.
- 2004 – FE Lecturer in Sociology and Academic Skills.
- 2008 – Made redundant. Distance learning courses.

Post-diagnosis

- 2009 – Start of PhD course.
- 2010 – Volunteer role for Ambitious about Autism.
- 2012 – First consultancy work and work for the NAS and Autism Education Trust.
- 2014 – Appointed at London South Bank University.
- 2015 – Appointed Head of Autism Knowledge and Expertise (Adults and Community) at the NAS.
- 2016 – Appointed at the University of Birmingham.

Some key issues and opportunities for autistic people

- The sensory environment.
- Autism and the 'spiky profile'.
- Passionate interests and flow states.
- An exacting gaze / systematic logic.
- The 'double empathy problem'.
- Stress, anxiety and comfort.
- The need for predictability and transparency.



Advice often given regarding the job interview

- Dressing for success
- Grooming tips
- How and when to give a handshake
- Sitting up on one's chair
- Facing the interviewer
- Using an 'upbeat tone of voice'
- Smile and make eye contact



Passing and masking – the dangers

- May have some limited uses – but not good as a general tactic to employment.
- Stress – shutdowns, panic attacks and long-term wellbeing.
- Reputation management and exposure anxiety.
- Exhaustion and burnout.
- Needs continue not to be met.
- Nothing changes regarding the structures and attitudes one works within.
- Does it work?
- When to disclose? Disclosure is not without its own issues.



Ways to find work

- Job advertisements – ‘scatter-gun’ approach or targeted applications?
- Showing your worth – work placements and the ‘portfolio’ approach.
- Being persistent and following passions.
- Not being afraid of being open – if you are rejected for it, it is likely you will be rejected at some point later on and at greater personal cost.
- Working with others that can advocate for you.
- Reasonable adjustments and the issue of ‘compromise’.

Barriers in the way

- Social attitudes, prejudice and stigma.
- The design and wording of job descriptions.
- Opportunities to gain experience and being given a chance to prove one's worth.
- Systemic issues.
- Your own efforts? Your 'autism'...???
- 'Selling oneself'.
- Paid employment not an aim for all and yet someone's disposition should not be seen as a barrier to being meaningfully occupied.

Meaningful occupation

- There is a proportion of autistic people who will be unable to work under current work conditions, or for whom it would be exploitative and not a 'meaningful occupation'.
- How one may utilise one's interests, motivations, and strengths to attain meaningful occupation, and when wanted paid employment.
- A case in point – the photography group.
- Often a keen interest will be within the field of autism in some way.

Sustaining employment

- The first 100 days.
- Finding out who your friends are...and those who one might struggle to work with.
- A culture of openness.
- 'Compromise' – how much is reasonable?
- Access to work and mentoring.

The Research Autism Cygnet Mentoring Project

- A two year pilot project designed by people on the autism spectrum to evaluate a mentoring intervention.
- After mentor training, selection, matching and completion of the Melbourne Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI), 12 pairs met for one hour per week over 6 months. Supervision was built in throughout.
- 3 Goals were set initially and reviewed throughout project.
- Meeting record sheets jointly completed and a reflective journal were individually completed after each session.
- After the final mentoring session, research assistants completed another evaluation and PWI with participants.
- Data has been collected and analysed by the research team with input from The Advisory Group.



Personal wellbeing index results

PWI	All – pre-intervention	Pre (who finished)	Post	Difference
Thinking about your own life and personal circumstances, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole?	5.08	6	7.8	1.8
How satisfied are you with what you are achieving in life?	5.08	5.4	7	1.6
How satisfied are you with how safe you feel?	6.42	7.4	8.8	1.4

Average progress toward goals

All – pre-intervention	Pre (who finished)	Post	Difference
3.75	4	8	4

- "...this helped me dig my way out of a life threatening hole that I could not see any way out of. It reminded me to make progress towards goals. [The mentor] Listened when I needed it, was a regular weekly marker in my chaotic life, provided an opportunity to reflect and plan and self manage. I wouldn't have done this otherwise."

Conclusion

- What is under your control/influence and what is not?
- Targeting efforts and following interests.
- Disclosure is a personal choice and can be problematic, but not disclosing can also lead to significant issues.
- What is meaningful occupation for one is not for all.
- For advisors and mentors – being person-centred is vital.



References

- National Autistic Society (2014) *Employment Services*. Accessed 03/11/14 from: <http://www.autism.org.uk/working-with/employment-services.aspx>