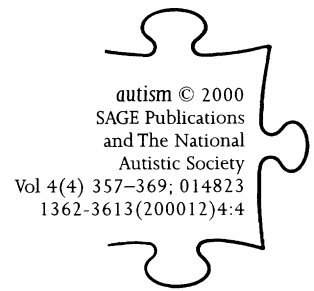


# Why and why not? Factors influencing employment for individuals with Asperger syndrome



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**ABSTRACT** The supported employment literature relating to organizational concerns has focused mostly on mild intellectual disability. The purpose of this study is to investigate the area of supported employment for individuals with Asperger syndrome using Prospects – The National Autistic Society's Supported Employment Service. The study will focus on a comparison of employment factors that influence organizations currently employing an individual with Asperger syndrome with organizations who are not. Findings suggest that many of the items rated as important to both types of organization were related to areas that might typically be difficult for an individual with Asperger syndrome. Organizations using Prospects found items relating to support and information regarding Asperger syndrome to be significantly more important. Organizations not employing an individual with Asperger syndrome focused more on items related to the ability of the individual to behave in certain expected ways. Reasons for differences and implications for service developments and future research are discussed.

## KEYWORDS

Asperger syndrome; employment factors; supported employment

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## Introduction

Organizational literature available on supported employment focuses on investigating attitudes to people with learning disabilities within the workplace. Petty and Fussell (1997) investigated the attitudes of employers towards workers with learning and physical disabilities. Findings suggest employers generally hold favourable attitudes regarding the employment potential of workers with disabilities and the quality of services provided through supported employment programmes.

Further literature indicates positive attitudes from employers and high

levels of satisfaction with the general work-related performance of employees. The City Polytechnic of Hong Kong, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (1994) investigated employers' expectations and evaluation of job performance of workers with a mild intellectual disability. The majority of employees fulfilled expectations and in several cases exceeded expectations.

Griffin et al. (1996) investigated job satisfaction and self-esteem. Findings indicated a significant relationship between these two variables. There was also an interaction between place of residence and place of employment; those who lived in a semi-independent home and worked in supported employment reported the highest levels of self-esteem.

The studies cited report positive findings regarding attitudes to people with learning disabilities within the workplace. However these findings are limited for several reasons. The majority of studies focus on people with mild intellectual disability. The failure of research to focus on the more severe range of disability relates also to the failure to investigate any specialist type of disability such as Asperger syndrome. They are also limited because they focus on employers who have experienced supported employment, rather than employers who have not, and in doing so fail to investigate the area of perceived potential barriers to employing people with learning disabilities.

### **Barriers to supported employment**

Parent and Everson (1986) identified the fact that organizations have concerns about employing workers with disabilities. Literature suggests that organizations make decisions on the basis of perceived benefit in relation to perceived concerns (Martin and Vieceli, 1988). It is not surprising that few adults with Asperger syndrome have integrated job opportunities, considering the lack of awareness and understanding of the disorder.

DiLeo and Langton (1993) proposed a marketing orientation to job development as one method of overcoming organizational attitudinal barriers that exist in organizations not using supported employment programmes. A marketing-oriented approach involves the use of job development strategies to identify and emphasize the salient benefits and counteract the perceived concerns of potential employing organizations.

### **Supported employment and Asperger syndrome**

People with Asperger syndrome and autism have the same core problem: difficulty in communicating feelings and reactions to others, and a failure to understand the non-verbal cues of others that are used in ascertaining

other people's feelings. However, typically, those with Asperger syndrome have better language skills, and relatively high levels of ability in other areas (Howlin and Mawhood, 1996).

Goode et al. (1994) found that despite the potential to work, few are in regular employment. Even among those with formal qualifications, employment levels are disappointing and occupational status is low. It is common for jobs to end prematurely, often leading to low self-esteem and depression. Paradoxically the fact that adults with Asperger syndrome are able may mean they are more aware and distressed by their apparent social incapacities than adults with a more severe autistic spectrum disorder.

## **Prospects – Supported Employment Scheme**

In 1994 the National Autistic Society set up an innovative supported employment pilot scheme to address the needs of more able individuals with autism (Howlin and Mawhood, 1996). There were two instances of computer programmers finding work, as well as examples of warehouse work, factory work, photographic laboratory processing work and retail backroom support work. Findings suggested that support throughout the first few weeks is crucial. However, there remained a need for flexibility within support as several clients went through periods of change at work or had other problems which meant they had a temporary need of a boost in their support hours.

The purpose of this study is to investigate further the area of supported employment for individuals with Asperger syndrome. Howlin and Mawhood (1996) found that with the right type of support, individuals with Asperger syndrome could be successful in employment. This study aims to investigate the organizational issues that may affect the level of success by comparing organizations that are currently employing an individual with Asperger syndrome with organizations that are not.

## **Method**

### **Setting and subjects**

The National Autistic Society's Supported Employment Scheme – Prospects – aims to serve clients in and around the London area. All the organizations currently involved with Prospects are based in or around the geographical area of London.

As recruitment decisions in most organizations are the concern of personnel staff, a sample of organizations was selected by making contact with several business colleges that were currently running the Institute of Personnel Development courses (IPD personnel qualification). Two colleges

were selected, one from an inner city London borough, and one from the home counties serving the south side of outer London.

### **Materials**

As there was no standardized assessment tool suited to the nature of this study, a questionnaire was constructed (see Appendix).

To help identify areas relevant to the issues, a small focus group was run with staff from Prospects. This group discussed the employment process from both a client and an organizational perspective. The meeting included a brainstorming session to help generate ideas and themes relevant to the factors facing employing organizations. This information was classified into five different content areas, covering every stage that was relevant to the purpose of the questionnaire: application process, selection process, appointment of applicant, support needed and level of successful independent employment reached.

The next stage was to think about how each content area could manifest itself as an item within the questionnaire. For example, the application process content area could manifest as an item related to the ability to read the application form, or the ability to put down information relevant to the job in question. In total 55 items were generated for use within the questionnaire. Each item was rated on a five-point Likert scale in which: 1 = no importance; 2 = some importance; 3 = moderate importance; 4 = high importance; 5 = great importance. Examples were given demonstrating the use of this scale.

### **Piloting**

As the sample of organizations already using Prospects was quite small (41), it was decided to pilot the questionnaire using only five organizations. Five copies of the questionnaire were also sent to the local council personnel department.

Respondents were asked to complete the questionnaire and to comment on the design. This involved taking into account the clarity of instructions given the relevance of the questions asked and also the time it took to complete.

All five of the organizations using Prospects and three of the organizations not using Prospects responded. The questionnaire was amended taking into account the comments. Five items were removed as comments suggested that they were irrelevant or represented by other questions. The final questionnaire consisted of 50 items.

### **Procedure**

Questionnaires were sent to organizations, accompanied by a covering letter of explanation. A stamped addressed envelope was attached for ease

of return. Initially organizations were given two weeks to respond. If the surveys were not returned within the first two weeks a reminder letter was sent. This was then repeated after a further two weeks.

## Results

### Respondent demographics

**Response rates** At the time of the study Prospects had 41 organizations employing an adult with Asperger syndrome. In total, 29 of those organizations responded with a completed questionnaire. In total, 140 organizations not using Prospects were contacted, and 40 responded with a completed questionnaire.

**Business type** Respondents were categorized according to business type. Eight categories were common to Prospects and non-Prospects organizations: retail, travel, banking, NHS, communications, charity, local government and manufacturing. An additional five categories were present within the non-Prospects condition: media, information technology, electronics, education and recruitment. The greatest proportion of respondents came from the retail industry (Prospects ten and non-Prospects six). The smallest percentage of respondents came from the travel industry (Prospects one and non-Prospects two).

**Business size** The largest proportion of organizations using Prospects fell into the 'more than 5000' category while the largest proportion of organizations not using Prospects fell into the 'more than 2500'. The smallest proportion of organizations using Prospects fell into the 'more than 50' and 'more than 25' category while the smallest proportion of organizations not using Prospects fell into the 'more than 500' category.

### Statistics

As this was a two-condition unrelated design with different subjects used for each condition, and the data collated were ordinal, Mann-Whitney was used (Table 1).

Significant differences at  $p < 0.5$  and  $p < 0.001$  were found to exist between groups on 12 items. Five items were found to be significantly more important to organizations using Prospects. These items were related to either understanding or awareness of Asperger syndrome or a Prospects service intervention, e.g. item 10 'Organisation's understanding of Asperger's Syndrome' or item 12 'Organisation's knowledge of Prospects Service'. This indicates that understanding of the disorder and support from

**Table 1** Variables showing significant differences between groups

Item	Variable name <sup>1</sup>	Average Rating		
		Prospects	Non-Prospects	Mann Whitney Test Z corrected
8	info	4.00	3.38	-2.59*
10	understan	3.69	2.78	-2.89*
11	experience	3.01	3.43	-3.22**
12	knowps	3.53	2.26	-3.38**
18	eyecontact	2.72	3.53	-3.25**
27	face	3.94	3.46	-2.26*
28	workpl	4.06	3.26	-3.50**
39	accchange	3.47	3.90	-2.05*
40	minsup	3.11	4.01	-3.13**
42	interact	3.22	4.03	-3.37**
43	pleasant	3.59	4.08	-2.29*
47	demon	3.40	3.85	-2.38*

\* $p < 0.05$ . \*\* $p < 0.001$ .

1. See Appendix for details of questionnaire items.

Prospects are both important prerequisites for employing individuals with Asperger syndrome.

This can be further supported by some of the qualitative comments concerning the quality of the service provided by Prospects. Organizations felt well supported by Prospects, 87.5 percent (28). When problems have occurred, in 75 percent (24) of cases Prospects had made contact within 48 hours. Of employing organizations, 59 per cent (17) felt 'very confident' that if problems did arise they would have support.

There were seven items that were found to be significantly more important to organizations not employing an individual with Asperger syndrome. These focused on the ability of the individual to behave in certain ways rather than the ability of the individual to do the job. These items are also associated with the ability of the individual to adapt to the organization, focusing in many cases on the ability of the individual to interact.

This can be further supported by the fact that these organizations do not see the provision of information and knowledge about the disorder as an important factor. They also fail to acknowledge the importance of an employment support worker in supporting the individual.

No significant differences were found relating to business type or size. Although marketing-oriented writers have suggested the possibility that differences exist across types of business and business size, only one study to date has found this. Nietupski (1992) found that respondents from four

business types – banks, grocers, credit unions and retailers – held relatively similar positive perceptions of supported employment.

## Discussion

Many of the items that were important to both types of organization were related to areas that might typically be difficult for an individual with Asperger syndrome. For example items relating to relevant information were found to be important to both types of organization. In many instances the ability to provide the right information at the right time can be seen as a skill in itself. However, it is a skill that cannot necessarily be taught but must be developed through interview practice:

The ability to think rapidly and under pressure, and to weigh up the underlying meaning behind questions, as well as to formulate appropriate answers is an area that has been documented as causing difficulties for people with Asperger's syndrome. (Howlin, 1997, p. 202)

Both types of organization focus on the importance of the individual rather than the organization in the provision of relevant information. Organizations using Prospects find the items relating to support and information regarding Asperger syndrome as significantly more important. On the other hand, organizations not employing an individual with Asperger syndrome focus more on the ability of the individual to behave in certain expected ways, an area that is difficult for people with Asperger syndrome:

Margaret, although a competent typist, insisted on having her work checked at the end of each page of typing. If a letter ran on to two pages, even by a few lines, she could not proceed until the first page was checked. (Howlin, 1997, p. 189)

Simon, generally a gentle and quiet worker in a library, became very upset if the work routine was disrupted in any way. His insistence that union meetings were held at lunch times or after work did not endear him to his colleagues. (Howlin, 1997 p. 189)

The fact that organizations not employing an individual with Asperger syndrome focused on the individual's ability to work in an established way, implies that the emphasis falls on the individual to make it work. By contrast, the organizations using Prospects were more open to information, implying an environment that was supportive and able to adapt to meet the needs of the individual. Organizations using Prospects rated effectiveness of employee to do the job as important, implying that organizations are willing to be supportive and adapt, but only if the individual is up to doing the job, which in most cases the Prospects clients have proved to be.

The study has provided some sound insights into the factors that influence employers, particularly regarding the similarities and differences between organizations currently using Prospects and organizations not. However, there are several methodological limitations which will now be discussed.

The questionnaire used was constructed from information collated from a focus group of employment support workers. It may have been useful to run a focus group within various personnel departments, as the information from organizations not using Prospects was taken from personnel staff. This may have provided more information regarding the factors relating to organizational policy, equal opportunities and policy development for the employment of people with learning disabilities. The questionnaire used contained only one item relating to this: item 30 'organisation's policy on Equal Opportunities'. This was found to be important to both types of organization.

The questionnaire was piloted on a small group of organizations that had used Prospects and a small sample of personnel staff working in a local council personnel department. Ideally a larger sample of organizations should have been used: this would have allowed for sufficient data to conduct a factor analysis to remove any items that were unreliable.

Overall the study achieved a response rate of 50 percent. Participation comprised 71 percent (29) of the organizations using Prospects and 29 percent (40) of the organizations currently not employing an individual with Asperger syndrome. Nietupski (1992) used a similar method to investigate employer perceptions of supported employment in general. The study surveyed organizations that had hired people with learning disabilities and organizations that had not and achieved an overall response rate of 49 percent. It seems the current study shares limitations typical of survey research, namely that it is difficult to determine the basis for participant responses.

The study failed to find significant results across the business type variable and the business size variable. While it has already been noted that this was not surprising as few significant results have been reported in the literature, it may also be due in some part to the small sample size, a limitation already noted earlier.

For future research, a qualitative study focusing on a sample of organizations using Prospects and organizations not employing an individual with Asperger syndrome may be a more effective research model. Rather than using a questionnaire, an interview schedule could be developed to focus on the content areas identified by the questionnaire. It would be worthwhile comparing findings as the issues explored are of a sensitive nature, and the design may have some impact upon results.



## Conclusion

Findings offer insights into factors that are important to organizations when making employment decisions. Items relating to support and information regarding the disorder are significantly more important to organizations employing an individual with Asperger syndrome. By contrast, it appears that organizations not involved in the employment of an individual with Asperger syndrome focus more on the ability of the individual to meet established expectations. This information can be used to help determine why some organizations are more geared towards employing an individual with Asperger syndrome than others. On the basis of that alone it is useful for improving job development efforts, as well as supported employment practice and education. Any future research conducted could enhance understanding of how employers view employment for individuals with Asperger syndrome and how schemes such as Prospects can best position themselves to overcome perceived difficulties for both the individual and the organizations involved in this area of employment.

## Appendix

### PROSPECTS SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT SERVICE RESEARCH SURVEY

As you may already know as part of my MSc Organisational Psychology research dissertation I am investigating the factors that influence organisations when employing an employee with Asperger's Syndrome. I would be grateful if you complete the questionnaire and return it to me in the stamped addressed envelope attached by the\_\_\_\_\_. All information given will be **completely confidential**, when research findings are reported back organisations will **not be individually named** and data collected will **be seen only by myself** and **used only** for this study.

As I am working with a limited sample, if you are no longer the key person involved with the employee and feel you are not the right person to complete the questionnaire I would be grateful if you could pass it on to a more appropriate person.

If you have any queries regarding this, I can be contacted on

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Many Thanks.

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Part One

General Information

Title/Position \_\_\_\_\_

Relationship to employee \_\_\_\_\_

Organisation/Nature of business \_\_\_\_\_

Part Two

**Instruction for Completion**

Please rate between 1 and 5 on the scale how important the following factors are when employing an employee with Asperger's Syndrome in your organisation. Please circle the number which applies most.

**Example 1:**

Neat presentation of an application form is of **no importance** in selecting for interview

1   2   3   4   5

**Example 2:**

Neat presentation of an application form is of great importance when selecting for interview

1   2   3   4   5

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Please consider the following factors:	No	Some	Moderate	High	Great
	Importance				
1. Application form reaching organisation before closing date	1	2	3	4	5
2. All documentation requested is supplied by potential employee	1	2	3	4	5
3. Information on application form is well presented	1	2	3	4	5
4. Information supplied on the application form is relevant	1	2	3	4	5
5. Skills are relevant to job specification	1	2	3	4	5
6. Experience is relevant to job specification	1	2	3	4	5
7. Gaps in work history are fully explained	1	2	3	4	5
8. Information is given regarding Asperger's Syndrome	1	2	3	4	5
9. Organisation's knowledge of Asperger's Syndrome	1	2	3	4	5
10. Organisation's understanding of Asperger's Syndrome	1	2	3	4	5
11. Organisation's previous experience of Asperger's Syndrome	1	2	3	4	5
12. Organisation's knowledge of Prospects Service	1	2	3	4	5
13. Organisation's previous experience of Prospects Service	1	2	3	4	5
14. Relevance of Asperger's Syndrome to the job in question	1	2	3	4	5
15. Ability to adapt interview to meet needs of Asperger's client	1	2	3	4	5
16. Input of Employment Support Worker to assist with interview	1	2	3	4	5
17. Personal presentation of potential employee at interview	1	2	3	4	5
18. Ability of potential employee to make eye contact in interview	1	2	3	4	5
19. Ability of potential employee to shake hands with interviewer	1	2	3	4	5
20. Ability of potential employee to provide relevant information	1	2	3	4	5
21. Ability of potential employee to answer questions at interview	1	2	3	4	5
22. Ability of potential employee to ask questions at interview	1	2	3	4	5
23. Visibility of traits associated with Asperger's Syndrome	1	2	3	4	5

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24. Nature of support given by Employment Support Worker at Int	1	2	3	4	5
25. Performance of other clients	1	2	3	4	5
26. Urgency of need to make a suitable appointment	1	2	3	4	5
27. Nature of Employment Support Worker contacts:-					
Phone Contacts	1	2	3	4	5
Written Correspondence	1	2	3	4	5
Face to Face contacts	1	2	3	4	5
28. Nature of Support Worker input in workplace	1	2	3	4	5
29. Resources available within organisation to accommodate employee with Asperger's Syndrome	1	2	3	4	5
30. Organisation's policy on Equal Opportunities	1	2	3	4	5
31. Potential cost of Employment Support Worker input	1	2	3	4	5
32. Ability of work individuals/team to adapt to employee with Asperger's Syndrome	1	2	3	4	5
33. Effectiveness of employee with Asperger's Syndrome to do job	1	2	3	4	5
34. Continued level of support needed	1	2	3	4	5
35. Attitudes of other workers	1	2	3	4	5
36. Ability of employee to conform to basic expectations	1	2	3	4	5
37. Capability to make recommended changes in work behaviours	1	2	3	4	5
38. Ability to stay on task without prompting	1	2	3	4	5
39. Willingness to accept change without decreasing effort	1	2	3	4	5
40. Ability to work with minimal supervision and direction	1	2	3	4	5
41. Ability to ask for supervisory help appropriately	1	2	3	4	5
42. Ability to interact with supervisor without anxiety	1	2	3	4	5
43. Ability to interact pleasantly and appropriately in the job	1	2	3	4	5
44. Ability to work co-operatively	1	2	3	4	5
45. Capability to establish friendships with co-workers	1	2	3	4	5
46. Ability to express oneself in social interactions	1	2	3	4	5
47. Ability to demonstrate sound cognitive skills in the job	1	2	3	4	5
48. Ability to relate to co-workers	1	2	3	4	5
49. Ability to accept routine assignments	1	2	3	4	5
50. Ability to respond appropriately to authority figures	1	2	3	4	5

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