



**Ambitious
about Autism**

Employ Autism:
From School to Work

Autism in the Workplace

**Untold Stories
Untapped Talent**

**Edited by
Jonathan Andrews FRSA**

Future Trainee Solicitor
at Reed Smith



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Introduction

By Jonathan Andrews FRSA, *editor*

Jonathan Andrews is a Future Trainee Solicitor at Reed Smith and an Ambitious about Autism Youth Patron

It's tempting to think that autism is not something employers need to worry about – that people with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are either super-smart and hyper-capable, able to excel in their “special interest” area (almost exclusively STEM-based) without any adjustments or understanding, or too “low-functioning” to work and not worth worrying about. It's through this prism that autism is often viewed in the media – but it is far too simplistic, and most do not fit these extremes.

Rather, autism is a spectrum, with differing levels of ability, and with autistic people being skilled in, and attracted to, many different roles. I felt it important to emphasise this wide range of talent and interest within the autistic spectrum because it's something all employers need to look out for and be aware of – **there really is no sector which someone with autism won't be interested in.**

As such, this booklet is a collection of a diverse group of people throughout the UK, each from a different walk of life; all have an ASD, but no two could be called identical and all have worked in very variant industries to each other. In the pages that follow they discuss how they feel about being open in the workplace, the kind of adjustments they feel they need and whether they can access these, and their hopes for the future.

I very much hope that this booklet can help raise understanding of autism, firstly among employers but also among readers in general. Autism really is an area recruiters in all fields need to get on top of, given that, due to increased diagnosis of autism over the past 20 years, there will soon be many more diagnosed autistic people applying for jobs than ever before. Understanding the condition in advance is crucial if companies want to make best use of the talents of these potential future employees.

The views and opinions in this booklet are those of the authors. They do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of Ambitious about Autism.

Morag Fraser

Morag graduated with an MA in Literary Studies from the University of Glasgow in 2005 and has since meandered between teaching, sales work and bookselling. She can now be found working at the Careers Centre at the University of St Andrews as Student Connections Facilitator.

Diagnosed at 29 with Asperger Syndrome, she is beginning again as an Aspergirl. Every day is an education, and Morag openly shares her experiences through her blog, sharing to aid self-reflection and increase awareness of women and Asperger's to all who will listen, amongst lengthy diatribes on film, TV and comics.

Having received my diagnosis later in life, every day has been a learning process. Trying to understand my own needs in general has been difficult, least of all expressing them. In trying to apply this at work I have been equally plodding along.

People do have some pre/misconceptions of what someone with ASD is like – nominally they look to what examples they have spotted in the media; predominantly masculine, good at numbers, bad at people, emotionless. That certainly is not the case with me – numbers and I have a mutual loathing for one another. I like people, but in small groups, ideally speaking one at a time. If anything I am far too sensitive full stop, feeling more and more like a Betazoid in Star Trek, with my mood mirroring what is detected around me. It's new to others as well, which is rough – women with Asperger's have a SOLID game face. To the point where some don't believe you, until you publicly flip out and go mute and scare the bejeezus out of people.

Policies around reasonable adjustments are left truly vague, with no examples of what this might relate to for anything other than physical ailments. The legislation they feed from is equally so, so with "invisible illnesses" there really isn't much in the way of reference points. A good chair is fine, but it really doesn't go far in reducing anxiety or stress, nor does it stave off a meltdown triggered by being over stimulated and painfully sensitive to sensory issue.

I have been very lucky, in that I have a manager and director who have been wholly supportive, not just

Autism and adjustments

generally, but in helping me to suss things out. Trying different things and learning to express myself in order to get to what might actually work have only come through conversations. With ASD, though two people may have similar side effects or tics, no two people are alike. I didn't know what might be helpful or unhelpful, I didn't understand, so how could they be expected to. Conversations and being able to speak freely has been massively important. The solutions I have in place have been very much collaborative in foundation. Being comfortable with speaking up about this is also challenging, so ensuring that you have someone consistently to talk to, and also who is willing to listen and learn alongside you is important. Just because they know someone with autism, or have worked with Aspies before does not mean they know you and how your autism affects you. What works for one is not universally effective, sometimes even the opposite.

I have also had support from a local autism charity, which was kind enough to come in and run a session about Asperger's and work for my office. When you work closely with colleagues, or in an open plan situation (not ideal – too many people, voices, sounds, smells, lights) you sort of feel as though you need to settle into your Game Face. It's one way of coping, but it takes a lot out of you and is asking for trouble. When I'm tired, or hungry, I'm more likely to boil over. You need to be ok, when things are not ok. And comfortable enough to find a safe space to cool off when things pile up. Your colleagues are naturally going to want to pitch in, help, or try to do what they think is helpful. If they understand what is going on, they are less likely to intercede and worsen the situation. I find being open about my AS makes sense; neurotypical folks scare easy.

By far, the best thing to do is to take each day as it comes, and try to plan for it. Think logically and bust down what you need to do into little steps.



Gareth

This works when dealing with new things. I had a great example of this inaction. I have to go to a conference tomorrow. I was really worried about it, had no idea how I would manage. My director suggested I speak to the organiser, so I sent an email. The person was really helpful. We worked through the day together, and thought about things in terms of logistics. She organised to meet me just ahead of the start, show me around so I could see the spaces. She has also made a quiet room available for me for the day, so that if I get overwhelmed I have somewhere to go that isn't me locked in a toilet. She also has arranged with the caterers to put aside a little bagged lunch, and planned out the whole day.

I suppose everything comes down to communication for me. Working life is so very different, until you have been in it, and can understand where you fit in, and what would make you feel more comfortable, it's really hard to put into words what you need. It could be something as simple as having toys at your desk, being allowed space of your own, getting the 'ok' to use headphones or flexible working hours – I get to work from home for part of the week. Being ok with not being ok, being ok with people knowing. Understanding yourself and being understood in turn makes a world of difference. It frees you up to get on with things, work and make a contribution.

Yes, work is made more stressful and anxiety-ridden by the way I'm wired. **Adjustments don't need to be big. Simple things, little things make a world of difference.** None of it is silly, there isn't a wrong answer really. Some things might be less feasible than others, especially if you are client-facing, but there is no harm in asking and trouble-shooting together. A 30-year-old with a teddy bear on her knee? Not a good look. Fine, now I am in a different role and any weepiness and bear grasping happens out of sight.

Gareth is a recent graduate of Computer Science at the University of Kent.

Autism has always been a word that disrupts conversation – be it a lack of understanding of what autism is or that it's a "disability" and should be swept under the carpet, never spoken of again.

So how does autism take its place in the workplace? It doesn't.

At least, that's the opinion from most modern workplaces – few employers seem to take the effort to understand autism and despite legislation to prevent autistic applicants being rejected due to their diagnosis, it can make the process much more difficult. However, as with all things, there's more than one refraction of the subject through the prism of perception – more than just a black and white answer.

Autism in the application

When applying for jobs, in my own experience, I find myself learning about the interviewers rather than the company. Before even meeting them, I try to craft a mask in order to give the best impression – as most would do. At the interview, nerves often get the better of me and this mask begins to warp, showing cracks. So when the interview begins, most can see the attitude I adopt, the mask I craft is always honest to myself but selective to the situation. However they can also see the cracks and things slip through... This can cause different reactions, from disbelief to amusement, though more than once the word "unprofessional" has been included in a rejection.

Some employers look past it, concentrating on what I've demonstrated rather than the mistakes – after all, nerves are natural. I'm treated as a "normal" person. Others politely and often with fake sincerity try to explain that I interviewed well but I'm just "not what they're looking for". Some try their best to understand and smile, stating the fateful words "This just isn't the place for you". Oddly (or not), I'm more offended by that last reaction. That's rejection however – and there's no good method whether the potential applicant is autistic or not. Still, there are better ways to reject someone – for me, I'd

Autism in the workplace: Unconventional thinking in a conventional environment

rather be told straight. Then there are the successful applications – but even then, you're a risk. **No matter the behaviour, autism seems to colour employer's perceptions more than they'll admit.** During applications, autism can make a frightening task that much more difficult, especially when companies reduce potential employees to facts and figures.

Autism in the environment

When an application is successful, the trials often don't end once the contract is signed but it's the time when I can put the advantages my autistic traits provide to the road and get some traction. So what's the most important thing about the first day?

The team. The people. This isn't always the case—there are environments where they just expect you to do your job and for someone autistic, this is a lot easier. However in other workplaces, particularly in industries such as computing, employers are often more concerned with how well you integrate.

So the first day... that's when the masks are dusted and shuffled, ready for the poker game of "I'm new." How integration happens doesn't bother most employers, though it does concern other team members – being several people at once to different people isn't normal social behaviour. My first days on the job involve adapting or creating masks, resulting in a flexible identity to use – though this can take several months to polish. Even so, you can't get along with everyone and I'm often particularly sensitive to rejection from others during this time. As such, I find I'd prefer my employer's understanding at this point, as too often I'm criticised for being chatty, regardless how much work is completed. Once the social aspect becomes easier, there's the job. This is usually easier and something that I tend to enjoy but I've found that some employers can make this difficult.

As I am, I'm fairly honest and slow to get traction but frequently a perfectionist. Depending on the job, this can be ideal but an element of playing fast and loose with the truth is too often involved in the workplace and working quickly is something managers like. This is usually where friction develops for me – no

matter how I adapt, I'm stubborn with my own beliefs and this can mean I become disobedient. I can be too honest or I take too long at a job and nobody understands that what I've made is so polished you can see your expression in it. So this is an area I believe employers need to have more understanding – **from my knowledge, a lot of people on the spectrum have their own ways of accomplishing tasks and, if left to do so freely, end up achieving better results.** Employers find that very hard to understand and I have once had to leave a job because of it.

Disclosing autism

So after all of this, what is my opinion on disclosing autism to employers or in the workplace? **The frank answer is that I tend not to. Officially written down, the condition escalates as those higher up in the hierarchy see the dreaded word and pass judgement.** My usual tactic is to let my employers judge for themselves – let them witness what I can do and how I do it and only disclose it to a few if I feel they really need to know. This tactic has a failure rate however... and it can be high. It would be simpler and easier to be able to disclose that I'm autistic and explain what that means. This is where employers would benefit from knowing more about autism and would certainly help prevent over-reactions. Autism doesn't define me; there's a reason the name on the application form is Gareth. It just means I follow different paths to most.

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Georgia Granger

Georgia is autistic and a disability advocate in Northern Ireland. She is also a political activist and studies linguistics at university, focusing on political and socio-linguistics, with her academic studies, activism and advocacy benefitting from special interests in politics and linguistics. She has worked in several jobs during her studies at university.

I'm a twenty year old autistic student at Queen's University Belfast, studying a BA in English and Linguistics. My autism was missed when I was younger so I did my entire education through mainstream schools with no extra support, and I got 5 A*s and 5 As at GCSE, 37 in the International Baccalaureate and got into my degree programme where I'm on track to get a high 2:1 or a First. I hope to go on to do post-graduate study of some sort. I've done multiple internships and work placements in different settings, and do volunteering and activism for as much time as I can give to it, usually at least a few hours every week. I have hyperfocus, enjoy repetitive tasks such as copying data or filing things, am really good at researching, and often find solutions that other people don't see. These are all good things that I achieve or experience because of my autism, not despite it. My autism has helped me a huge amount in academia and it has meant that I have really strong interests in certain areas that I am able to volunteer. I also have sensory processing issues, general anxiety, chronic pain and very limited energy levels, again, because of aspects of my autism. My autism affects every aspect of my life, sometimes positively, sometimes negatively and most often neutrally — it just makes things very different for me than they might be for other people.

My way of working is often intense, with hyperfocus for hours on end and then (necessary) long breaks to recuperate. With hyperfocus, I am able to focus in a similar way to how people are expected to work in exam settings, with high levels of concentration to produce high quality work. The difference is I can do it for a whole day with very few breaks, and without getting distracted or losing momentum. It comes very naturally to me and

was something I did automatically as a child when interested in something, but it also ends up with my brain struggling to focus at all the next day. It's great for meeting deadlines and for being able to deal with multiple tasks quickly. I can spend a morning dedicated to one, finish it, then dedicate the afternoon to another, and I am happy to use it in work settings since it's such a high level of productivity that also has really good quality results. However, I can only do this if I know I'll be able to take the time I need to recover from it — usually the same length of time I was focused for, without any requirements for social or intellectual engagement.

This is one of the ways in which my autism can be difficult to navigate in a workplace. I constantly have to balance how much effort and energy I put into something with whether I'll have the time to recover from it. Obviously I want to give my best to any job but I can't give that level of focus on finishing a project if I know I have to come in to work the next day, or if my work day isn't long enough for me to finish the project. It's really difficult for me to start and stop something I'm working on while that focussed. If I was able to work with flexible hours, it would be much easier for me to be able to put that level of effort into work and be able to get the best results rather than feeling like I'm giving 30% effort to a task, just so I can be able to come in the next day to also give 30% effort, instead of giving 100% one day and taking some time off the next day. I don't need time off every day, and not every task benefits from hyperfocus, but it is a very useful tool that I'd like to be more able to use.

The sensory landscape of the workplaces I've been in has also been very difficult for me to deal with. The work I've done so far has been in offices, doing different kinds of computer-based work. The offices I've worked in were open-plan, where even if I wasn't required to do phone work and didn't have a desk phone, there would be phones ringing and people speaking on them all day — my brain can't "tune out" other noises around me, it always focuses on them and it means I can't really do anything else but listen to them. In one office, I was told that I

couldn't put earbuds in, even without music playing, because it didn't look like I was working even though I was still doing the task I had been assigned of writing content for a website. Office lights quite often make me feel anxious (a sign for me that I'm getting close to a sensory overload) because I'm hypersensitive to light levels and they are usually a bright blue-white light, whereas I work best in dim lighting or with warm-coloured lights. Natural light is also quite difficult for me because of it changing throughout the day so I can't work next to windows. Most office chairs make me fidgety because I prefer sitting cross-legged on the floor. I find it really difficult to work at a regular desk if I'm doing computer work as I'm much more able to focus if I have a laptop on my knee, or at least a keyboard, because then it feels like I have a tactile connection to what I'm meant to be doing. I can work in places with unfriendly sensory environments (since most places have unfriendly sensory environments, I do work in them on a very regular basis), but the consequences are that I will find it difficult to focus. I'll potentially be slightly distracting for other people through fidgeting or getting up to walk around because I can't focus. My work won't be of as high a standard as it should be and I may even have an autistic shutdown which is where I become unable to do anything (including any verbal communication) and would probably have to leave the workplace for a few hours to recover. Working in that kind of place is unpleasant for me and it's also not good for my employer as they don't get anywhere near the kind of work that I'm capable of and aren't getting what they hired me for.

The same as most non-autistic people, I want to do my best at a job that fulfils me that I'm good at, in a place I enjoy working in. However, almost any employment for me means working in a way that is contradictory to how my brain works, in a setting with sensory input that my brain struggles with processing. It means dealing with a set of social expectations that are for someone with a different type of brain to me; that's a challenging thing to deal with for something you do every day. I will already be

making quite big compromises between what feels comfortable to me and what my employer wants. I'll do what I can to make sure I get the desired end goal, it's just that my steps to get there might be a bit different.

I've lived with my autism my whole life and I know it pretty well. If someone is impressed by my CV and chooses to hire me based on it, then they need to recognise that I did everything on that CV while being autistic. All of my references compliment the work I did while being autistic, and all of my academic grades were awarded to me because of the things I did with my autistic brain. **Choosing to hire me based on my autistic accomplishments and then expecting me to work in a non-autistic way doesn't really make much sense.**

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Jack Welch

A 22-year-old graduate in English and Creative Writing, Jack has been an active advocate for causes in greater inclusivity of people with learning disabilities in society and for young people to have a role in decisions that affect them. Working with charities like Mencap and Ambitious about Autism, he has a great motivation in looking at how lives for people with disabilities can be improved, as well as a pleasure in meeting the many inspiring people wanting to make a difference too.

His interests beyond social action include current affairs and politics, mixed with reading and travelling for relaxation.

Throughout my education, where I was placed for that entire period in a comprehensive setting, it is from hindsight that having the support mechanisms tailored for your needs at school is a much easier request compared to what is needed in transition to adulthood. Whether it may be assistance in the classroom or extra time in examination, those provisions change somewhat in employment, access as an adult is a more daunting prospect. As a graduate from university, which sadly still stands as a limited opportunity for many of those diagnosed with a learning disability, the assumption may be I have no exceptional considerations for employers to take into account. I am perfectly mobile and with sufficient communication skills that would not need close monitoring.

However, the process of applying for roles can often become a draining process in itself. For many graduate vacancies, some roles require shortlisted candidates to attend assessment centres and partake as any other person in the various tasks throughout the day. Not only having to travel outside of your home area, you will be thrown into group exercises with complete strangers. For many autistic people, such an idea like this will immediately cancel their potential out of the process. In the past I've tried to feel more able in coping with such challenges. In an assessed interview once I had only 15 minutes to plan a response to a scenario which would form the basis of a test by interviewers. If I had perhaps spoken up that I needed more time,

Employment and disability: An insoluble barrier?

or that I found processing new information and responding in such a short space of time beyond what I can excel at, then perhaps I may have stood a better chance of success.

Returning back to hindsight, it is easy to recognise now that the job market is hostile in comparison to the support I received in education. **Being on the mild autistic bracket can make it more difficult to declare what may look like your 'limitations'** as opposed to going into an environment where you are equal among the others, with an equal right for consideration. It is the job of recruiters to emphasise the desire for inclusivity and how they believe the skills of someone with a learning disability can benefit an organisation. Beyond having adjustments or being viewed as 'high maintenance', your contributions and talent that are on offer are greeted with open arms, regardless of the means to make that a success.

Across the UK, a disproportionately low number of people with learning disabilities are currently in employment, with just 7% of adults according to the Foundation for People with learning disabilities with a full or part time role. For autistic people, that is as little as 15%. It stands as a scar in society that many employers are not equipped to support those with more disadvantages than most in life. More than that though, both teachers and employers are not sufficiently accounting for the further demands when employment brings a possibility of greater independence for a young adult just starting life in work, but the many situations attached to that. From responsible management of wages to finding a work-life balance, the pastoral care of those with learning disabilities is more serious when they have moved away from home and are adapting to a new routine in a workplace.

From my own experiences, I like to think myself as adaptable and comfortable within a fast-paced work environment. My typical requests for those that manage me, like not loading excessive tasks when previous ones are still incomplete or sending work documents in an electronic format so I may be able to process them in my own time and if working from

home feel to me appropriate adjustments. However, equally it is easy to imagine yourself burdening what could be an already over-stressed and rushed colleague to support on a personally tailored level.

Being in work is the principle of pushing yourself further and to gain new skills that advance your working life, but when it is easy to feel discriminated by employers or faced with prospects of working in both low skilled and low paid roles, the impression of employers not wanting to expand their diversity of workforce can only be intensified. In a Masters dissertation from a former school teacher and adult volunteer in projects I am involved with, her focus on barriers to employment for those with learning disabilities in forms of welfare, bullying and physical capacity. Action on all sides by government to employers can change this – it is not as steep to embrace inclusivity as it may seem and when the potential is not undermined by the disabling factors in disability. An environment which hosts employees from all backgrounds can breakdown those perceptions which poisons society today. Until then, employers will never know of the real assets brought to the development of their organisations.



Being on the mild autistic bracket can make it difficult to declare what may look like your ‘limitations’



Craig

My name is Craig, I'm 35 years old and have a diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome. I've been exceptionally lucky in that my condition has actually helped me find a niche for my employment.

Like many people who register high on the spectrum I often find that I view the world slightly differently to other people, often much more simplistically, but sometimes I'm aware of far more detail than others.

In my role as a software developer this has been quite a useful tool. On the down-side, I frequently find it really hard to understand new programming concepts. However, when it comes to building an interface for people to use I'm much more capable than most of recognising what's confusing and what feels natural to an end-user.

I only received my diagnosis a year and a half ago so understanding how autism affects me in the workplace is still an on-going process for me. From my late teens to early twenties I've been treated and medicated for extreme anxiety and depression. Having a diagnosis of autism has made such a wonderful difference to how I view my mental health and my outlook on the world.

One of the most tangible benefits I've felt is in the workplace. I no longer feel so angry at myself for being able to pick one thing up far quicker than others, and yet finding something apparently similar being permanently out of my reach. This has really helped me focus my efforts in my career towards more attainable goals.

For the past 17 years I've been a generic 'Web Software Developer', being responsible for all aspects of making programs, from gathering requirements, designing databases and configuring security systems to constructing the front-end (the bit the user actually sees and interacts with).

By understanding my strengths and weaknesses, and how my condition directly affects them, I've realigned my career path towards a focus on the front-end. Since making this realisation a year or so ago, my daily anxiety of going to work has lifted considerably. **I still struggle with the noise and social interactions required to hold down a full**

Working with autism

time position but by being confident that I'm capable of the entirety of my role rather than being strong in some areas and not others, I can face these challenges much more easily.

As well as making internal changes to my outlook on working, receiving a diagnosis has given me the confidence to discuss my challenges with my employer. I hope that some of the really simple adjustments that have been made for me may be useful for others.

- I offset my hours from 09:00 - 17:30 to 09:30 - 18:00. This small change means I have less traffic to deal with on my commute in the mornings and so I can concentrate better when I arrive.
- I moved to a quieter part of the office so that the background noise of the sales team was not so intrusive (I have a lot of trouble filtering out noise, especially voices).
- I got my employer to agree to give me a reserved parking space. This way I can spend my lunch break in my car where it's quiet and I can give my internal 'social interaction batteries' a chance to recharge for the afternoon.

Even with these adjustments in my attitude and working environment, I still find it extremely difficult to hold down a career at times. My urge is all too often to escape to solitude and away from working to timescales and complex specifications. However, by understanding that I'm not perfect but I have real worth in my role, I still make it into work each day. When I have a good, productive day at work it still feels great.

By understanding that I'm not perfect but I have real worth in my role, I still make it into work each day. When I have a good, productive day at work it still feels great.



Becky

Things that are helpful:

- Being able to **listen to music and have headphones** this helps me absorb myself in tasks and **minimise office distractions**.
- Having the option to move round the office to different desks and areas such as sofas as helps to refocus and helps with senses.
- Having **clear points of contact** for any queries or questions I have.
- Being involved at the heart of decisions about me and being listened to about what I need **rather than people assuming the types of things I need or being afraid to ask me**. Then things go undone and it doesn't help me be productive as people close down rather than just asking.
- By listening to me, I always say I am open to questions but despite that people still stereotype me as they aren't confident to ask so I end up being held back sometimes in roles on the basis of people's stereotypes. Instead businesses need to get confident at just asking! And **involve the individual**, they're the expert, rather than meeting about them without them.
- Misconceptions can also lead to people making ill-thought-out judgments about a person's performance and abilities; instead speak to the person! Ensure a buddy is in place who is open to hearing direct answers to things. This is a big struggle as when adjustments go unimplemented frustration builds, I then get told off for saying how I feel about it or for saying I'm entitled to have something. Having a buddy to say how it is without having to worry about, "Oh no! What if I come across as too frustrated or emotive?" can help prevent managers thinking someone is badly behaved when actually they're just upset by not having their adjustments in place. **Buddies also help with wider office understanding**.
- **Perhaps get training in ASD awareness but again don't make assumptions off the back of being told what autism is, as all people are different so should be consulted individually.**

Although sadly firms won't always allow this and it's harder to fund with access to work cuts.

- Don't make assumptions about facial expressions sometimes people think I'm cross as I frown when reading but actually this is because, due to a learning disability, I find reading hard so I'm just concentrating.
- **Don't assume we can't interact with people:** I'm in a client-facing role. People with autism can actually care more about people and what's best for them than some neurotypical people do.
- The hardest relationships are with team members and bosses as these are more intense than the business relationships. Your team are around a lot! **So allowing us space to go somewhere else to work in the building can help ease the pressure**. Also allowing us to express concerns and how we feel without treating it as naughty can help us be honest about what we want to achieve in our career and air things that perhaps need to be changed.



George Harvey

My name is George Harvey. I am 21 years old and I have been diagnosed with autism since I was three. My condition has made life challenging for me, but I've always strived to do my best despite my limitations. In recent years, I've been very ambitious about using my skills in creative/professional writing to raise awareness of autism and give motivation to others like me. In the past, I've written for the *NAS Communication* magazine (Summer 2013), and made contributions to books such as *Successful Studying* (2013) and *Making Our Mark* (2015). My dream is to one day write a successful children's book series that touches on disabilities and personal issues.

I have worked as a checkout operator for almost three years now. I've personally never had an experience where my autism has caused me discrimination at work; the people I work with are respectful and treat me the same as any other colleague. However, I think it is important for managers (and the like) to be aware of their employees' autism, if they have it. This isn't to say the condition should be made a big deal of and it should never affect how fellow colleagues see or treat that person. But it will help them to remember that certain colleagues need additional help sometimes.

Whilst it's never happened to me, personally, I have heard cases where somebody was turned down for a job, because of their autism. In other cases, people have applied for things like driving lessons and only informed their instructor about their condition later, which then harmed their relationship. Naturally, not everyone understands the effects of autism and not everyone feels they can deal with a condition they have no experience of. Sometimes there are only certain driving instructors who specialise in teaching autistic students. However, **the fact that somebody has autism should never determine whether they'll be given a job or not.**

The misconception is that because **someone with autism may have learning difficulties, they won't be able to handle the pressures/requirements of a certain job. But if this were true, why would**

they apply for the job to begin with? If anything, they have better knowledge of their autism and what their limitations are. So if they're still passionate about applying for the job regardless, they clearly don't think their autism will be much of an issue.

Of course, **it is still important to inform managers (and the like) about having autism. Just because there won't be as many issues as they might think, it doesn't mean there won't be any at all.** If a person with autism knows their limitations, they'll know if there's something that could pose a challenge to them in a role. If this is the case, they should be given the opportunity to tell managers, recruiters, etc. what they might need - preferably during their application process. Usually these requirements are very small and don't affect a job (or management) too greatly. **The slightest thing, like one-to-one support or being reminded regularly of how things work, will make all the difference to somebody with autism.** And soon they'll be settled enough into a job that they won't need additional help or support anymore.

Everyone's worried about making mistakes, but sometimes having autism makes a small mistake seem big. Managers (and the like) should be aware that autistic employees may be more stressed when starting out, which is why they sometimes need additional help. They should also be aware that just because an applicant requests additional help with some things, it doesn't mean they won't have the skills to do a good job. They just want to be assured that they'll be supported during their early days/weeks and can settle in more easily. It's not like they'll come into a job and request it be drastically altered just to better suit themselves. If they knew there was too much about a role they couldn't handle then they wouldn't have bothered applying for it.

In my opinion, any kind of application should allow people to say if they have a condition, like autism, and note down some additional requirements they may have. But I don't think this should affect whether somebody will be given a job. That's why I

think information about disabilities should be given at the end of an application form, so the people making the decisions can judge people on their work skills first - after all, this is what they're looking for in an application. If the applicant really wants to make it clear they have a condition straight away then they can mention it in their profile/summary - in addition to the section at the end. If application forms were completed this way, the beginning would have to state that applicants will have the opportunity to mention their disabilities and requirements at the end, but it won't affect their chances of employment.



One final thing worth mentioning is that **I feel managers (and the like) shouldn't tell other employees about certain colleagues having autism.** This should be left up to the people themselves, so they won't feel like they're being singled out and others won't treat them differently because they know about their condition. People should be given the opportunity to settle into their new workplace and establish themselves on their own. Then they can let fellow colleagues know about their conditions when they feel it's appropriate. Even to this day, there are people at work who don't know about my autism. But I prefer it that way, as I don't always like to make a spectacle of my condition. I only bring it up when I feel it's necessary.

In summary, what I'm saying is this. Employability should be decided on a person's work skills and (sometimes) their experience. Although an applicant still has the responsibility to tell employers about



their autism, how much it's made an issue of should be left up to them. They will know their limitations and requirements better than the employer, and they'll know how often they want their autism brought up in conversation. It's up to the managers, employers, etc. to be prepared and offer additional help when, and only when, it's requested.

Some workplaces have the things I've mentioned in place already. But if all of them did, people with autism would feel less concerned about their ability to be employed and the community would be a better place.



Just because an applicant requests additional help with some things, it doesn't mean they won't have the skills to do a good job... if anything, they have better knowledge of their autism and what their limitations are.

Fern Adams

I have just completed a degree in Politics with International Relations. Prior to university I spent one year volunteering in Uganda where I taught in a primary school and worked in a medical clinic. Since starting university I have spent a year studying in Toronto, worked as a research assistant, worked in a soup kitchen and worked with international students. I am now looking at working for a Non-Government Organisation in Eastern Africa before hopefully returning to university to study for a Masters and PhD in Forced Migration and Refugee studies. I was diagnosed with high-functioning autism as a teenager.

Having just finished studying at university, I, like all other graduates, am facing the 'real world' of work. While I intend to return to university again in a year for a Masters and then hopefully PhD, I am keen to be able to get paid work experience in the meantime.

This has proved more difficult than I expected. Jobs that describe themselves as having social trips for staff, working in an office from 9-5 and having to cope with commuting at rush hour are all things I look at with absolute dread. However, before even facing the stage of getting a job there are plenty of other obstacles in the way first. A particular one is the interview, or rather getting to an interview. Considering I really dislike public transport and have absolutely no sense of direction (I was still getting lost in my third year at university) travelling to an interview is the most challenging part. I normally have to do a practice run which means arriving extra early. I need to check, double check and triple check the transport situation, I get very stressed being on transport and have to do all this while wearing an uncomfortable outfit. By the time I arrive I normally have a headache and am close to completely shutting down due to having taken all of the stress I can in one day, as a result my adrenaline has already gone by the time I start answering questions. My interview performance therefore I often don't feel is my best. Most of the jobs I have managed to get have been carried out over Skype or have been very close to my home environment.

When I have managed to get work, some paid but mostly voluntary, I have really enjoyed it and often get thoroughly involved. Jobs such as waitressing and working in large noisy and bright supermarkets are out due to sensory overload and reduced motor skills, I have as a result ended up with more unusual and diverse work experience. The more challenging the task at hand the better. I have worked as a research assistant, TESOL classroom assistant, helped found a voluntary run pay-what-you-can cafe that looked at reducing food waste and volunteered at a food kitchen for people who were homeless and on low incomes. But the most enjoyable, rewarding and successful experiences have been internationally based.

While many people would associate the idea of someone with autism and international work as two spheres that perhaps would not work and should not be mixed, I have found that in many ways the opposite is true. While not every person has the same experience, I have found that for me autism manifests itself outwardly in a working environment through anxiety, lack of grasping social clues, dislike of office talk and inability to sit in an office from 9-5, five days a week. Working abroad however often makes these challenges easier to deal with and sometimes completely gets rid of them. Everybody moving to a new country faces nerves, and often have to learn the social clues, customs and how to fit in. For a person with autism, this has often applied to them within their own country also. Therefore they are by no means a novice at being the odd one out and having to put effort into what is going on around them; which for a neurotypical person would not normally be something they have dealt with. Put the neurotypical in an international environment and they have to learn the skills to pick up the things that they would normally find easy; the autistic person by comparison is several stages ahead having done this all their life. Similarly office small talk can become much easier as you can use this time to find out about the country and culture. It is expected already that you might not understand the conversation around you so it is explained and other people want to know about your culture too.



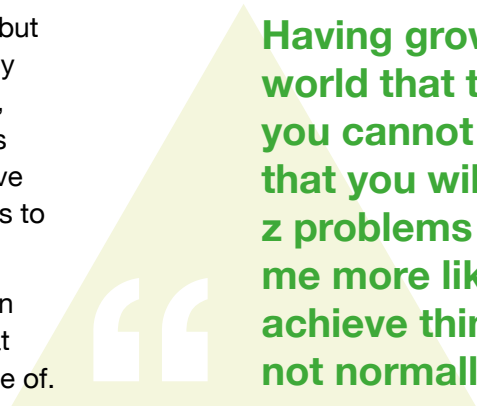
Furthermore, international work provides handbooks in living that your own country might not give you. Going abroad, it is likely you will pick up a country guide which will provide detailed instructions on things such as public transport, customs, etiquette, and how to do various tasks. These are things you would in your own country just be expected to pick up and know how to do; something not always so simple for the autistic person. Alongside this I have found that anxiety tends to be less severe as well. I think this is due to the fact that as there is so much information to collect, and everything is so new, there is less time to think about being anxious. When anxiety does occur it is often easier to find reasons why this is the case which then makes it more logical to deal with. In the UK, I may get anxious getting the bus I have been getting for weeks and not be able to provide myself with a logical reason as to why this is, therefore my anxiety will increase further creating a vicious circle. Working abroad I am able to work through these sorts of anxieties in a more logical manner, as they make more sense to me and others.

Having spent a year living and working in Uganda with Project Trust, it became apparent that in other cultures it can be the case that autistic traits are not given such a negative stereotype as in the UK but are viewed as skills and talents. In Uganda, autism awareness is fairly non-existent; however traits such as determination, hard work and the ability to remember and collect knowledge is valued more than in the UK. During my time in Uganda I started off teaching a few subjects in a primary school but by the end of the year was head of two departments and school first aider. I also worked in a medical clinic where I started off by cleaning equipment but by being keen to pick up skills and knowledge by the end of my time I was dispensing medication, looking for malarial parasites under microscopes and assisting in basic operations. The skills I have that are directly related to my autism allowed this to become possible.

For many autistic people I know, a lot of time can be spent in work and elsewhere trying to combat stereotypes and in proving what they are capable of.

Being frequently told by people or asked 'if you're autistic, how come you can talk?' or 'how come you managed to make it to university?' can lead to a determination to prove people wrong and that you can be successful in your own right. I think from this skills are developed which can be invaluable to employers as well as being useful in starting your own business, enterprise and projects successfully. For me, hearing someone say that something cannot be done, makes me want to try and see if this is true. Having grown up in a world that tells you that you cannot achieve and that you will have x, y and z problems has made me more likely to try and achieve things that would not normally be done. Without this I would not have studied in Canada for a year, worked in Uganda or helped set up a cafe that aims to provide food for donations only. Working in jobs, it has helped to give me the drive that if something needs achieving and looks difficult I am not afraid to tackle it or look at alternative ways it can be achieved. Just because something may not appear straightforward does not mean that it is impossible.

Being autistic has by no means made employment impossible. As a result of being on the spectrum I face difficulties other people will never have to consider; but I also have strengths and skills that can be utilised that other people may find harder to achieve or may not have. Autism therefore really offers itself as a 'glass half full or half empty' when examining it in an employment setting. I think which one it is though really is up to the individual, employer and the rest of the staff.



Having grown up in a world that tells you that you cannot achieve and that you will have x, y and z problems has made me more likely to try and achieve things that would not normally be done.

Alex Lowery

Alex Lowery was born in October 1993, and diagnosed with Classic Autism at the age of four. When he was seven his IQ was 73 and his parents were told not to expect too much. Despite this Alex has exceeded everyone's expectations. He is a public speaker, author, trainer and autism campaigner. In his short life he has met with MPs, won awards and helped to arrange an 'Autism into Employment' conference. Alex's motto in life is that you have to keep on moving forward despite whatever difficulties you face. He's written a book about his life with autism called *Thinking Club: A filmstrip of my life as a person with autism*.

The first time I ever got a feeling of the workplace was back when I was 16. I had some work experience in my father's office. I did some basic jobs like stamping post, printing and indexing. I found that I kept on having to do the same job for hours on end. I got extremely bored. Now, don't get me wrong: I know that office work isn't the most fun job to do for anyone, but I especially struggled with it. I found that I got so bored that I simply couldn't keep my attention on the work. I also wasn't great at hiding the fact that I was bored. I started to exhibit stereotypical autistic behaviours which stuck out to everyone. My dad's colleagues started to worry about me when they saw me. They thought perhaps I was unwell. They also may have interpreted my behaviour as being rude. None of these things were the case. I was just really struggling to cope with the job because I found it so stressful. A lot of the jobs I had to do, I enjoyed to begin with but after a while I just got really tired of them, and couldn't help but really struggle to cope with them. I remember thinking 'when I come to look for a job when I'm older, there is no way that I'm going to work in an office'.

Five years later, I still stand by the fact that there is no way I could cope with working in an office. Issues like this are a few of the many, many reasons why it's so hard for adults with autism to find work. It's hard to find the right job that suits the right individual. There is also the issue that employers and colleagues rarely understand the condition.

This was even the case for me when I did this work experience at 16. Sadly, only 15% of adults with autism in the UK are in full time paid employment. However, we know that many, many more can work and want to work. There's just such a lack of understanding and support out there that it's extremely hard for these adults to find work.

I think that self-employment can be one of the best options for adults with autism. If they have the necessary support, self-employment can work well, because they can go into business doing something which they're good at. Many people with autism have gifts and/or obsessive interests. They'll likely have a really high level of knowledge in their favourite subjects that they may be able to use to their advantage. It can be a good idea to broaden out an obsessive interest or gift into something they may be able to make a career out of. If they're obsessed with politics, maybe they can get some form of job working in politics. If they're obsessed with films, film reviewing and criticism, maybe they can become a professional film-critic. As well as having autism myself, I have an obsessive interest in autism, and I've managed to use my high level of knowledge and insight into the condition to my advantage.

As a teenager, I was worried I may become one of these autistic adults who would never get a job. I remember at the age of 14, I saw men with autism in their twenties who weren't doing much with their lives. They were maybe doing one college course after another but they were doing nothing else in life. I've seen autistic adults who literally spend their whole time walking around town. I've even known some autistic adults who are just stuck indoors all the time. I remember thinking 'I do not want this to become my future'. I am now in my own business, delivering talks around the country on the subject of autism.

It began when I was 17. I was asked to do a talk for an audience at St. John's Ambulance and the speech went really well. I was then trained in public speaking by Autism Cymru. I kept on getting more and more opportunities to speak for audiences.

It eventually led to me going into business doing public speaking on autism. I became self-employed in around August 2013 at age 19. I am very happy that I now have a job; it's like a dream come true. But this doesn't change the fact that at times it has been hard. I've found the job exhausting, and I do have a tendency to only focus one task (for my job) at a time as opposed to focusing on everything. This can be a disadvantage when there's such a lot to do.

It's quite clear to me that there is no way I'd be able to do it if I didn't have all the support from my family. My mother is involved with everything and will take me to do some of my talks, although when necessary I get support from someone who's paid through access to work. My father manages the accounts, my sister-in-law built my website and designed all my leaflets and business cards. I strongly believe that with the right support and the right job, individuals with autism can thrive. There are also many benefits to employing a person with autism.

I am, with the support of my family and a number of organisations, running an 'Autism into Employment' conference in Wales, because of how much this struggle to find work is a growing problem for people with autism. As well as raising awareness I would like to set up a support group for adults with autism. I would like to get funding for social skills training and self-employment support for this group.

Sadly, only 15% of adults with autism in the UK are in full time paid employment. However, we know that many, many more can work and want to work. There's just such a lack of understanding.



Dami Benbow

Dami Benbow is the Participation Coordinator for the charity Ambitious about Autism working on a new civic engagement project for young people with autism: myVoice. He was diagnosed with ADHD in his early childhood and autism when he was 14 years old. Dami started his journey in youth participation when he was elected deputy young mayor of Lewisham at 15 and then went on to become a volunteer youth worker for the project helping young people from disadvantaged backgrounds use politics to improve their lives. Dami has recently completed a degree in politics and parliamentary studies from the University of Leeds where he completed a one year political internship before taking up his role at Ambitious about Autism. Everything Dami does is driven by the singular goal of giving young people the opportunity to discover where their passion lies, in the same way he was given that opportunity when he was 15.

Every young person growing up struggles to think of their place in the world, what their future will look like and whether they are going down the right path. Every young person feels this, that's why it's called growing up. That process, however, is complicated when you receive a diagnosis of autism. I received my autism diagnosis when I was 14 years old and all of a sudden my world had changed. I didn't even know autism existed until I was diagnosed with it.

I always thought there was "something" wrong with me, I was diagnosed with ADHD at five and I was different from the other kids, I was constantly getting into trouble at school but I always thought that was just me. However now there was more concrete reason to explain my "behaviour". This didn't mean that receiving a diagnosis of autism made things better however, I now saw myself as disabled, I was less of a person, there would always be things I would never be able to do. Now you may read this and think that is ridiculous for someone to think, but try to put yourself into the mind of a 14 year old whose entire experience of "disability" came from the mainstream media.

Although I am sure there are some who will criticise me for not having a more positive view of disability

could you even really blame me for thinking that way? 25% of autistic people progress to further and higher education, 26% of university graduates are unemployed and only 15% of autistic people are in full time employment. These statistics are shocking. Maybe the reason I felt so bad about my diagnosis, and the reason why so many people across the planet are uneasy about themselves when diagnosed with autism, is because we as a society treat people with autism so badly. By denying people with autism a role in our society we not only lose out on valuable talents and skills but we also deny those very people the ability to discover for themselves exactly who they are.

I consider myself very lucky; I was able to buck the trend. I did manage to progress past secondary education and into university. I was able to complete a parliamentary internship and I am now working a full time job as the Participation Coordinator for Ambitious about Autism. This was not an easy journey, however, and my successes and failures in each of these positions were in direct correlation to how much support I received.

At university I was very lucky to have got a 2:1 in Politics and Parliamentary studies, I very nearly failed. I owe my success at university to the fact that when I eventually owned up to the fact that I needed support, it was very forthcoming from my student support officer and the university disabilities team. Without these people pushing me to stay in university and not let me fail myself it's safe to say that I would indeed have failed my degree and my story would be very different to what it is now. I am in debt to these hard working people who pushed me to become the very best I could be. **My experience at university is testament that with the right support any person can achieve what they dream.**

My experience in Westminster was completely different. I completed two internships over the course of a year with two employers. The first employer I worked with was very apprehensive at first and I will also admit that my behaviour initially was not conducive to a working environment.



However after a disclosure of my autism to my office manager and a slight change to my working environment I was able to do extremely well within the office. Despite being an intern I was able to do the same job as my colleagues and they were very sad to see me go. My second internship however was nothing short of disastrous. Being told by my colleagues that “autism was a made up diagnosis so that people can get away with whatever they want” should have let me know exactly what I was getting myself into. **A lack of support coupled with bullying from my colleagues left me extremely depressed and my ability to work suffered hugely.** The day I left that internship was the happiest day of my life and its results still mark me to this day. It is because of that experience that I no longer want to go into politics and my lifelong dream is now dead. It has also affected me professionally as I am now constantly second guessing every piece of work that I do and I am constantly on edge that the work that I do is never good enough.

It's important to note that not every story has a happy ending but at least my story ends on a positive note, if you want to find a happy ending you will have to ask me in 70 years. I was extremely lucky to experience only three months of unemployment before getting a job in January 2015 at Ambitious about Autism as their Participation Coordinator. My job is to help young people with autism aged 16-25 become active citizens in their communities through the myVoice project and I am able to draw upon my extensive experience of being a volunteer youth worker for 10 years prior. I do not think I could have found a better place to work especially after my previous disastrous internship. As an autism charity it's not surprising that Ambitious understands what it is I am going through and gives me the support to become as effective a worker as possible. At Ambitious I am able to play to my strengths and my colleagues are able to recognise when I am going through difficulties and adjust accordingly.

Having this job has let me rebuild my shattered confidence and self esteem. I may not be perfect but I am able to do this job to the best of my ability.

Most importantly of all I am able to make good on the promise I made 10 years ago to myself. After extensive help from youth workers after my diagnosis to develop my passion for politics and allow me to see my place in the world, I swore that I would not rest until I was able to give this same opportunity to other people. Through my job I am now able to do just that making sure that young people with autism receive the same care and guidance that was provided to me. No person wants to fail at life, nobody wants to be written off and as long as I am helping people who were in a similar position to me navigate this complex and difficult world I will always be able to go to sleep with a smile on my face.

My journey through life is not over and the future will bring what it brings but we can all do our little part to make sure that people with autism have the same life chances that other people have.

Sometimes all that is needed is a little understanding, making adjustments needn't be expensive and time consuming. One thing is clear however: **every time a person with autism goes through life thinking they have no place in the world we as a society have failed. When a person with autism thinks they will never find employment we have failed as a society. When a person with autism is bullied out of their job for no fault of their own we have failed as a society. Autism does not need to hold someone back in life, with the right support a person with autism can go on to do great things.** All we need to do is understand autism, so I ask the question: why has it taken us so long to reach this point?

My experience at university is testament that with the right support any person can achieve what they dream.

Anonymous

Like many people on the autism spectrum, I have more than one diagnosis. I have a diagnosis of bipolar disorder and a working diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome; and as I sort of have two separate diagnoses, sometimes my symptoms overlap or even contradict. That said, I will try and talk through my experience of employment and what concessions have been and can be made in my context with reference to one or both of these.

First off, the interview stage is very important. In an interview review I was told I often talked 'off topic' - this is a symptom of Asperger's predominantly but also is very apparent in individuals with bipolar when in a higher mood. I can be prompted to stay on topic with reminders. I also have trouble maintaining eye contact and then I'm accused of being 'disinterested' or 'not listening', it should be kept in mind that this is a common symptom of people with Asperger's and I am listening.

Unfortunately and in the case of both bipolar in a low mood and Asperger's, it often takes me a little more time to understand and process information so there may be a delay in answering questions. I have the opposite problem in a high mood where I will answer the question too quickly and may provide an irrelevant answer; in this case I can be urged to slow down.

In my current job, I initially found things very difficult. Although I had disclosed my disability, my employers were not aware of what type of symptoms might present themselves. As a carer I was expected to work nights, I expressed concern that my health would be affected if my sleep pattern was disturbed. I was urged 'to try nights' and see how it goes which I did and I unfortunately became psychotic and was hospitalised. This was partly my fault as I should have had enough self-awareness to refuse to work nights and get a doctor's note to support this, but I wanted to fit in to the job as much as possible and show how committed and eager I was. Shortly before I was hospitalised I rang in sick, saying 'I hadn't slept at all during the night' and was greeted with the reply somewhat sarcastically, 'What should I put on your absence form? Just very tired?'

This is the first point I would like to make about employment and bipolar disorder: it is very important for me to maintain a regular sleeping pattern and to get enough sleep, as not having enough sleep will trigger an episode. Therefore, to any prospective employers of those with bipolar disorder, I would urge to take your employee's sleep more seriously than those without and not to undermine sickness based on lack of sleep as it will likely indicate something more serious. After my episode in hospital, I was removed from night work and my shifts were also made shorter (they are usually 13 hours). If it is possible for someone with bipolar to start and finish work at the same time every day, this should be put in place as it helps control circadian rhythm or your bodies awareness of when it needs or doesn't need sleep, something people with bipolar have trouble controlling and will often veer between oversleeping and under-sleeping.

What also happened after this was my employers read my 'crisis plan' which I made in the mental health services. Previously they were not aware I had such a thing. If you have a 'crisis plan' then it is important your employers read it, if you don't have one and feel you need to, you could make one and include symptoms that can be recognised when approaching crisis. The most important and obvious symptom for me is 'Rapid Pressurised Speech'. This is a very common symptom for bipolar people approaching mania but a lot of people have idiosyncratic symptoms, including twitching your head or being very wide eyed.

I think anyone with any type of disability should have regular opportunities to talk to management which I am lucky to have during supervision meetings. At the same time I think discussion of the individual's wellbeing should be confined to these meetings, something which hasn't been provided in my case. Often my manager will keep asking me how I'm doing and in front of others which I feel disrupts my privacy as it is not treatment afforded to the other employees. It also makes me feel 'babied' and makes me wonder about management's trust in my self-awareness, which in turn makes me feel insecure and fixated on my own presentation.

Gary Burge

My name is Garry Burge and I am 43 years old and live in Brisbane, Australia. I work at the University of Queensland Social Sciences & Humanities Library as a Service Support Assistant. I have been in this job for almost 10 years now and will have a 10 year anniversary in March 2016. I will be taking Long Service Leave and am looking forward to a trip to Europe in June 2016. Although the workplace is challenging it has provided me with the opportunity to travel and have some quality of life. It has also allowed me to write a book which I self published *I Want To Work: An Asperger Story*. This book also contains a foreword from Dr Tony Attwood.

Finding a job has been difficult, for even though I was doubted in terms of my academic ability, going to university became a reality in 1994 when I was granted admission into the University of New England in Armidale, Australia. University life was a struggle as I find it difficult to make friends. My difficulty in school caused me to fail the first year of university in 1994 causing me to be excluded for one year. I never gave up in my determination in getting through and after completing a tertiary preparation course at the recommendation of the University of New England, I was granted re-admission in 1996

after showing cause that I met the requirements of the university's standing committee. After working hard, and only failing a couple of units, I was able to graduate in 1999 with the degree of Bachelor of Arts.

In my spare time I advocate as an adult on the autism spectrum and have my own website at <http://www.garryburge.com>. I have also assisted in setting up a support group for adults on the autism spectrum in Brisbane and know of adults who also advocate for autism on a worldwide scale. This is how I met Jonathan Andrews who advocates in the United Kingdom and Chris Mitchell who works for Autism Works (<http://www.autismworks.co.uk>) in the United Kingdom. I also know some other adults in New Zealand, some parts of Europe and in North America. My advocacy work connects me to more and more adults on a worldwide stage.

If you have a 'crisis plan' then it is important your employers read it, if you don't have one and feel you need to, you could make one and include symptoms that can be recognised when approaching crisis.



Conclusion

This is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to autism in the workplace. With around 1 in 100 people now estimated to have some form of Autism Spectrum Disorder, and roughly 30 million UK workers*, that's over 300,000 autistic people in the UK alone who either work, or are able to. Unfortunately, the latter is true far too often – only 15% of people with autism are currently in full-time work, despite the great benefits we can bring to the workplace. Beyond qualities such as high attention to detail, honesty, loyalty, working longer hours on average and punctuality, each person is different and can bring unique skills to the workforce – as the stories above have outlined.

It's important not to fit autistic people into a rigid box. Many of us are skilled in IT and computing, for example, but this should not be taken to define the entire spectrum – others can bring skills to academia, law, business, teaching, and many other areas too. Our skillsets and personalities are as varied as any other group of people – there really is no sector autistic people can't contribute to.

More needs to be done to raise awareness of autism in the workplace, especially since – with diagnosis rates having increased exponentially in the past 20 years, and the rate of autistic people attending university rising incredibly fast – companies will soon have many more people with autism applying to them, and hopefully working for them, than they have done before.

Autistic people did (and still do!) exist in older generations, but went largely undiagnosed – millennial autistic people, by contrast, will have likely grown up with the diagnosis, understand it and themselves better, feel more comfortable discussing it, and not be afraid to ask for what they know they need to work at their full potential. Employers need to be ready.

*Office for National Statistics January 2016

In memory of
**Matthew
James Percy**

19 February 1994 - 21 April 2015

A dedicated and principled autism self-advocate





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