

# Career development for special populations: asperger syndrome



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

To begin, I became very interested in Asperger Syndrome when I was teaching high school. One of my students had been diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome (AS) and had major issues with socialization and communication. Since this was his last year of High School, I wondered what his next step would be after graduation and what guidance (if any) he was getting from the school Guidance Counsellor in regards to career development.

Asperger Syndrome is classified as an invisible disability and grouped under the umbrella of autism spectrum disorders. This research paper will be a compilation of characteristics of Asperger Syndrome, how this impacts the workforce, relationship to career theorists, and the importance of job coaches/career counsellors.

## **INTRODUCTION:**

Asperger syndrome (AS) is defined as a developmental disorder that involves how the information is processed in the brain. It is often called “ high-functioning autism,” and it is one of five pervasive developmental disorders known as the Autism Spectrum Disorders (NIMH, 2006). According to the Autism Society of Canada, approximately 15 in 10, 000 Canadians have AS and it is the fastest growing developmental disorder in North America.

Asperger syndrome can also be classified as a ‘ hidden disability’ in that it is impossible to tell that someone has the condition from their appearances alone. Compared to other types of autism, people with Asperger Syndrome have average or above average intelligence. It can also be argued that with the right amount of encouragement and proper support systems, adults with Asperger syndrome can live very meaningful, independent lives (National Autistic Society, 2009).

<https://assignbuster.com/career-development-for-special-populations-asperger-syndrome/>

People with Asperger Syndrome typically have extreme social deficits (Klin et al., 2000). Quite often, an individual with AS can show a wide range of behaviours and social skills, but common characteristics include difficulty in expressing feelings or emotions, developing friendships, and an inability to understand social rules and body language. Individuals with Asperger Syndrome are occasionally self-described outsiders who may be unable to participate in normal social interactions because they simply lack the skills needed. Though companionship is wanted, frustration can often occur when trying to build relationships, likely because of failed attempts in the past (Klin et al., 2000). Also, gross motor skills, including posture and gait, and fine motor skills such as manual dexterity may be under-developed, making people with Asperger Syndrome seem clumsy or physically awkward (Klin et al., 2000). While there is substantial variation across individuals with regard to degree of impairment in these areas, even slight deficits can have a significant impact on psychosocial development (K. K Higgins et al, 2008).

In regards to career development, the social and communication problems inherent in Aspergers create challenges in job hunting and in sustaining long-term employment. Common social and communication problems experienced by an individual with AS include: difficulty maintaining conversations, inability to understand simple instructions and a need for a structured routine. Also, they may experience problems understanding the emotions of co-workers, and as a result, may react inappropriately. Some of these symptoms may create misunderstandings with co-workers and make it difficult for employees with AS to fit into the workplace environment.

However, with this being said, people with Asperger's Syndrome can contribute greatly to their jobs and careers. Individuals with AS are often very smart, but they lack the skills required to hold a job. (K. K, Higgins et al., 2008). Many AS adults have an average to above average intelligence and because of this they are more than capable of being beneficial to the working environment. They may not be able to express themselves verbally as well as others, and may struggle with the social aspect, but much recognition can be given to their effort and work. Their precision and diligence lends itself to getting the job done right and allowing for hardly any mistakes. (K. K Higgins et al, 2008).

## **SOCIAL SKILLS DEFICITS & SOCIAL SKILLS TRAINING (SST):**

In the article " School-to-work transition and Aspergers Syndrome, Hendricks and Wehman (2009) detail how Asperger Syndrome is a pervasive developmental disorder characterized by mainly of underdeveloped social and communication skills. As mentioned in this article, Asperger Syndrome affects the social development of a person. An individual was AS can find it difficult to maintain proper eye contact with another individual(s) during conversation. It can be very difficult for them to distinguish between sarcasm and regular speaking, and reading nonverbal cues given off by others can be a challenge. Another characteristic of Asperger syndrome is the intense focus that people with the syndrome can bring to very specific interests or topics. This can even be accompanied by continuous talking on s particular subject without even noticing the other person's boredom or need to go somewhere. All these characteristics can make an individual feel

uncomfortable in social situations, as well as make it extremely difficult to socialize within the workplace (Hendricks and Wehman, 2009).

For an individual with AS, learning a new job in the work force is not the problem; relating to others is the real issue. Because of these debilitating social skills deficits; they are unable to manoeuvre social situations or understand theory of mind (Hendricks and Wehman, 2009). The social communication impairments can interfere with both job attainment and job retention. For example, most employment settings require an interview prior to being hired for employment, and this task alone involves these critical skills. Without the needed non-verbal and verbal social communication skills to appropriately interview for a job, individuals with AS will be unlikely to secure employment (Hendricks and Wehman, 2009).

As mentioned above, impaired social skills are a core feature of Asperger Syndrome and while individuals with AS have preserved cognitive functioning; their social difficulties have an effect on all areas of academic, emotional and social development (Rao et al., 2008). The need for social skills training (SST) intervention is certainly warranted for individuals with AS. The following two articles take a closer look at the SST interventions available for individuals with AS: “ Social Skills Intervention for Children with Asperger Syndrome or High Functioning Autism: A Review and Recommendations” by Rao et al. (2008) and “ Social Skills Training for Adolescents with Asperger Syndrome and High Functioning Autism by Tse et al.” (2007). These SST interventions should be reviewed and taken into account by career counsellors/job coaches when helping individuals with Asperger Syndrome.  
<https://assignbuster.com/career-development-for-special-populations-asperger-syndrome/>

A shared belief by both authors, that SST interventions are essential and worthwhile for individuals with AS, represents a shared theoretical perspective on successful human development. Both authors realize the importance of social skills for individuals with AS because without it they will struggle in all facets of life. Although these authors are not addressing SST interventions for the purpose of career development and success specifically, their work does lend itself to the topic. Persons with disabilities are typically confronted with a host of career development issues (Nyles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2005). One such issue is the development of social/interpersonal skills, which evidently relates to individuals with AS. This issue, like the others, requires specific career development interventions to facilitate the career development of individuals with disabilities (Nyles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2005). These SST interventions mentioned in the above articles are imperative because they show how SST interventions can help individuals with AS to change their self-concepts and challenge their emotional intelligence (EQ). Most importantly, the articles mentioned above validate the belief that social skills are crucial for life as well as career success.

## **TRANSITIONS TO THE WORKFORCE:**

Individuals with Asperger Syndrome can find it very difficult transitioning from school to the workforce and because of that the quality of life for young adults with Asperger syndrome can quickly diminish. Leaving school and possibly their homes, tends to lead to the abrupt end of normalcy and words and employment problems can be created before the individual has even entered the workplace for the first time. With this in mind, job training and life skills programs designed for people with Asperger Syndrome are

excellent ways to help a person transition from school to work and independent living. These programs address specific skills that are required for work, create job environment interaction, and provide strategies on how to deal with common workplace challenges. Some of the programs require the person to live on the premises and gradually adjust to independent living and employment. Hendricks and Wehman's (2009) article "School-to-work transition and Asperger Syndrome" emphasise how the transition from school services to adulthood can be particularly difficult for many adolescence with autism disorders. Although some individuals with AS are able to successfully transition, most are faced with significant obstacles in multiple areas as they attempt to negotiate their way into college, work, community participations and independent living, Hendricks and Wehman's (2009) article also contains a review of research related to the transition from school to adulthood for youth with AS in the areas of educations, employment, community living and community integration. They state that it is these key areas of the transition process that are crucial for success in adulthood (Hendricks & Wehman., 2009). Community participation is also a critical component of the transition planning process. They discuss how planning must involve the entire community in which the person wishes to take part after high school and might include numerous activities, organizations, agencies and institutions. Finally, Hendricks and Wehman (2009) detail the relation between community participation and reduction of social skills deficits. They state that "community participation and includes productive engagement in these activities' but, more importantly, encompasses the desired goal of integration into social networks and relationship development" (Hendricks & Wehman., 2009, p. 82).

<https://assignbuster.com/career-development-for-special-populations-asperger-syndrome/>

## **WORKPLACE DIFFICULTIES:**

In 2004, only ten years after Asperger Syndrome became recognised as its own separate disorder in the DSM, Karen Hurlbutt and Lynn Chalmers published an article titled, ' Employment and Adults with Asperger'. In this article, Hurlbutt and Chalmers (2004) conducted a study to determine if there were certain overlapping factors which influenced adults with AS in the workplace. They concluded that individuals with Asperger could find employment but had a hard time staying employed. Often, employment is terminated due to communication problems between the employer or coworkers and the employee. Adults with AS often have a difficult time understanding social cues and non-verbal language as well as interpreting other people's feelings. Also theory of mind is a huge problem for these individuals since there is a block which does not allow them to understand other people's perspectives.

Clearly, research has shown that the greatest difficulties faced by individuals with AS in the workplace seem to emerge from the deficits in social and communication skills. These social communication impairments can interfere with both job attainment and job retention. For example, most employment settings require an interview prior to being hired for employment, and this task alone could be very challenging for the individual with AS. Without the needed non-verbal and verbal social communication skills to appropriately interview for a job, individuals with AS will be unlikely to secure employment (K. K. Higgins et al., 2008). Hurlbutt and Chalmers (2004) indicated that frequent unemployment rates of individuals with AS arise from difficulties in " the social aspect of employment but not with actual job duties" (p. 218).

<https://assignbuster.com/career-development-for-special-populations-asperger-syndrome/>



Therefore, even when an individual with AS has the requisite job skills, is able to successfully complete a job interview, and enters the workforce, the social interaction aspects of employment often create barriers to job retention and career advancement. Deficits in these areas can also undermine the individual's ability to adhere to workplaces rules/standards, work effectively with colleagues/supervisors, and respond appropriately to feedback.

Many individuals with AS also face challenges in the workplace because of the shame associated with their disability and the associated negative perceptions of their co-workers and superiors. Problems that are likely to occur in the working environment include higher than usual tendency for the employee with Asperger syndrome to lose his or her temper, to be viewed by colleagues as arrogant, have difficulties asking for help and being assertive. In addition, many individuals with Asperger syndrome have a sensory system that makes it difficult to cope with everyday workplace sensations, such as office chatter or flickering ceiling lights (Meyer, 2001).

Furthermore, the odd behaviours of a co-worker with AS can be perceived as a threat to the social climate of the workplace. For example, co-workers may feel uncomfortable if the individual with AS violates their personal space or work area and supervisors may lose their patience with the employee because he or she seems to lack understanding about common social expectations in the workplace. These reactions are likely to create a work environment where the individual with AS does not feel welcome or, in the extreme circumstances, feels unsafe (Meyer, 2001). Symptoms of depression and anxiety can be an especially concerning outcome of such negative  
<https://assignbuster.com/career-development-for-special-populations-asperger-syndrome/>

experiences on the job (Hurlbutt and Chalmers, 2004). Undoubtedly, these workplace difficulties need to be addressed, and supports should be put into place to help aid both the AS individual and their co-workers. Compassion, understanding and being knowledgeable about this disability is key to success in the workplace.

## **VOCATIONAL SUCCESS:**

To begin, in 1951, Donald Super defined vocational guidance as “ the process of helping a person to develop and accept an integrated and adequate picture of himself and of his role in the world of work, to test this concept against reality and to convert it into reality, with satisfaction to himself and society” (Herr, Cramer, Niles, 2004). His assumption that both personal needs, values and intelligence as well as socio economic and cultural variables (economy, family, school, community, labour market) help an individual to develop both an occupational and self. Relating vocational success to individuals with AS, their lack of social competence and self-esteem may also become a barrier to vocational opportunities (Tse et al., 2007). Individuals living with Asperger Syndrome face a number of unique challenges when it comes to their vocational success. Because this developmental disability is characterized by social and communicative deficits including problems interpreting social cues, inflexibility and discomfort with change, and difficulty adapting to new tasks and routines (Muller et al., 2003), the social implications of the job site place great demands on individuals with Asperger Syndrome, and can be a heavy determinant of on-going or future employment.

Historically, it seems that there has been a great deal research surrounding educational support needs of children with Asperger Syndrome; however, few studies have focused on the vocational characteristics of emerging adults with AS and the skills they need to thrive in the workplace. ‘ Meeting the Vocational Support Needs of Individuals with Asperger Syndrome and Other Autism Spectrum Disabilities’ by Muller et al. (2003) researched the perspectives of individuals with AS, and sought strategies for improving vocational placement and job-retention services for individuals in this demographic. Primarily the researchers aimed to gather information regarding the real-world employment experiences of individuals with AS; their findings were divided into three major categories including the overview of positive and negative experiences, major obstacles for successful employment, and recommendations for appropriate supports. One very useful section described ‘ ASD-specific supports’, especially the need for properly educated Vocational Rehabilitation Counsellors. The participants identified four major expectations from these professionals; assistance with the job search process, on-site job-coaching, facilitation of social interactions, and mentoring services (Muller et al. 2003, p. 170).

Considering the vocational difficulties experienced by individuals living with AS, their overall career development is greatly impacted. As a person’s career pattern is influenced by decision making style, values, life-roles and self-concepts; the social and communicative characteristics of AS are also grand indicators. Resultant dissatisfaction and perceived failure in the form of job loss and un-employment can cause great amounts of stress. The type of work in which we engage is a determinant of self-image, and when

uncontrollable psychological factors influence work-success regardless of credentials and work ethic, the results can be devastating, hence the importance of vocational support and research in the area. (K. K. Higgins et al., 291).

## **JOB COACHES & CAREER COUNSELLORS:**

It is estimated that only 10 per cent of adults with Asperger syndrome receive support at the interview stage and around 20 per cent receive some sort of specialist support when in employment (Beardon and Edmonds, 2007). In general, it tends to be the case that adults with Asperger syndrome suffer from a lack of understanding, support, respect and appropriate services in the employment domain (Beardon and Edmonds, 2007). It is important the career counsellors understand the role of a job coach- as it may be a viable option for many individuals with AS. Also, a job coach should work very closely with career counsellors to ensure optimal success in the workplace.

‘ Communication Supports by Job Coaches of People with Developmental Disabilities’ is a research study completed in connection to job supports for individuals with AS. D’Agostino and Cascella (2008) considered job coaches’ knowledge base with regards to quality communication indicators. The participant base for this study consisted of thirty-six job coaches whom were employed among older adolescents and adults with developmental disabilities (including Autism Spectrum Disorders and AS). Specifically, the researchers used a questionnaire that would identify job coaches’ knowledge and experience with communication supports and assessment tools. The information collected during this study revealed a number of major findings. <https://assignbuster.com/career-development-for-special-populations-asperger-syndrome/>

Job coaches reported a high-degree of prior training in specific communication interventions, they could accurately define many concepts and terms associated with communication support, and were overall knowledgeable about communication and communication supports (D'Agostino and Cascella 2008). This article showed that job coaches were very successful with communication interventions and supports given to individuals with disabilities lead to a great chance of success.

“ Career counselling and guidance can move with the changes to make a greater difference in people’s life by helping them to connect with the parts of their own lives and connect with others in community for the common good” (Hansen, 2001). With this in mind, a job coach can be especially helpful to the individual with AS with identifying and remedying problematic behaviours associated with the disorder such as interacting inappropriately with co-workers, misinterpreting and responding to social cues, responding to supervision in an unacceptable manner, inability to conduct adequate self assessments of one’s job performance and unintentionally violating unspoken work norms and rules (K. K. Higgins et al., 296). Also, the idea of a job coach could be very beneficial because they could support the individual with AS until the employee begins to develop natural skills on the job on their own.

Like job coaches, “ career counselors [also] have a responsibility to help clients free themselves from negative attitudes, irrational beliefs, information deficits and low self-esteem” (Herr, Cramer, & Niles, 2004). It goes without saying that competent career counsellors must be good

listeners, understanding, empathic towards their client and willing and able  
<https://assignbuster.com/career-development-for-special-populations-asperger-syndrome/>

to develop trusting relationships. It is important for career counsellors to remember that one of the defining characteristics of AS is the presence of marked deficiencies in social interactions, communication, and behaviours and because of this characteristic, individuals with AS are often viewed by others as odd, or peculiar. While individuals with AS may be physically indistinguishable from their peers and have similar intellectual capabilities, deficits in social interaction, behaviour, and communication often result in the perceptions that these individuals are “loners.” This is why it is extremely imperative for career counsellors to be patient and understanding of this disability.

Also, Prager & Freeman (1979) explain that “level of aspiration is also frequently related to self-esteem, with persons of higher aspiration also persons of higher self-esteem” (Herr et al., 2004, p. 177). Consequently, many youths with AS have few, if any, meaningful peer relationships which may affect self-concept and esteem. Again, it is vital to reiterate the importance for career counsellors to be patient, understanding, and accepting with their AS client... while trying to raise the individuals self esteem. Without a doubt, the ability to understand why others do what they do and think the way they do is undoubtedly one of, if not the most, important traits a career counsellor should possess when working with an individual with AS. Given the right support and encouragement from a career counsellor, it is believed that individuals with Asperger syndrome are capable of negotiating key employment-related social situations, such as job interviews, team working, and the broader social conventions of work organisations (Attwood, 2007).

“ Essential to a process that integrates career and personal counselling is the ability to assess clients’ differing psychological needs and to understand how specific occupations and roles fulfill or frustrate various needs” (Manuele-Adkins, 1992). Helping an individual with Asperger Syndrome involves working on their particular interests, strengths and skills, while possibly avoiding jobs that involve major quantities of social interaction. Notably, career counsellors should realize that one of the best ways for job seekers with the condition to increase their chances for successful employment is to prepare for work and to look for jobs with employers that are educated about Asperger Syndrome. Autism and Asperger support organizations can help job seekers prepare for work life and find employers who are sensitive to their needs. Career counsellors can work with these organizations if they need extra supports or resources on this disability.

### **RELATION TO CAREER DEVELOPMENT THEORIES:**

Overall, the majority of influential career development theories acknowledge the massive role that social and self awareness play for successful career development. The following section will discuss how Holland’s and Gottfredson’s theories apply to individuals with AS.

### **HOLLAND’S THEORY:**

Holland’s theory (as cited in Herr, Cramer & Niles, 2004, p. 212) “ contends that individual behaviour is a function of the interaction between one’s personality and environment and that choice behaviour is an expression of personality”. Holland’s theory of ‘ Person-Environment Interactions’ is also applicable to individual with AS, specifically the consideration of ‘ The Social Environment’. In many regards the components of the social environment, <https://assignbuster.com/career-development-for-special-populations-asperger-syndrome/>

especially the activities that inform, develop, and enlighten should be explored by support workers and employers – allowing them to better accommodate workers with AS. As individuals with AS aspire to succeed vocationally in both work-skill and social-skill; awareness, tolerance, and support must be present to aid their vocational endeavours. This paired with on-going support will increase employment rates, and career satisfaction for individuals with AS (Herr, Cramer & Niles, 2004).

To achieve congruence in future employment, according to Holland individuals must use self-reflection to understand their personality type so that they can make an informed decision about which type of environment they feel would be best suited to them. Holland bases his theory on two beliefs. To begin he believes that individuals search for careers that will allow them to use their skills and abilities. It is known that individuals with AS are very capable employees when their skills are matched up to their employment. Second in Holland's theory is that there is a strong interaction between personality and environment which in turn affects behaviour. This must be considered for individuals with AS since they must consider employment opportunities in which they will not be forced to socialize on a regular basis. It is very important for counsellors to be aware of the importance of congruence between the environment and the personality of the AS individual in an effort to minimize any problems which may arise in work environments (Herr, Cramer & Niles, 2004).

## **GOTTFREDSON'S THEORY:**

One of the major findings in the article ' Employment and Adults with

Asperger Syndrome' by Karen Hurlbutt and Lynn Chalmers (2004) was that <https://assignbuster.com/career-development-for-special-populations-asperger-syndrome/>



AS individuals had difficulty finding work in their area of speciality and are therefore typically underemployed. This can be linked to Gottfredson's theory of compromise in that individuals were compromising on their goals and settling for occupations for which they were over-qualified. Gottfredson believes that it is important for people to understand their abilities and to be aware that they have many options and that they should not have to compromise. Individuals with AS have a great amount of self-awareness in regards of the supports they require. However, in association to theories suggested by Gottfredson - these individuals may succumb to circumscription and illegitimate compromise based upon supportable vocational difficulties. These two factors occur naturally throughout career development, but for someone with AS, having to avoid a particular field or dream job may be a result of social pressures and expectations rather than a lack of potential, intelligence, or situational realities (Herr, Cramer & Niles, 2004).

## **CONCLUSION:**

The challenges faced by individuals living with AS can be staggering, but as time passes awareness is grows and support become more effective. Of course, studies will differ in perspective and depth, but the overall process is a step towards essential accommodation. At a time when career development researchers pay little attention to the career experiences of persons with disabilities (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2005), the work of researchers mentioned in this paper is crucial. Considering that 18. 7% of Americans between the ages of 15-64 have a disability (Nile & Harris-

Bowlsbey, 2005), the work of these individuals is not only crucial for people with AS but for the future of our workforce.

People with Asperger's Syndrome have every right to equal treatment in the workplace. They cannot be discriminated against because of their differences. With continued hard work and help from competent job coaches/career counsellors, a person with AS can lead a highly successful life. The bottom line is that Asperger Syndrome is a condition that should not be a barrier to having a good career. Hopefully with future exploration of past and present research, supports will develop and be applied so that individuals living with AS will fulfill their vocational potential.