Everyone Managing… Disability in the Workplace

NetworkRail

Version 1

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A Brief Guide to Asperger's Syndrome

1. Introduction

For many of our staff, managing a disability or impairment forms a core part of who they are. Having an understanding about disability as line managers will help us to be safer, more inclusive and to provide the right support to our staff, so that they can perform at their best.

This guide provides a description of Asperger's Syndrome and the impact that it can have on the individual at work. While this guide provides useful pointers, the best information will generally come from the individual themselves and managers are encouraged to discuss disability with their staff whenever relevant.

Further guidance is also available from the [diversity and inclusion team](#).

2. Overview

Asperger's syndrome is a form of autism. It is a lifelong disability that affects how a person processes information, relates to other people and makes sense of the world. Autism is often described as a 'spectrum disorder' because the condition affects people in many different ways and to varying degrees.

Asperger's syndrome is mostly a 'hidden disability'. This means that you can't tell that someone has the condition from their outward appearance. However, there are behaviours that make the person with Asperger's seem different. These behaviours are often misinterpreted and can lead to the person being excluded or ridiculed.

3. Understanding Asperger's Syndrome at Work

People with Asperger's perceive the world differently to those without. For example, adults with the condition report acute awareness of certain noises, lighting, colours textures and tastes. Having heightened senses and an unusual attention to detail can be a distinct advantage in a work situation. However, sensory issues can also cause stress and anxiety. For example, noises that are not always noticeable to someone without Asperger's, can be a huge source of distraction or distress to someone with the condition.

People with Asperger's may find eye contact uncomfortable and not look at people that they are talking to. Others may give prolonged eye contact without realising that this can cause social discomfort. Some people with Asperger's may talk at, rather than with, their colleagues and not notice when the person is losing interest in the conversation. Communication tends to be more concrete and about observable facts, rather than about internal states or feelings. This is because people with Asperger's,

no matter how intelligent they are, tend to have difficulty in processing their emotions and those of other people.

Difficulty in reading the body language or subtle non-verbal aspects of communication can lead to a feeling that the interaction is one-sided, not reciprocal. Without a diagnosis people with Asperger's are often labelled as rude or arrogant and judged negatively by colleagues.

4. Managing People with Asperger's Syndrome

Asperger's can be a distinct advantage in a work environment. People without the condition often report that they cannot maintain the same level of interest, ability to persevere and attention to detail as their colleagues with Asperger's syndrome.

People with the condition tend to be more task-oriented and less distracted by the social environment, in a way that benefits an organisation. However, in order to reap the benefits of having an employee with Asperger's Syndrome, we need to put some support in place.

People with Asperger's Syndrome may have difficulty changing from task to task, multitasking, learning new tasks and transferring skills from one situation to another. Things that are assumed about how a person learns from exposure and experience, often have to be specifically taught to the person with Asperger's and this may need to be reinforced to reduce stress, confusion and frustration.

Understanding an employee with Asperger's Syndrome is as important as providing routine, structure and predictability at work. It is important to recognise that not everyone with Asperger's Syndrome will excel in every job. However, where they do find a niche people with Asperger's are generally well regarded. With the right support and understanding, they can make reliable and productive employees.

5. Practical Hints and Tips

5a) General Guidance

In the workplace, the person with Asperger's Syndrome may have difficulty:

- interpreting unclear instructions
- working in noisy situations
- concentrating in unstructured situations
- starting unfamiliar work
- organising complex or unclear tasks

Managers' strategies for support can include

- keeping instructions brief and precise
- using simple, precise language
- providing written instructions
- confirming that the person has understood
- using peers/workmates to provide additional support
- giving the person time to process the instruction
- checking that you have the individual's attention
- where practical, making use of visual cues and procedures
- using a written schedule or task sheet rather than verbal instructions
- breaking work into smaller steps
- checking progress regularly

5b) Guidance on Organisational Skills

People with Asperger's Syndrome often have difficulty with:

- listening to multiple instructions
- coping with change – rooms, times, workmates
- distractions and can being easily sidetracked
- interpreting abstract instructions
- a quick succession of instructions (e.g. asked to do one thing followed by another, and another and so on)
- focussing on the important part of instruction
- planning how to tackle a task
- small movements such as writing
- bigger movement skills e.g. arms, legs and torso

Managers' strategies for support can include

- using visual cues and instructions
- colour coding instructions
- using precise language
- encouraging the employee to mark off each task as it is finished
- highlighting the starting place
- showing an example of what you require
- giving briefings re changes, or targets
- giving time to take changes onboard
- if possible organising a formal peer support system
- offering regular verbal reassurance

5c) Guidance on Communication

The spoken language and listening skills of the person with Asperger's Syndrome may have particular characteristics e.g.

- an unfamiliar or unusual intonation
- specific or literal interpretation
- linking different thoughts together in unusual ways
- confined to narrow topics of conversation
- learned phrases in particular situations
- out of sync - their listening skills are not necessarily in line with their verbal skills
- misinterpretation of what was said
- hear only the beginning or the end of an instruction or comment
- not able to interpret the intended meaning of colloquialisms, metaphors, similes, sarcasm or wit
- have feelings of inadequacy and isolation from peers because they cannot understand what is happening

Managers' strategies for support can include

- using visual cues where possible
- explaining if you are joking or teasing
- reassuring that it is OK to be wrong
- being supportive
- keeping your language simple and direct
- talking through issues, and discussing possible situations or outcomes, eg by asking "what could you say if xxxx happens?"
- refraining from using sarcasm

5d) Guidance on Social Skills

People with Asperger's Syndrome are often socially "blind". The main issue is that they do not know how to behave even though they may know they are different and do want to interact. They may:

- not understand rules of social behaviour
- talk about inappropriate subjects
- have difficulty with empathy
- be very outspoken and tactless
- develop a fixation on certain individuals
- have a strong sense of justice and see things in black and white terms
- have difficulty making friends
- lack the idea of personal space

- misinterpret the behaviours of peers
- dislike being touched
- appear naive and be vulnerable
- have difficulty interpreting body language or facial expressions
- have poor conversation skills

Managers' strategies for support can include

- ensuring meetings have a clear concrete purpose
- providing an option of virtual meetings if desired
- focusing on what is being said by the individual not how it is said
- assigning a thoughtful supportive mentor
- providing a quiet workspace to help reduce noise and over stimulation
- using written reminders to support proposed actions
- being very aware of how vulnerable the person may be to peer pressure
- setting achievable objectives and tasks

6. Getting the best of from people with Asperger's Syndrome

To help people with Asperger's Syndrome thrive and play their full part in the success of our business, individuals need

- consistency
- predictability
- patience
- a calm and controlled supervisor and
- an organised workplace.

These requirements are similar to many of us in Network Rail. So remember as line managers it is our role to pro-actively support our staff find out what they need and do our best to create an environment which is supportive and encouraging.

For more information about Diversity and Inclusion visit Connect
or email the team on diversityandinclusion@networkrail.co.uk