

For Some Jobs, Asperger's Syndrome Can Be An Asset

by ADRIENE HILL



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Aspiritech, a nonprofit in the suburbs of Chicago, trains people with Asperger's syndrome in data entry and computer program testing — skills that come naturally to many with the disorder.

February 11, 2010

text size **A A A**

Statistics on the unemployed have been dominating the news for months.

And while the current portrait of the jobless might seem dire, consider this: According to new data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, less than 20 percent of the disabled population in the country has work.

But Aspiritech, a nonprofit in the suburbs of Chicago, is trying to help improve the job outlook for people with Asperger's and high-functioning autism.

The company trains people in data entry and computer program testing — skills that come naturally to many with the disorder.

Important Work

Brian Tozzo is making sure programs like Yahoo Messenger and AOL interact properly with a cell phone. He types a message into his phone and pushes send.

"There it is — 'Hello, how are you?' " Tozzo says. "And on the PC you can see the same message, 'Hello, how are you?' and it passes, hooray!"

Tozzo marks it down as a success in a spreadsheet that has hundreds, even thousands of repetitive tests.

At a different desk, Alan Sun is training with a similar list. "It definitely helps utilize my computer skills and lets me use them to help others," Sun says. "So, at least I'm seeing how my computer skills can be potentially useful to society."

Brenda Weitzberg, the founder of Aspiritech, says employment is so much more than a paycheck. "It is structure to the day," she says. "It is sense of self-worth, value."

A Natural Fit

Weitzberg started the business because she felt frustrated with the lack of job resources for her 30-year-old son.

She says software testing is the perfect fit for people like him, with autism spectrum disorder. "They're very focused

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on detail," Weitzberg says. "Able to do highly repetitive work, able to spot imperfections."

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Aspiritech is relatively new and started with \$25,000 in private donations. So far, it's trained eight testers. And the company just signed its first contract for work that will start later this year.

- Brenda Weitzberg, founder of Aspiritech

Weitzberg's inspiration is a six-year-old Danish company called Specialisterne.

Difference Not A Disadvantage

Thorkil Sonne is the founder of Specialisterne. The company currently has three dozen consultants with autism spectrum disorder doing software testing and data entry.

"[The company] actually sees autism — the autism characteristics — as a potential competitive advantage," Sonne says.

He came up with the idea after his son was diagnosed with autism, and he says he thinks the outlook for his son has substantially improved since the company's inception. "I think that there's a much more positive attitude," Sonne says, "And openness in the business sector in Denmark."

Sonne's hoping to spread the model worldwide.

Copenhagen Business School professor Robert Austin has studied Specialisterne's business. "It does something that a lot of other models that hope to help people don't do," Austin says. "It aligns the interest of the people being helped with the interest of a business."

Austin says it's a hopeful model that he'd like to see work.

It's one that doesn't view difference as disadvantage.

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 Recent First



Stephen Meier (Sunmeier) wrote:

Interesting and exciting. Tyler Cowen wrote "Create Your Own Economy" an excellent book on this topic which goes into great depth on how a spectrum of diversity will greatly enhance society and provide these types of opportunities to the neurologically diverse population. It's an excellent read.

Friday, February 12, 2010 12:32:20 PM

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Sofya Polyakov (SP_LA) wrote:

I think this is just wonderful! I don't understand why all the negative comments on here. What a better way to help someone, then to allow them to help themselves by doing something they're naturally good at?

Friday, February 12, 2010 12:29:12 PM

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Michelle Moore (HappyCamper1) wrote:

I'm not an expert but as the mother of a young man with Asperger's I can tell you that he could care less how you label him. I suspect that is true of the majority of his fellow "Aspies".

He has ideas about what he wants to do with his life and has the ability to acheive those goals, whenever he chooses to make them his priority. He has an exceptional IQ and is extraordinarily, artistically gifted. But by the same token, he may never get to the point of acheiving "great things" because he may also be perfectly happy making a living by performing a "menial" task. He won't feel any social stigma. If he has time and the means to do whatever he's passionate about at that time, be that building Lego worlds or writing poetry or sculpting or playing computer games, he will be as happy as any of us can ever hope to be.

Many people can't understand that folks with Asperger's only need what they need, want what they want, and are far less inclined than the rest of us to feel like they need things because they are supposed to want them. The fact that some of them are being employed by companies that "exploit" their talents in exchange for the ability to do what they please seems a pretty fair deal to me.

Friday, February 12, 2010 12:26:28 PM

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Jay Ashworth (Baylink) wrote:

Oh, my Ghod; they're helping the people *for all the wrong reasons*!!!

<sigh />

I don't even know what to say here. People freak out about labels because they feel that

labeling someone *requires* everyone to treat them like their cultural stereotype, I guess.

We label people, folks, so that we can get through the day.

Does anyone here have the time to invest in acquiring a full picture of each of the people mentioned in this article? Not even the writer did, let's face it.

Does anyone here advocate dealing with *individual people* in this article based on a stereotype? I certainly hope not.

But if you're trying to deal with 100,000 of them, you have no other choice. You have to aim for the statistical mean, and hope the standard deviation isn't too large.

Friday, February 12, 2010 12:00:26 PM

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Meredith Killian Askey (peacelovemath) wrote:

Didn't you hear the story you ran a few days ago about how they're just calling it Autism Spectrum Disorder now, and doing away with the name Asperger's as a separate diagnosis? So it's not "Asperger's AND high-functioning Autism," it's just high-functioning Autism. Am I right?

Friday, February 12, 2010 11:03:10 AM

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Danes Basilisk (Basilisk) wrote:

This reminds me of mentants from Frank Herbert books; people trained to become human computers, experts and detail, logic, and memorization at the expense of normal relationships.

Thursday, February 11, 2010 9:46:34 PM

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Irene Cardenas (irenesee) wrote:

When people are told to view someone (and themselves) as having a mental problem, can they ever escape the effect of that social environment, and how can that effect not do some harm?

Thursday, February 11, 2010 4:45:51 PM

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Irene Cardenas (irenesee) wrote:

Don't many labeled people also deserve credit for overcoming all the lack of respect they've gotten as many people don't realize how well many of their hearts and minds actually work? Aren't many people lead by the nose to believe they have biological mental deficiencies simply because health authorities told them to do so, without opening their own minds to investigate whether there is definitive biological proof for that? Aren't bloggers often offering information from research that is starkly different than what authorities, doctors and researchers have told the mainstream press to report? Haven't people believed in many mental labels without knowing whether problems are inherent to the person, or the social and physical environment? Since even genes express themselves or not based on environment, how can it ever not be a factor?

Thursday, February 11, 2010 4:41:51 PM

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Charles Gillard (shylove) wrote:

Could you repeat that a few times please.



Thursday, February 11, 2010 4:31:32 PM

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Christopher Wallis (eumenides) wrote:

While people with Aspergers have traits that lend well to some jobs, it should be remembered that there is also a price that they pay. These people are not super-human, they have troubles in their lives and deserve recognition for overcoming those difficulties in order to gain employment.

Thursday, February 11, 2010 3:09:15 PM

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