

Tips: Interviewing someone with an ASD

- ✓ Avoid open questions such as “Tell me about yourself”, as the candidate may find it difficult to judge exactly what you want to know. Instead, ask closed questions with a more obvious answer. For example, you could reword the previous question as “Tell me about your last job and what it involved.”
- ✓ Ask questions based on the candidate’s past experience or that relate specifically to skills needed for the job they are applying for. For example, you could ask: “In your last job, did you do any filing or data input? What processes or procedures did you use to do this effectively?”
- ✓ Avoid hypothetical (“What if?”) questions such as “How do you think you’ll cope with working if there are lots of interruptions?” A better question would be “Think back to your last job. Can you tell us how you coped with your work when people interrupted you?”
- ✓ Be prepared to prompt the candidate and ask supplementary questions in order to get all the information you need.
- ✓ If the candidate is talking too much, let them know – they may find it hard to judge how much information you need. You can do this tactfully by simply saying “Thank you, you’ve told us enough about that now, and I’d like to ask you another question.”
- ✓ Be aware that the candidate may interpret language quite literally. For example, if you ask “How did you find your last job?”, you may invite the response “I looked in the A to Z” or “I found it in the newspaper.”
- ✓ The candidate’s eye contact and other body language may appear different from that of other candidates, so try not to use this as an indication of how they feel about the job or the questions you are asking.

To find out more

Prospects factsheets

More factsheets are available from prospects.london@nas.org.uk. Other topics include: What is an autism spectrum disorder? Recruiting someone with an ASD How can Prospects help you as an employer?

Further reading

NAS Prospects Team (2005). Employing people with Asperger syndrome: a practical guide. Prospects Employment Service. Available at: www.nas.org.uk – click on ‘Shop online’.

Warman, R. (2003). A guide to supporting employees with Asperger syndrome. Berkshire Autistic Society. Available at: www.autismberkshire.org.uk/employment

Telephone support

The Autism Helpline provides an information service to those affected by autism or Asperger syndrome
Tel: 0845 070 4004 Monday to Friday, 10am-4pm
Email: autismhelpline@nas.org.uk

Support for employers

Prospects Employment Service provides a range of services for organisations that employ, or would like to employ, someone with an ASD. (See details below.)

Employer factsheet

Recruiting someone with an ASD

As an employer, you may not realise that people with some autism spectrum disorders (ASDs), such as Asperger syndrome, can be highly skilled and qualified, and may be extremely employable. This factsheet explains the benefits of employing someone with an ASD, and offers tips for recruitment and interviewing.

Why employ someone with an ASD?

Many people with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) – particularly those with Asperger syndrome – have a variety of sometimes exceptional skills that enable them to thrive in roles ranging from sales assistant to computer programmer and journalist to statistician, to name a few. However, they are often disadvantaged when it comes to getting and keeping a job because of difficulties with social skills and a lack of understanding about the condition among the public.

People with an ASD typically experience problems with communication, social interaction and changes in routine, and may need some simple support within the workplace. Nevertheless, many do well in jobs that require these skills, including some in senior positions. As well as their individual strengths and talents, candidates with an ASD often demonstrate above-average skills in some or all of the following areas:

- > high levels of concentration
- > reliability, conscientiousness and persistence
- > accuracy, close attention to detail and the ability to identify errors
- > technical ability, such as in IT
- > detailed factual knowledge and an excellent memory.

This means that someone who has an ASD may well be better at a particular job than someone who does not. By gaining an understanding of this condition, you can open up new possibilities for your organisation, and for people with disabilities. Meanwhile, employing someone with an ASD demonstrates your commitment to equality and diversity and a positive attitude to disabled people. Having a diverse workforce brings benefits to staff and business alike, and managers and colleagues often describe working with someone with an ASD as an enriching experience that encourages them to think more carefully about how they communicate, organise and prioritise their work.



“I have been very impressed with the way that Katherine has approached and completed her work. As a direct result of this I offered her a full-time position as a data administrator at Circle 33.”

S. Lewis, Technical Audit Manager, Circle 33

Recruiting someone with an ASD



The recruitment process

Recruitment procedures often inadvertently create barriers for people with an ASD. There are many minor adjustments that organisations can make to their processes that will help candidates with an ASD apply for jobs, and enable them to demonstrate their skills as potential employees. Many of these adjustments may also benefit other candidates and enhance overall efficiency in recruitment. By taking these simple steps, your organisation will also be meeting the Disability Discrimination Act (2005) requirement for employers to make 'reasonable adjustments' for people with disabilities.

The job description

Job descriptions often include skills that are not essential for the job to be carried out effectively. Qualities such as 'excellent communication skills' or 'good team player' are often included as default skills, even if they are not necessary – and many people with an ASD will not apply for jobs demanding these attributes, if they are aware of their potential difficulties in these areas. This can mean that suitable applicants may assume themselves to be ineligible for a job even where they have strong skills that are directly relevant to the tasks involved.

The application form

It is not always obvious what information the applicant needs to provide on the application form. It is important to provide clear guidance on this, and to make sure that the form includes a space for applicants to highlight any help or adjustments they may want at an interview.

The job advert

Job adverts are not always concise and written in plain English. They should list essential skills, and avoid jargon or unnecessary information. The advert should be clearly presented, avoiding complex design. Try to be really objective about what abilities and experiences are genuinely essential for the job to be done well, and leave out any that are not.

Thomas's story

Thomas applied for a position as a filing clerk at Camden Council. He was shortlisted and invited for an interview, which included a short filing test. During the interview, Thomas did not come across well. Because of his Asperger syndrome, he tended to take questions very literally and gave 'yes' or 'no' answers to questions rather than elaborating on his experience. However, his prospective employers were extremely impressed when Thomas scored almost 100 per cent in the filing test – significantly higher than other candidates.

Following discussions with The National Autistic Society's Prospects Employment Service, which was supporting Thomas in his job search, Camden Council agreed to offer Thomas a work trial as an alternative method of assessing his ability to do the job. Thomas completed this with great success and was offered a four-week contract, working ten hours a week. At the end of this time, his managers were delighted with his accuracy and reliability, and his contract was extended.

Three years later, Thomas was still working for Camden as a filing clerk, enjoying and performing consistently well in his job.

The interview process

Interviews rely heavily on social and communication skills, so candidates with an ASD may well struggle to 'sell themselves' in an interview, even if they have all the right skills. In particular, they may face difficulties with:

- > understanding body language and maintaining appropriate eye contact
- > knowing how to start and maintain conversations
- > judging how much information to give – especially if questions are open
- > thinking in abstract ways, or considering 'what if?' scenarios
- > varying their tone of voice and finding the appropriate level of formality.

What adjustments can I make in the interview?

You need to be prepared to make some reasonable adjustments during the selection and recruitment stage of employment.

If you want to interview the candidate, it is important to realise that asking each applicant exactly the same question does not always equate to equality of opportunity. Consider offering an adapted interview in which you ask 'closed' questions, based on the applicant's past experiences, rather than 'open' (in other words, generalised or hypothetical) questions.

You will find more tips on interviewing someone with an ASD overleaf.

Are there alternatives to the traditional interview?

Yes. If adapting your interview skills to the needs of a person with ASD sounds daunting, or if you feel that an interview might not be the best way to gauge the person's suitability for the post, there are two other options:

- > **Inviting a supporter to accompany the person** Many people with an ASD perform much better in interviews if they have a supporter with them. This person can act as a go-between to ease communication between the interviewer and the candidate, rewording any unclear questions for the candidate and helping them understand exactly what the interviewer wants. The supporter will not answer on behalf of the person, but may help rephrase unsuitably worded questions (although ideally the employer should do this in preparation for the interview), or help them communicate with the interviewees, in order to clarify their relevant knowledge and skills. This does not only benefit the candidate: it can also help employers understand what the candidate has to offer.
- > **Work trials** Because of the difficulties that people with an ASD often have with interview situations, some employers find that a work trial, or a period of work experience, is a better way of assessing their skills than a formal interview. This approach may also help if you think that a person with an ASD is likely to do well in the job but you have concerns about how well they will cope in the workplace. If you would like to take this approach, Prospects Employment Service can offer support and advice (see overleaf).

"Mark joined Max Fordham's in March 2002 as a drawing filer, quickly grasping the complex procedure. He applies care and attention to detail, constantly using his initiative to improve efficiency. He regularly attends progress meetings, where his input is invaluable and he supervises temporary cover within his group."

M. Jones, Partner/Head of Administration, Max Fordham LLP

Disability and the law

The adaptations detailed in this factsheet would be considered 'reasonable adjustments', which employers are required to make under the Disability Discrimination Act 2005. For more information, contact the Disability Rights Commission on 0845 070 4004 or at www.drc-gb.uk