Adam Feinstein

The ‘autism advantage’ in the workplace

Gresham College Lecture

Museum of London

October 22, 2018
Johnny and Adam
Looking Up interview:

Dr TEMPLE GRANDIN

RESEARCH NEWS:
- Regressive autism ...
- Prozac ...
- Melatonin ...
- Blinking ...
- Ability to drive in ASD

EDUCATION:
- Why children still fall into the gaps

PAWS FOR THOUGHT:
- Dog therapy in autism

AROUND THE GLOBE:
- Schoolboy with autism stuffed in duffel bag ...
- Support grows for suspended ‘Banana Man’ ...
- Autistic boy sent home from hospital with sewing needle in foot ...
- Caesar triumphs on the saxophone
A History of Autism
Conversations with the Pioneers

“No one has attempted to write the history of autism so comprehensively before ... a treasure-trove of conversations ... a unique resource for future generations and a terrific book.”

Simon Baron-Cohen, Director, Autism Research Centre, Cambridge University

WILEY-BLACKWELL
‘There are an estimated 70 million autistic people on the planet, and among those adults, most are unemploye. Unemployment adds a sense of exclusion and failure, lower self-esteem, worse mental health and feeling not valued. Feinstein’s highly readable, well-researched, original book illustrates, through an inspiring array of diverse examples, how autism does not need to lead to unemployment. With a welcoming attitude on the part of employers, autistic adults can work well. When employers reduce barriers to employment and make reasonable adjustments, this can lead autistic adults to feel a sense of inclusion, autonomy, pride, and good mental health. For many, employment is the transformational silver bullet.’

SIMON BARON-COHEN, Cambridge University, UK

‘Neurodiversity is all around us. But how are we accommodating to it in practice? Adam Feinstein provides a wealth of useful suggestions. His vivid case reports show just how enormously varied individuals with autism are, and how they fare at work. Readers will marvel at some truly inspiring role models. This book will be of immense value to employers as well as those seeking employment.’

UTA FRITH, University College London, UK

‘This timely book on the important issue of employment in autism is a comprehensive account from theoretical justification to practical guidance for all stakeholders: autistic students, their educators and supporters, and future employers. Numerous real-life examples and case studies enliven the text and make this a fascinating and enlightening read.’

RITA JORDAN, University of Birmingham, UK

People with autism are being left behind today, with only 16 per cent in full-time employment. This inspiring book addresses the lack of understanding of the wonderful contributions people across the autism spectrum can make to the workplace, drawing attention to this vast untapped human resource. Employers who create supportive workplaces can enhance their companies by making use of the talents of people with autism while also helping to produce a more inclusive and tolerant society; and people with autism can themselves benefit materially and emotionally from improved employment opportunities.

Packed with real-life case studies examining the day-to-day working lives of people across the autism spectrum in a wide variety of careers, this book provides constructive solutions for both employers seeking to improve their workplaces and for individuals with autism considering their employment options. It dispels popular myths about autism, such as that everyone is good at IT, and crucially tackles the potential job opportunities available across the spectrum, including for those who have no language at all. It also highlights the neglected area of gender differences in the workplace and the costs of autistic females’ ability to ‘camouflage’ their condition.

This book is a must-read for parents, employers and adults with autism. It is also essential for anyone interested in the present and future of people with autism in the workplace who will benefit from the positive message that employing autistic people is not an act of charity but one that makes sound economic sense.

Adam Feinstein is an internationally recognised autism historian and researcher.

A Guide to Successful Employment across the Entire Spectrum
Grace Igoe, ceramicist on the autism spectrum
Hans Asperger (1906-1980)
‘We can see in the autistic person, far more clearly than with any normal child, a predestination for a particular profession from earlier youth. A particular line of work often grows naturally out of his or her special abilities.’
THE IMPORTANCE OF WORK:
‘Working is such an important part of my life. Without work, no matter how big or small the job, life would become small and unsatisfying for me. Without work, we discover we can give back to our family and community that have given so much to us … For many on the autism spectrum, work is the glue that keeps our lives together in an otherwise frustrating and sometimes confusing world.’
• Just 16 per cent of individuals on the autism spectrum have full-time jobs in the UK.

• Recent research found that only 10 per cent of adults diagnosed with autism currently received support to find employment, yet 79 per cent of people with autism on unemployment benefits want to work.
Focus on the strengths, not the deficits!

• Attention to detail
• Punctuality
• Honesty
• Creativity – the ability to think ‘outside the box’ in the workplace
• Change the workplace conditions, not the person with autism
Many people with autism who have specific skills are not good at selling those skills. Some have low self-esteem, some are unable to communicate their strengths verbally. Sometimes, employers should take the lead. They should concentrate on what adults with autism can do, their strengths, not their deficits, and the specific talents which come with their differences.
Thorkil Sonne – and dandelion
Thorkil Sonne to Adam Feinstein:

‘Kids love dandelions. But as you become an adult, this love turns to hate. The dandelion has become a weed. It destroys the order of your garden and you want to get rid of it. But the flower is the same. Something else has changed. Your own norms have been replaced by society’s norms. But what is a weed? A weed is a flower in an unwanted place. If you put the dandelion in a wanted place, it turns into a herb. I know this because I visited a farmer who makes a living out of growing dandelions. He harvests them for nutritional purposes. They give you back so much if they are treated well. It’s the same with people – if they’re made to feel welcome, you have access to values. So what we’re trying to do is make autistic people welcome in the workplace so that employers have access to all the values.’
SAP’s ‘puzzle piece’ metaphor:

People are like puzzle pieces, irregularly shaped. Historically, companies have asked employees to trim away their irregularities, because it’s easier to fit people together if they are all perfect rectangles. But that requires employees to leave their differences at home - differences which firms need in order to innovate.
Autism as a different cognitive style

People with autism display higher levels of creativity – University of Stirling, 2015
WHICH TYPE OF JOB?
Jobs for non-verbal (or minimally verbal) individuals with autism:

- Store-stock, library helper, factory assembly worker, warehouse helper, office helper, odd-job gardener

- Positive examples: the bottle bank worker in Belgium; Poetry in Wood (London)
Thomas Robins at Poetry in Wood
Jobs for tactile workers

Eighty per cent of one US car wash firm, Rising Tiding Car Wash, are on the autism spectrum. Another autistic individual in the States has proven a wonderfully passionate guitar-maker.
Jobs for visual learners:

Commercial artists, graphic designers, web designers, cartoonists, photographers
Jobs for verbal learners:

- Acting
Positive examples: Dean Beadle (public speaker) and Julius Robertson (actor)
Jobs for auditory learners:

• Susan Boyle, Derek Paravicini
Derek Paravicini, blind autistic pianist
Manual work:

Walking dogs, gardening
The horrors of the job interview:

- A Canadian study in 2015 indicated that adults with ASD fare poorly in job interviews and that impaired communication skills may be apparent even in those considered ‘high-functioning’.

- Interviews require interaction, eye contact and often responses to abstract questions expressed in metaphorical, rather than literal, language. Some employers agree to supply the questions beforehand; many still do not.
for the interview:

- Show up early
- Look after hygiene and grooming
- Decide whether to disclose your Asperger’s
- If you DO disclose, keep it positive
- Do not make money the focus of the interview
- Use humour sparingly and with extreme caution
Well-meaning stereotypes are misleading – like all stereotypes

- Not everyone with autism is good at IT.
- Not all people with autism are all content to do repetitive tasks without becoming bored.
- Some people with ASD can do well working in the service sector.
UNPAID INTERNSHIPS:

• A positive example: Little Gate Farm in Sussex
Angela Dellow (with tiramisu)
Angela opening her first payslip
Women with autism in the workplace

There is clear evidence that females are better at camouflaging their autism, but this effort can be exhausting, depressing and distressing.
Kevin Pelphrey (George Washington University, Washington DC) to Adam Feinstein:

‘The systems dealing with stress are constantly being taxed. Women with autism have two jobs – to pass as neurotypical and to do the job itself. They are not given as wide a latitude for being different. Exceptions are made for boys: if boys are a little bit unsocial, that is not deemed as being mean or cold.’
General issues in the workplace:

- Sensory distractions of the office
- Key problems with executive function
- The ‘hidden curriculum’ (Brenda Smith Myles)
- Bullying
- To disclose or not to disclose
Georgia Granger on sensory distractions:

The offices I’ve worked in were open-plan, where even if I wasn’t required to do phone work, 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 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 … 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.’
Gloria Granger on problems with executive function:

‘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 … It’s really difficult for me to start and stop something I’m working on while that focused.’
Becky on the ‘hidden curriculum’: 

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.’
Thomas Madar (brilliant but bullied)
Self-employment:

• Eliminates the ‘hidden curriculum’ of the workplace and permits a more controlled structuring of the environment.

• **BUT:** Involves stressful record-keeping, marketing and the need to keep clients satisfied.

• **Temple Grandin:** ‘Freelancing is not for the faint-hearted.’
Positive example: Alex Lowery
Alex is a successful public speaker, author, trainer and autism campaigner. He tried working in an office environment with his father but found it ‘boring and repetitive’. His freelance speaking career began at the age of 17, when he was asked to give a talk to an audience at St John’s Ambulance. He was subsequently trained in public speaking by the Welsh charity, Autism Cymru. He became self-employed in 2013. He still carries his favourite piece of string with him to his speaking engagements. He calls it ‘Freddy’.
Found that managers identified employees with Asperger’s syndrome as having characteristics distinctive from neurotypical employees working in similar roles. A high work ethic and IQ were conceptualised by managers as strengths, whereas attention to detail, honesty and directness, flexibility and social interaction were conceptualised variously as strengths or as weaknesses, depending on the specific job role, working environment and the norms governing HR processes and ways of working.
Cockayne and Warburton (2016):

‘Employers should question if positive valuations of these “softer” skills are always appropriate or if they are based upon subjective and arbitrary notions as well as more precisely specify the attributes or skills that are actually required, for example: what attributes or ways of working count as team working? Is being empathetic and a “good” communicator always necessary?’
Jon Adams:

‘I firmly believe it’s the creatively divergent way of thinking that’s enabling as an autistic artist, but this can’t usefully exist in isolation. It needs an opportunity to be revealed and nurtured, and an understanding of neurodiversity is vital. We can see and reveal patterns, thoughts and ideas very differently, and when “compelled to make” can do so with great concentration and detail …
... This is especially important in employment where ‘mistreatment’, deliberate or not, adds mental health issues and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) to the weight of the rucksack you carry already. Without understanding on the employer’s part, all this adds to low self-esteem and becomes a self-imposed barrier, stealing focus away from what we can do and our talents. From recent experiences, I’ve unfortunately found that there are no grey areas – we are either enabled or “left” to struggle. Autism awareness and listening to what we say we need is key … I’m confident with my neuro-difference. I wouldn’t change anything other than maybe people’s attitudes and their understanding, but that’s something hopefully I can help to achieve with the work I make and show.’

- JON ADAMS
Advice to employers:

• Eliminate fear of the unknown, but also avoid well-meaning stereotypes about autism
• Tailor the interview process
• Keep instructions literal – and write them down
• Be aware of the ‘autism advantage’ in the workplace
• Employing a person with autism is not an act of charity – it makes good commercial sense
Gloria Granger:

‘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.’
Future trends:

• Are the prospects encouraging or discouraging?

• The use of new technologies
‘We hire incredibly expert people and then we put them on jobs that could be done by non-experts. Let those experts we hire play at the top of their game. In my field, almost 80 per cent of that time is spent on less than what their expertise is. Not only would AI be better for employee satisfaction, because I don't have to deal with the mundane stuff, but I would also get to deal with the big problems and creation.’

- Executive team member, major national hospital, US
Alyx in Edinburgh
The importance of the siblings
Keep positive about autism!

‘It has never been a better time to have autism. Why? Because there is a remarkably good fit between the autistic mind and the digital age. For this new generation of children with autism, I anticipate that many of them will find ways to blossom, using their skills with digital technology to find employment, to find friends and, in some cases, to innovate.’

(Quoted in The Times, January 1, 2007)
Adam Feinstein’s book, *A History of Autism: Conversations with the Pioneers*, was published by Wiley-Blackwell in 2010 and has been translated into a number of languages. Routledge published his new book, *Autism Works: A Guide to Successful Employment across the Entire Spectrum*, in September 2018. He is the founder and editor of the international autism magazine, *Looking Up* (www.lookingupautism.org). He has written on autism for many publications, including the *Guardian*, and has given talks on the condition around the world, including India, China, Argentina, Mexico, Spain, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Denmark and the United States. He has a son, Johnny, with autism. He is also the author of *Pablo Neruda: A Passion for Life*, the first authoritative biography of the Nobel Prize-winning Chilean poet, first published by Bloomsbury in 2004 to coincide with Neruda's centenary and re-issued in an updated edition in 2013.