



“I Hate Change”

Helping those with Asperger's Syndrome transition between jobs successfully

I have been told that everyone has an inner child. If that is true, mine is a 5-year-old holding a protest sign that reads, “I hate change.” I have run away from some situations, but the ones that I have achieved the most success from, I have been forced to meet head on.

BY RACHELE J. JONES, ED.D.

Transitioning between jobs causes a great deal of anxiety for most individuals on the autism spectrum; however, if done with careful planning and knowledge of the person’s needs, it is possible to have a wonderful experience. This article outlines some necessary steps to make sure this transition is as smooth and anxiety-free as possible.

Find Co-Workers You Can Trust

Before you accept your new job, find out if you can be introduced to individuals with whom you will be working. One

of my previous supervisors did this for me. It is not easy to decide who you can and cannot trust, especially if you are face-blind (have an impaired ability to recognize faces). Having colleagues to turn to can provide you with help in navigating the social nuances of the organizational culture.

Learn the Rules of the Workplace

Another necessary step is to find out the rules for the new job. For example, you may have an employer who micromanages or one who simply expects you to get your work done when you say you will. Either of these management styles in a boss can lead to problems. The first is stressful because it feels like someone

is nagging you all the time to get things done, while the second might cause you to struggle with time management and organizational skills. The best approach in such situations is to be honest. Provide your supervisor with regular updates on your work progress, and make sure that expectations are clearly communicated so that you understand what the employer wants from you.

When there is a great deal of pressure from co-workers in the office for you to “just act normal,” it is important to educate your employer concerning Asperger’s and disclose any accommodations you may need (see the accompanying sidebar on disclosure). Many times, no one will be able to tell that you are any different from anyone else. Then the frustrating communication and sensory issues crop up, especially during times of stress and fatigue. Although most countries have laws to protect individuals with disabilities in the workplace, sometimes the individual needs to adjust his or her behaviors for the comfort of others. There is a give and take in the workplace environment just like there is in a family.

Interact with Your Co-Workers

Whether you like it or not, you will be interacting with your co-workers. It is extremely rare for an individual to work by himself or herself on the job. So much for being a hermit! Most work environments involve collaboration in teams. Therefore, for the sake of job longevity, it is extremely important to get to know your co-workers. I have learned that people love to hear the sound of their name in pleasant conversation. They also enjoy positive interactions, so if you can facilitate those exchanges on a regular basis, there is a high likelihood that they

To Disclose or Not

From the “The Asperger’s Difference: For and About Young Adults with Asperger’s Syndrome” DVD and accompanying discussion guide. Produced by the Center for Spectrum Services. For more information and/or to order the DVD, visit www.centerforspectrumservices.org.

As you transition into a new school or job, you may feel that you need to disclose your autism or Asperger’s. There is always some risk involved in disclosure. Who should you tell or not tell? Here are some questions to consider:

What is the nature of the relationship?

You should use your judgment about whether or not to tell. A lot depends on the length and/or involvement of the relationship. If it’s someone you may not cross paths with again, it’s likely better not to tell. But if it’s someone who will be in your life and possibly your future, you probably should disclose.

Why do others need to know?

Others need to know your strengths and challenges, so they can provide you with needed accommodations. Teachers and professors are examples of people you should tell who can help you. They should be people you trust. However, don’t ask for more help than you need. As one student in the DVD says, “Seek help, but don’t use your Asperger’s as an excuse to be lazy.”

Also, when you do disclose, it might be beneficial to consider how much others need to know. For example, you can offer a partial disclosure by describing a challenge in the environment (such as “The lights make my eyes hurt”) rather than fully disclosing that you have Asperger’s.

Why is it important for others to have an understanding of your social style or unconventional ways of being in the world, often called “behaviors”?

It may not be important for everyone to understand your behaviors. But if they are affecting your performance in school or work, it’s important to speak to your teacher or boss.

Be your own advocate. Learn the appropriate language and social skills to be able to communicate your challenges and ask for the accommodations you need. Disclosure is a personal decision. Some people accept who they are, but don’t feel the need to tell. Others want to share their differences, teach people about their condition and bond with others who have the diagnosis.



will equate you with happiness and you will be able to work well together, when this is required.

Wear Appropriate Clothing

Fashion is one of those items that changes at a rapid rate of speed. Males tend to have less fashion-related stress than females, but there is still a lot of pressure in the workplace to look a certain way. It has taken a great deal of time for me to learn to ask for help with this and then a lot of humility to submit to some of my co-workers' fashion rituals when I would

prefer to wear something that is simply comfortable.

According to business coach and writer Renée Evenson (2007), employers look for individuals with good attitudes and clean appearances. Her tips for dressing are as follows:

- Dress professionally for your interview.
- Dress appropriately for the work for which you are interviewing.
- When unsure about how to dress, always rule on the side of being conservative.

Pick out clothes the night before that you feel comfortable in, but that still look appropriate for the organizational culture.

- Make sure you are clean and well groomed before you leave home.
- Look in a full-length mirror before you leave home to make sure you've covered all of these points.

The First Day on the Job

Even if you are equipped and qualified to start that new job, there are two possible scenarios for which you should prepare. In my research, I have learned that some Aspies have absolutely no anxiety walking into a new job. My hunch is that this confidence emerges from an egocentric world view that helps them cope. In some ways I am a little jealous of that coping mechanism because I am in the other group that is perseverating over the change in routine and anxiously checking my list of things not to forget to do on the first day. Here are some hints to get through the first day successfully.

- Pick out clothes the night before that you feel comfortable in, but that still look appropriate for the organizational culture. Remember, it is important to be comfortable at work, but for professional purposes you should look fashionable as well.
- Get up a tad early in the morning so that you have extra time to adjust to your new routine. Do things that naturally help you to be happy. If animals help you to be happy, play with some animals. If a certain kind



Have lunch in a quiet place so you can refocus for the rest of the day.

of music makes you happy, listen to that music.

- Arrive at work 5–10 minutes early, but not too early. It can be awkward if you do not have keys to the building, and no one will be ready for you. Make sure you smile and say “hello” to people even if you feel like throwing up. This will create a positive first impression that will assist you in the office culture.
- Find a mentor. This is a person who will teach you all there is to learn in the office. According to office protocol, this should be a person who is higher up the chain of command than you. Having someone lower than you on the chain of command help you

with certain things, such as proof-reading e-mails before you send them out, can be a violation of workplace rules.

- Take a time-out. Have lunch in a quiet place so you can refocus for the rest of the day. This will help prevent sensory and social overload.
- Make friends with the secretary, administrative assistant or receptionist. This person knows everything there is to know in the office. One of the first things I have learned from my work experience is that the people who keep the office running are to be kept happy. Thank him or her frequently or with small gifts, like chocolate or a card.

- Be aware of monopolizing the conversation. If you are talking with someone for more than five minutes (and you are not giving a formal speech or presentation) and the other person has said only a few words, it is probably the other person’s turn to talk.
- Go home and rest. After the first day of work, do not be discouraged if you are emotionally drained. Interaction with lots of new people is difficult. Give yourself a little time to adjust to the new routines and situations before you start wondering if you have done a good job.

In conclusion, transitioning to a new job is often riddled with anxious moments because it is full of interpersonal interaction. Changing positions means that, as an individual with autism, you have to change a lot of things: your location of work, your co-workers and oftentimes the type of work you are doing. But change can bring wonderful new opportunities as well. My inner child holding up the protest sign saying “I hate change” is awfully glad she took her new job. I have gotten to work with some amazing people, and get to do what I am good at. Who could ask for more?

Reference

Evenson, R. (2007). Making a great first impression. *Techniques (Association for Career and Technical Education)*, 82(5): 14–17.

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