

Imagine you heard someone described as “being paralysed by shyness”. Shyness is a characteristic we all have, but taken to excess it becomes a disability, hence “paralysing”. The person becomes disabled by an inbuilt disposition that cannot be seen or touched, exactly as it is for those with Asperger’s syndrome. It is where disability and diversity come to overlap.

“Neurodiversity” is the blanket term describing differences in how people think, see the world around them and process information. Autism, including Asperger’s syndrome (as well as dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD and Tourette’s) are all neurodiverse conditions protected under the Equality Act 2010. Neurodiverse individuals are outnumbered by neurotypicals, and [about one in 200 people](#) have Asperger’s syndrome.

Although one area where the act provides protection is in the job market, there is a case to be made that businesses that find out more about about the characteristics of those on the autistic spectrum – for example high attention to detail, conscientiousness, some difficulties with social interaction, hyper-sensitivity to lights and noise – can optimise their strengths and help them [to contribute hugely](#) to the output of their teams.

Building strengths

As part of my doctoral study, I interviewed line managers in a large organisation where numeracy and accuracy were highly valued skills, to find out more about what strengths they saw in team members with Asperger’s syndrome. Here are a couple of things that were said: “She is exceptional (I’d say ‘gifted’), works more quickly, makes less mistakes, generates higher levels of output than all of her more experienced colleagues, and has a more creative approach to solving problems” and “He’s a model employee, does the work of two people.”

A legal eye for detail?

Someone with high predilection for spotting detail is very likely to be able to see errors and oddities in a situation or document that others simply do not. If overused, such a characteristic can be a weakness, and may lead to people with autism being described as pedantic by colleagues. But a fine eye for detail in the right context is a strength, for example lawyers poring over heavy text and proof readers checking websites for spacing inconsistencies and inaccuracies.

For the person with Asperger’s syndrome, it is likely that the time taken for such tasks passes quickly, is accomplished easily and to a high standard.

These glowing descriptions are often accompanied by a “but”, usually related to working conditions. People with Asperger’s syndrome find it very hard to concentrate in environments which are excessively noisy or brightly lit. They often find team meetings unnecessary and a distraction from the task in hand. Instead, employers could question the value of having all of the team present at all meetings, all of the time.

Private matter

Having a different way of processing information and experiencing the world around you is for the most part a very private matter. A person with Asperger's syndrome doesn't wear a badge telling colleagues to watch out for particular characteristics. Differences in outward behaviours may be highly visible, yet the disability itself remains unseen, making it hard for line managers and HR teams to understand completely why employees find such constraints disabling.

So while it's obvious to a company that a wheelchair user needs a ramp or a visually impaired person needs better lighting, someone who thinks differently, is hyper-sensitive to noise or other stimuli, finds team meetings a strain often doesn't accord the same support. If line managers have a healthy curiosity and are able to find out what works for the individual, it is often the case that minor changes can make a major difference.

Typical workplaces, untypical contributors

Imagine a workplace populated entirely by neurotypicals all wanting to progress. They would consult the competency framework, showing what behaviours were required for progression, and then simply develop the required leadership skills and influencing capabilities ready for the annual performance review.

Organisations in our study spoke about the relentless focus on leadership and management competencies, for example "influencing others", often to the exclusion of other approaches to talent development. This isn't new. Almost every company I have ever worked with struggles with finding workable pathways for career progression for technical specialists, many of whom have limited interest or aptitude for leadership and management roles. We're also now seeing how frameworks like these unintentionally disable people with autism.

Looking more closely at these frameworks through the eyes of a person with autism, phrases such as "flexibility, coping well with change, seeking opportunities to influence those around you" sit far less well. An intelligent, productive person with autism may shudder at the thought that these attributes, seemingly peripheral to the job they want to do, are the only way in which they can progress and be organisationally valuable. I'm not saying that competency frameworks are redundant, far from it. But it is holding onto them regardless of the messages they send to people with autism that needs attention.

One company that is taking a step back and thinking hard about such matters is SAS, a data analytics company who are exploring how the strengths of this population can be better harnessed within their business.

Having meaningful work which plays to strengths is desirable for most people. We need to learn how people with Asperger's syndrome can contribute to roles, as well as challenge some of the stereotypes that persist about all forms of autism. Enlightened employers have long made the business case for employing diverse workforces and much progress has been made where differences are highly visible, for example in female diversity programmes and positive action pathways for people with physical disabilities. It's time for HR specialists to decide if carefully developed processes aimed at mainstream neurotypicals are also fit-for-purpose for those with hidden differences.