

Stream title: Hidden inequalities in the workplace: dignity and well-being

Author: Anne Cockayne, Department of HRM, Nottingham Business School

Conference Abstract

Title: 'Hidden' disability: an investigation into the characteristics of employees with Asperger's syndrome.

Asperger's syndrome is a neurodiverse condition which lies on the spectrum of autistic conditions. Individuals with Asperger's syndrome (AS) differ from others, classed as neurotypical, in the way in which they process information and experience the social world. These differences are largely non visible ('hidden') and are the prime reason that knowledge of the condition is low. AS individuals possess particular characteristics which in the workplace play out as both strengths and impairments. However they often struggle with securing and maintaining meaningful employment on account of working in jobs or environments that are unsuited to these characteristics (Baldwin and Costley 2015). This research highlights how AS individuals can contribute to the workplace through deploying the characteristics associated with the condition. The research also introduces the challenges for HRM specialists of employing and managing individuals with Asperger's syndrome, a neurodiverse condition that is under explored in the employment context. Challenges include considering how to manage disclosure which is frequently problematic for employee and employer.

The Equality Act (2010) requires employers to act in a non discriminatory manner towards individuals with neurodiverse conditions such as Asperger's syndrome in relation to recruitment, selection, development and management. However in most organisations HR specialists and line managers know little about Asperger's syndrome, and what they do know is often inaccurate or based upon misleading stereotypes (Griffiths et al (2012). Employment studies exist which explore employment experiences including disclosure solely from the perspective of employees with hidden disabilities. Following Ahonen et al (2013) who call for criticality in diversity studies, this research includes the perspective of the line manager in exploring how AS employees can contribute to the organisation as well as their role in shaping disclosure opportunities.

Neurodiversity is explored in domains outside the employment context. Owren and Stenhammer (2013) discuss how in the context of social care, neurotypical norms are applied to neurodiverse individuals and their translation into policy, practices and rules which create unintentional indirect discrimination. However, parallels between the operation of neurotypical norms underpinned by ableist perspectives noted by critical disability studies (Williams and Mavin 2012) and which govern policies and practices within the HRM domain have not yet been drawn. Neurodiversity is under explored in the employment context and neglected in both disability and diversity studies in the main on account of its hidden and 'invisible' status, prompting Thompson and Smith (2010) to note that making reasonable adjustments for employees with hidden disabilities represents difficult challenges for HRM.

The primary aim of this research is to understand more about the employment experiences of employees with Asperger's syndrome and in particular the experiences of their line managers. The focus of the study is upon the strengths that are associated with the condition, and thus to consider how such differences can be utilised productively within the employment context. A further aim is to enhance the career and employment outcomes for AS individuals, a population known to incur adverse employment experiences ((Muller et al 2003; 2008; Krieger et al 2012, Hughes 2012, Haertl et al 2013)

The study cites Asperger's syndrome as a neurodiverse condition, and concurs with the 'deficit as difference' approach (Baron Cohen 2015; Goldstein-Hode 2015; Ortega (2009). The findings are drawn from qualitative semi-structured interviews with 12 line managers, 8 HR and EDI specialists and 8 employees, from 7 organisations of varying size and sector. All the quotes displayed are from line managers of AS employees.

Autistic spectrum conditions occur in about 1 in 100, and Asperger's syndrome occurs in approximately 1 in 200 people. These estimates would suggest that large organisations in particular would have sufficient numbers of employees with a diagnosis to take part in a research study. However a major challenge to address in this study became that of identifying sufficient numbers of line managers who manage employees with a diagnosis to come forward as participants. The cause of such low numbers is likely twofold. Firstly there is no legal requirement to disclose any hidden disability. Secondly, some individuals feel no need to disclose; and some simply may not know they have the condition. This is particularly true for women with Asperger's syndrome. Females are often misdiagnosed or remain undiagnosed as in general they are better at handling social interaction and symptoms present differently (Baldwin and Costley 2015).

Preliminary findings

Disclosure

A common finding was that employees who were diagnosed later in life experienced a sense of relief following the diagnosis, as well as some regret that this had not happened earlier, citing their belief that more knowledge would have led to better career choices and greater comfort with their own abilities and difficulties.

Findings indicates that many employees are either working without a diagnosis, or have chosen not to disclose. Individuals avoid disclosure for many reasons, for example fear of being stigmatised or of facing a hostile reaction.

"Only a very few know. I've put it on the diversity thing and on my file, but managers, they don't want to know they don't want to touch it, they don't like the subject. I declared on (physical disability) god knows what they would say if I disclose I have Asperger's syndrome" (employee)

The tension between the benefits of raised awareness about AS and the potential unintended negative consequences of disclosure was highlighted:

"We need to be very careful of pigeonholing people. For example, 'A's strengths in seeing data... I think that [others] perceptions are that if you put him in line management he wouldn't do well. But he did an absolutely fantastic job."

State of knowledge about the condition of Asperger's syndrome

Most line managers and HR specialists were unsure about the facts relating to Asperger's syndrome in regards to prevalence, and acknowledged that the knowledge they did have was based largely on educated guesses. All knew Asperger's syndrome is a protected characteristic under the Equality Act (2010), through equality and diversity training programmes. Most were confident that it is a spectrum condition, and knew also that it is classed as a disability in law. Line managers recognised that the knowledge they have about the condition is directly related to their ability to manage the disability productively.

" I think it is disabling...but because the spectrum is so wide, you could be either disabled or not depending upon severity. At one end you could be disabled, at the other, not"

"It's only a disability if it affects everyday life"

"there's probably things I would give 'A' to do today, that if he was at the other end of the scale (of autism) that I wouldn't give him. So I worry about that"

Skills

Line managers were also asked about their perceptions of AS and whilst many recognised AS as disability, paradoxically they also noted that AS individuals have rare and valuable skills.

A rare skill which is to look at these [charts] and pick out some pedantic detail- but more than that - he will know that people won't make sense of the data and so will change it. I think there are only 3 or 4 people I've known that have that level of intuition.

The following characteristics were identified as being typically associated with Asperger's syndrome more so than the wider population:

a higher than average IQ; a tendency to be blunt and direct; having high attention to detail, difficulties in social interaction and working with others; having a high work ethic; being hypersensitive to lights and noise; being inflexible; experiencing stress and anxiety

Attention to detail was a characteristic strongly associated with AS employees and in most cases recognised as a valuable skill. Overused, such a characteristic can be a weakness; people with autism have been described as 'pedantic; boring; geeky', whilst this same fine eye for detail is an asset in some roles.

"She can dissect the detail in legislation and then apply it. She is VERY good at that. And she gets through an amazing amount of work... volume, speed and it is always very well thought out. Very difficult stuff. (line manager talking about employee)

Work ethic, more akin to an underlying value than a skill, was consistently reported as a strength associated with AS. This is often manifested in excellent timekeeping, although attendance can be affected adversely where the demands of the job and working environment do not suit characteristics. Almost all line managers reported that their employees would prefer to perform tasks that others in the team find unattractive, often on account of their repetitive nature. Paradoxically these tasks are often those which are valuable and/or essential to the organisation. This finding held across high and low skill levels.

"She is very technically gifted but it is keeping her at work that is the issue, her attendance"

"Once in work that high work ethic kicks in, and the problem is getting him to go home. He has the focus to see a piece of work through to the very bitter end. He's a model employee, does the work of 2 people"

Rising customer expectations and the use of new technology are frequently reflected in competency frameworks in descriptions of being flexible and managing or working through organisational change. All except one line manager cited flexibility as a potential problem area commenting upon the difficulties in applying competency frameworks to make decisions relating to performance. These findings raise the question of whether or not it is reasonable and unintentionally discriminatory to expect those with Asperger's syndrome to possess these in the same levels as others.

"Where does this leave people within the spectrum... where they aren't seen as being flexible, because they can't be? It's like asking someone with a broken leg to do the fandango! A broken leg you can see. But other conditions you can't see"

Managers reported that employees were frequently blunt and direct in their communications and that this could surface awkward issues, which others did not want to highlight, and that doing so was helpful to either the direct manager or the organisation. Conversely such directness could also be problematic.

"Her directness is brilliant; I'm taken aback the first few times. Often she will pick holes in what I've done- it definitely keeps me on my toes!"

"Emails were too blunt and upset one member of staff. It did cause a real problem, I don't think that the recipient will ever really understand - they don't know about the condition".

What adjustments are reasonable?

Managers spoke about the difficulty of managing someone with a hidden disability and how this can make it hard for the immediate team to understand why someone finds particular

tasks difficult, or why they are accorded certain adjustments, for example additional break times.

"I feel there is a lot more support and understanding placed upon someone who has a disability that you can see rather than someone who has different brain chemistry. It would be a lot easier if it was a broken arm or leg... other people 'get' it. Nobody can argue with this can they?"

The spectrum nature of the condition means that individual requirements differ greatly; noisy environments require much more adaptation than do quiet offices where the role has less social interaction. The adjustment that frequently makes the biggest impact is being able to change the nature of the task itself through 'job crafting' (Wrzesniewski and Dutton 2011).

Discussion - HR challenges

Policy

Findings connect low levels of knowledge and understanding of the condition of AS with the application of NT norms resulting in unintentional (informal) discrimination, which may be either hidden or overt. Organisational norms governing processes for recruitment, selection, career progression, performance management and redeployment through their reliance upon HR 'tools' such as person specifications and competency frameworks, may operate against the spirit of the equality and diversity legislation. Organisations could therefore question such practices, for example in recruitment where the reliance upon the interview is the prime tool for assessment. For those with Aspergers syndrome or other autistic spectrum conditions, applying for roles which primarily require skills in predictive analytics, the interview may be both a poor predictor of job performance as well being discriminatory.

Findings also suggest that line managers and HR specialists can question existing norms about how decisions related to the tasks individuals are allocated within a wider team. For example, exploring if all team members are required to perform the same amount and type of tasks; or take part in meetings in the same way. Job roles in which characteristics associated with AS, particularly high IQ, attention to detail and affinity with data are prime areas in which AS individuals may excel. As these roles exist at higher and lower grades within organisations, they represent potentially useful career development opportunities for AS individuals.

Improvement in the knowledge and understanding of HR specialists about the strengths of the AS population has the potential to be advantageous as well as problematical. More accurate knowledge of the condition will in probability encourage more people to disclose. In turn this may employers widen their talent pools particularly when seeking skills in the STEM disciplines, for example predictive analytics. However negative stereotypes may cause managers to avoid employing or restrict the career development of those with Asperger's syndrome. Positive stereotyping may lead to pigeonholing of employees into routine and low level tasks. The decision to disclose is therefore not straightforward, as potential for unintended negative consequences exists through labeling individuals as disabled and therefore impaired according to stereotyped views about Asperger's syndrome.

A further implication of improved diagnosis and awareness arises from the increase in applicants, particularly at graduate level, who are likely to have had support in their student experiences following disclosure. The numbers entering employment are likely either to have been diagnosed or be prepared to disclose. Employers therefore need to anticipate the expectations held by future employees in respect of reasonable adjustments and attitudes to difference, in order to prepare for such new entrants.

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