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An autistic guide to successfully maintaining employment

Employers! Don't see the label, see the potential

Since graduating from university I have always had person- centred jobs, not because I wanted to, but because I was good at them. However, a job based around people did take its toll on my health, causing meltdowns due to the constant unpredictability of clients, scenarios, situations and even work colleagues.

On the face of it, I appeared confident and excelled at 'acting' in the appropriate environment. In every interview I attended I either got the job or came first reserve. This was because I had learnt to act and predict what questions were coming my way – I knew what the question and answer would be even before entering the interview room.

The problems came when the job began. In my first job I could only maintain 9 months of employment due to the pressure I was under. I could never understand why I always had difficulty maintaining a job since leaving university. However this all changed in 2013; at the age of 27 I was diagnosed with high functioning autism.

Post-diagnosis

I am still in a person centred job, but my meltdowns have decreased in number and I am able to 'hold down' a job.

I have been with my current employer [North East Wales Carers Information Service \(NEWCIS\)](#), a charity which offers support to informal carers, for over 3 years.

My contract has recently been extended, and I do a job that 'autistics are not meant to do'. I was initially appointed as a Development Officer and am now a Carers Needs Assessor and Hospital Carer Facilitator. In this role I experience societal situations, interaction and unpredictable scenarios.

Together with my line manager, Jean Roddan, and CEO Claire Sullivan, we have created a

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working environment where I can strive and even utilise my unique skills to improve the service for carers, the workplace and other organisations.

This has only been made possible because Jean and Claire have allowed me to grow, develop and find new strategies which allow me to work in a way that best suits my needs.

Claire explains “Ben has many qualities that support the team and the work we deliver. We have learnt together how we can achieve what works for all involved.”

Support in the workplace

During my application process I asked if I could visit the NEWCIS office, view the premises, and meet the team prior to the interview. They were very accommodating and welcoming. At the time, I hadn't been diagnosed as autistic but instinctively felt I needed to do this.

Once I successfully got the job, an in-depth induction helped me to form relationships and learn the routines and boundaries. It allowed me to speak to staff, and doing some work-shadowing gave me a greater understanding of personalities and expectations.

I can only work in my way because my managers set boundaries and visual targets to work with. My CEO has to be flexible to let me work in a manner that doesn't become overwhelming. She's aware I have to enter the neurotypical world in order to get results, which may cause me to become over-anxious. Others in the office also need to be aware of my way of working, and my 'dislike of unpredictability'.

Effective management

Having one line manager has made it easier for progression in my role, giving me direction and support. It is important for me to have regular supervisions. I find it hard to identify my own feelings and these supervisions give my manager clues as to how I'm getting on.

These supervisions also allow us to consider what reasonable adjustments can be made to make my working environment easier e.g.

- location of my desk in the office
- work shadowing
- emotional support
- encouragement to identify my strengths and weaknesses and support in developing strategies to work on them
- joint working
- instigating personal development.

Claire explains ‘it is important to treat everyone as an individual. Every member of the team has a skill set - it's knitting them together that makes managing all staff needs work. Flexibility, understanding and creativeness ensures that all the staff members achieve their own goals, as well as those of the organisation.’

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One element of the job which I struggle with is the unpredictability of my work colleagues, other agencies and carers. Unfortunately this element will always be a part of the job, but the anxiety caused by unpredictability can be reduced.

The autistic person can use their strengths of observation and attention to detail. By simplifying tasks, putting in strategies, and having an understanding and knowledgeable team around me it has made finding and maintaining a job achievable.

Sharing good practice

I would like to share some of these strategies online at www.autismthinktank.co.uk with other autistics, professionals, family and friends and carers. I'm aware that we're all individuals and what may work for me may not work for you, so I'll welcome any input from fellow autistics and employers.

To conclude, being successful in the workplace requires flexibility from both the employer and the autistic employee. Strong boundaries, targets and routines are needed even before the autistic person is employed.

NEWCIS is the perfect example of an organisation that supports people on the spectrum. By adopting good practice it shows that with the right working environment an autistic person can succeed in their chosen job.

Further information

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