

Asperger Syndrome Job Success Secrets

By Dan Coulter

So, what do you do?

It's one of the first questions one adult asks another when they meet. What do you do for a living? What's your job?

If you're an adult with Asperger Syndrome, you may not be able to give the answer you want. While people with Asperger Syndrome can be very knowledgeable and highly skilled, steady employment is often a challenge.

I learned a lot about this over the last nine months as my wife and I produced a DVD about finding and keeping a job when you have Asperger Syndrome.

As part of our research, we interviewed six people with Asperger Syndrome who have good jobs, and also talked with their bosses, coworkers and job coaches.

What are their secrets to success?

SECRET ONE: They assessed their skills and challenges, and sought jobs that were right for them.

Many children with Asperger Syndrome have trouble socializing in school, even if they do well academically. Those problems don't magically disappear in a workplace. If you want an employer to hire you, you need to show that employer

that your productivity will outweigh any efforts that the organization needs to make to help you fit in. So you should seek out a job that you have the aptitude, knowledge and skills to do well. If you have a special interest, you're much more likely to succeed if you find a job related to that interest.

Also, you need to find a work environment that you can fit into without major problems. For example, people with Asperger Syndrome who have limited social skills tend to do better in jobs where they don't have to constantly deal with new people. A behind-the-scenes job such as accounting is better for some people than a sales position. But Asperger Syndrome affects people in different ways and to different degrees, so you need to determine what's right for you.

Of the six employees we interviewed, two work in accounting jobs, one is an administrative assistant in an office, one works with documents in a state archives department, one is a library page, and one is a veterinary assistant. All have aptitudes that help them succeed, such as great attention to detail.

Tori Saylor, the veterinary assistant, described how a sensitivity associated with Asperger Syndrome actually helps her in her job, "I think I have a way of understanding animals in a different way than

maybe other people would. Just because I can understand, coming into a room and having all the chaos going on, it can affect me. And I see it affect the animals. So just having that understanding and being real calm and gentle with them, I think helps them calm down..."

What does Tori's boss think of her work? He was so impressed that he put her in charge of her department and made her supervisor of two other veterinary assistants, "Well, Tori is not supposed to be your average employee, right? Well, she isn't because she's above average when it comes to that... that's why we made her the department lead."

SECRET TWO: They are open with their employers about their strengths and limitations.

Kevin Singh works in accounting for a large software corporation. He's great with numbers and highly productive, but he can get anxious when he's under stress and tends to engage in long explanations when short ones would suffice. By disclosing his Asperger Syndrome, he enabled his coworkers to understand the reason for his behaviors and help him fit into the workplace.

SECRET THREE: They asked for reasonable accommodations and actually use them.

Some of Kevin's accommodations involve his co-workers. He's given them cue words to alert him when they see a behavior that could interfere with work and give him a chance to make a change. If a coworker sees Kevin is getting upset, they'll suggest that he "Take Five." Kevin will then take a short break, calm down, and go back to work in a better frame of mind. If Kevin is giving too long an explanation, a co-worker can ask for the "Cliffs Notes" version. Kevin then knows to shorten his explanation to essential information.

Kevin makes the observation, "Aspergers...you should never use your diagnosis as a get out of jail free card... (but) people are willing, if they see you are making an honest effort, you're really trying, they will, you know, give you a break."

Giving Kevin a break enables him to be so productive that his supervisor says, "Kevin is very detailed, fast...If you give him an assignment, he can perform this better than anyone in our department because of his accuracy."

David Moser, another employee interviewed for the program, works in an accounting position for a state agency. While he has an extraordinary memory that makes his coworkers marvel, he also can sometimes become distracted. Two accommodations that help David be productive are a schedule/checklist of what he needs to do during his work day, and a form template. When he

deals with a form that includes lots of information, he covers it with the template, which only shows him the fields he needs to work with. This way he can quickly read the relevant information he needs without other numbers catching his attention.

SECRET FOUR: They are flexible, and have adapted their own behaviors to fit into their workplaces.

Drew Coulter, who works at a public library, likes to socialize with people. As part of his job, he assists library patrons who are using computers. But he had to learn to not interact with these patrons unless they asked for his assistance. Also, Drew used the fictional character of a very proper and polite butler as his inspiration for dealing with the public, "After reading a good deal of P.G. Wodehouse, I've assimilated the manners of Reginald Jeeves into my personality for the purpose of being more pleasant and understanding of the clients." Drew's supervisor says, "He's a delight to work with."

Tori found it helped to study her coworkers at the veterinary clinic and model their behavior, "Once I started working here, I had to kind of stand back and just watch how everybody here portrayed themselves...what was okay to say and what wasn't okay to say...so I just had to watch what they were doing and kind of mimic what they were doing and that is what I call my act."

SECRET FIVE: They ask for help when they need it.

Many people with Asperger Syndrome have difficulty asking for help, especially if they're highly competent. Administrative assistant Katie Rogers is described by her supervisor as, "One of the best employees we have." But regarding assignments, Katie admits, "Sometimes I have to work up my courage, I guess, to say that I don't really understand and if you could explain this more, I'd appreciate it."

Getting help and support from others was one of the biggest factors in the success of the employees we interviewed. Four of the employees have job coaches, who work for public or private agencies. Job coaches help job seekers find the right jobs, help create and modify accommodations, serve as objective observers of an employee and a workplace, counsel employees, employers and coworkers about interacting, and generally serve as ongoing problems solvers. Some job coaches are paid for by public agencies, at no cost to the employee or employer.

The two employees we interviewed who were working without job coaches had understanding supervisors and coworkers who provided some of the supports a job coach offers. For all the employees interviewed, getting the right supports and help enabled them to be productive, valued workers.