Employment

The Practical Guide to Living on the Wrong Planet

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Key Concepts –

- Aspies may be able to use their special interests, areas of expertise and sensory sensitivities to help guide them in identifying career options.
- A psycho-educational assessment may be useful in preparing for post-secondary education; it may be helpful in gaining accommodations and aid, including potential funding, to facilitate success.
- Using the MindWing story template (Friendship chapter) and the Explain script (Self-Advocacy) chapter, as well as having a portfolio or examples of work products, can be helpful tools for preparing for and being interviewed for a job.
- The story template and Explain script are also helpful tools once in an employment situation as communication tools with co-workers and your employer.
- Reviewing past employment experiences can provide helpful information to learn from and facilitate success in future employment situations.
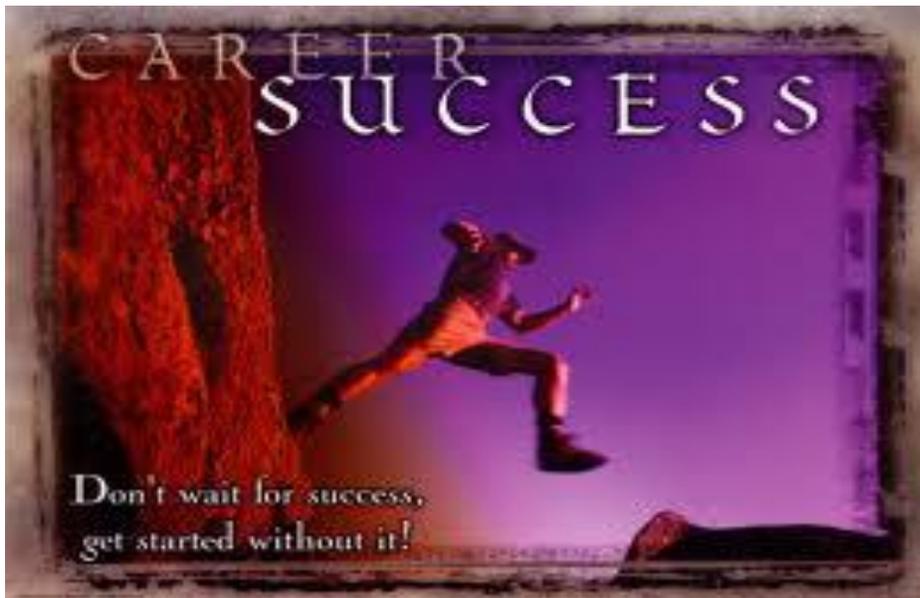
Career success involves several steps, including:

- identifying an area in which we have skills and / or an interest
- accessing post-secondary training to learn relevant information and skills
- finding a work environment that fits with our social and cognitive style
- developing an effective communication strategy for dealing with our boss (who assigns job tasks and evaluates our performance)
- interacting with co-workers and jointly solving problems

Identifying career options

Most Aspies have some areas of special interest that can be a useful starting point for exploring career options. If there is something that you enjoy researching and / or have become skilful at, and it can result in a product or service that would benefit others, then that could be a career possibility. The Aspie strength in learning all the related information on a topic, paying attention to all the details, and focusing on the goal of generating an outcome that has all the details correct, usually results in a superior product or service.

Many Aspies have found unique ways of solving problems throughout their life, and this ability often helps them generate creative solutions and more effective ways of doing something. This ability to be innovative can be a valuable contribution in the workplace.

Sensory Sensitivities

Sensory sensitivities can also be used to explore career options. Paying attention to sensory details, and exploring creative combinations of sensory stimuli, can result in outcomes that are interesting, stimulating and valued by Neurotypicals who do not have the same sensory awareness and creativity.

Example of Aspie using sensory sensitivity for career success

"Andy had been outside all morning and was in for breakfast. He said, indicating the west pasture, "Can you feel the grass out there? It's like this." And he did an impersonation of the grass: mouth pressed tight in anticipation, eyes squinting looking eagerly into the future, head strained up toward the sun. ... I have also heard Andy explain the "desires" of a flowering plant.

"The plant's goal is to reproduce itself. It grows vegetatively to create maximum energy, it flowers and then sends all that energy into the seed pod. When the seed is made, the plant is done. ... If you want to keep a plant in its vegetative state then you have to keep it from flowering."
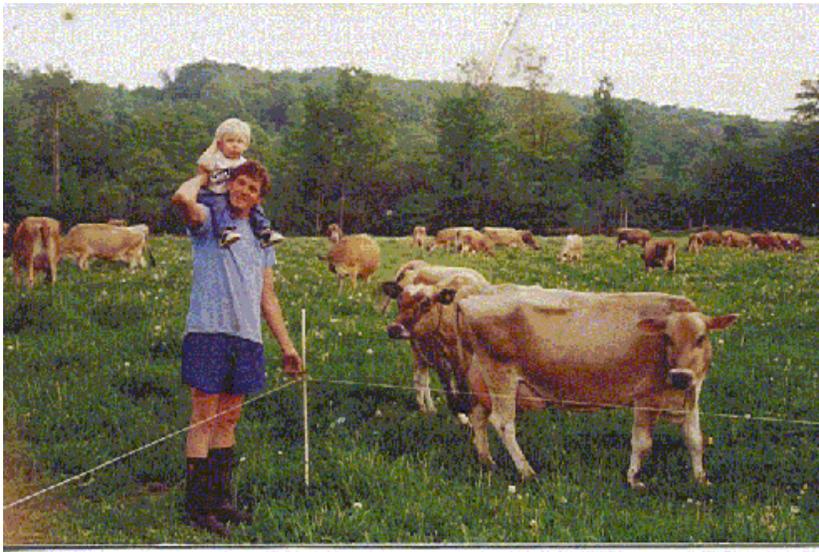
The result of such knowledge on our farm? Twice the hay other farmers get from their fields, lettuce and basil all summer long, and from the other plants, the ones allowed to flower and set seed, enormous vegetables and berries."

Other examples where sensory sensitivities might be used to be successful at a career are cooking, baking, wine-tasting, music, medicine & diagnostics, etc.

Become an expert

Many Aspies find it helpful to think about career planning as identifying an area in which they can become an expert. Possessing technical expertise or knowledge also makes social interaction easier, because the conversation is based on asking questions and providing information, and the Aspie is in the role of the expert or teacher.

Post-secondary training

Usually, some post-secondary training is required to obtain the certification that employers use as an indicator that the potential employee has all the necessary pre-requisite knowledge and skills required for the job. Attending a technical school open house is often a useful step, since it provides an opportunity to see exactly what one does in the job and one can ask questions of the instructor. Some technical institutions allow individuals to do a "student for a day" activity where an individual can participate in all the educational activities that are involved in the training program.

Prior to enrolling in a post-secondary program, it may be helpful to participate in a psycho-educational assessment. This assessment (usually conducted by a psychologist) can be used to identify your cognitive strengths, learning style, and areas of potential difficulty. The assessment report typically includes a list of recommended accommodations and useful strategies, and the post-secondary institution uses this report as the basis for allowing or implementing accommodations and supports to facilitate success for the student.

For example, most Aspies prefer to learn more independently and often find the typical classroom lecture or group discussion format to be a poor match for their learning style. Accommodations could include: receiving a copy of the teacher lecture notes or a copy of another students notes; additional time for exams and / or writing exams in a distraction-free environment, and accessing support from an academic strategist who can assist with planning, organization, and self-advocacy.

Structured study groups or a study partner may be a useful strategy. It may also be helpful to access alternative learning methods beyond the traditional in-class question-and-answer approach - such as visual representations of information, audio recordings, or examples of the desired outcome or product.

Many Aspies have also found that the on-line learning approach to courses that many universities, technical institutes and colleges are now offering can be a good fit for them

Technology tools, such as the iPad, provide many useful tools for recording information, making notes, organization and planning, etc. A psycho-educational report may enable you to access funds from the government that help cover the cost of technology tools, accessing an academic strategist, or paying for copies of another student's notes.

Work environment

Most work environments involve a group of people working together to accomplish a goal, produce a product, or deliver a service. This requires social interaction, so it is important to have some strategies to effectively manage these social interactions.

Several aspects of the work environment present common potential areas for misunderstanding between Neurotypicals and Aspies.

Job interview

In a job interview, a Neurotypical manager who is interviewing potential employees usually has two primary questions in mind:

    a) Does this person have the skills and experience to do the job?
    b) Will this person be a good match for our social group?

The interviewer knows that hiring a person with similar interests and personality style to other employees will make it easier for them to work together as a group. The interviewer also knows that people with a similar style understand each other more easily and are less likely to have communication or interpersonal problems.

To obtain information about whether the job candidate is a good social match, the interviewer may ask an open-ended question, such as "how do you work with others?" or "give me an example of a situation where you solved an interpersonal problem".

The interviewer will also observe nonverbal signals to see if the job candidate responds with positive facial expressions, tone of voice, and body gestures; and whether the candidate builds upon an interview statement by expressing interest or sharing a related experience or story. The interviewer looks for the presence or absence of these social signals in guessing whether there will be a compatible match with the social group.

These open-ended questions, observations of nonverbal signals, and listening for statements that communicate compatibility with the social group are Neurotypical ways of getting social information that is important to them.

However, this interview style is not a good person-situation match for someone with Asperger's. It will be useful for an Aspie to provide information and use strategies that help create a better person-situation setting.

Neurotypicals tend to rely on using a story with verbal descriptions of past events, leading up to a conclusion that states, either directly or by implication, that the candidate has specific skills that can be generalized across multiple situations.

An Aspie will find it helpful to create several story scripts (using the MindWing script in the Friendship section) that tell a story about a characteristic they possess that is important to the job. For example, most employers are looking for employees who can solve both practical problems and interpersonal problems, can handle stress, and are responsible. If there is a situation where you demonstrated any of these skills (or other relevant skills), it would be useful to create several stories and practice them prior to a job interview.

It will also be helpful for an Aspie to provide the interviewer with an understanding of his or her communication style. Most Aspies are confident and effective in their communication when they are able to show others real-world examples of their accomplishments and / or provide a detailed verbal explanation.

Prepare an interview checklist   *Bring a portfolio of your accomplishments*

It can be helpful for an Aspie to create an "explain script" to describe his or her communication style. You can put together a portfolio or photo journal of your accomplishments, and use a script such as the example below:

"I thought it would be helpful to tell you something about my communication style.

I'm the type of person who likes to show examples of my accomplishments rather than just talking or making claims.

Sometimes I can't think of the best way to describe my accomplishments when I am asked an open-ended question or presented with a hypothetical situation.

I can often provide the information you want quicker and more effectively if I show you examples (or photos) of what I have actually done.

I also love questions that ask me to provide facts and evidence, which I find is a good way of confirming how well someone understands something or how they are likely to respond in a real-world situation."

You can also share the following request or suggestion with this script:

"If I happen to miss what you are looking for with an open-ended or hypothetical question, I'm usually good at communicating the information you want in response to a concrete question focused on real-world accomplishments."

If the interviewer asks an open-ended or hypothetical question, you can also respond:

"Would it be OK with you if I showed you some practical examples (or photos) of what I have actually done?"

Communicating effectively with your boss

The `explain script` described in the interview section gives you an example of the type of information you want to provide to your boss when he or she is assigning tasks to you.

For example, you could create scripts to explain characteristics such as the following:

- *"I'm the type of person who works best when I can see a practical example of the ideal finished product, etc."*

- "I'm the type of person who works best when I can understand all the details about what is involved in the process. I might ask a lot of questions because of this. If I am asking a lot of questions and you don't have time to answer them right then, it would help me if we could schedule a follow-up time, or if I could send you an email with any further questions, or if I had a chance to observe and talk with a co-worker performing that task."

- "I'm the type of person who is most effective when I am doing a task that requires performing a specific set of tasks each time to a high standard of excellence, etc."

Social interaction with co-workers

Neurotypicals tend to view social interaction as an important factor in accomplishing group goals, so they often engage in social activities such as "small talk" at various points in their work day. Although "small talk" does not accomplish work goals, it allows Neurotypicals to give and receive non-verbal signals that confirm that they are part of a group and can access the resources and help of other group members.

Aspies may find it helpful to create a script to explain their preference for meaningful conversation and intellectual debate. This will help co-workers understand that an Aspie's lack of participation in coffee break small talk conversations is not a rejection of the group or another person, but instead a preference regarding conversation topics.

One does not need to explain this preference to every co-worker. Usually, once one has explained this to one or two co-workers, it will become a piece of information that is shared among co-workers in coffee break or lunch conversations.

You can also create a story about some positive event or accomplishment that you experienced working together with another co-worker. Sharing this story with a fellow employee will be seen as a positive contribution to the social group, because you are strengthening the group's perception that they are an effective friendly social network.

Neurotypicals sometimes allow social or emotional factors to affect their expectations of and communication with co-workers. A Neurotypical might want a task to be given a higher priority because it is important politically, or they want increased personal recognition in the group, or they feel a feeling like anxiety, frustration, anger etc.

As a result, co-workers can place expectations on an Aspie that he or she will give their task or problem higher priority, when their motivation is social or emotional and not logical. Neurotypicals co-workers may use tone of voice or non-verbal signals to communicate, and may feel frustrated if the Aspie does not respond to these signals.

Creating a buffer zone

Many Aspies find it helpful to create a buffer that helps ensure that the information and requests they receive are factual and logical, and focused on what is important to the business. This buffer can also reduce the amount of non-verbal communication that is presented to the Aspie, including dealing with a lot of emotion or emotional language.

It is important that an Aspie discuss and create a buffer jointly with his or her boss, whenever possible. If there is not an opportunity to discuss this plan and receive approval from the boss, it could be perceived as an individual action that weakens the social and work effectiveness of the group.

The most important elements of the buffer are:

- A data collection or input source that requires the requestor to provide a specific list of relevant task-related facts
- A set of rules or guidelines (usually established by the boss or company) about which tasks are most important, which can be used to prioritize and schedule tasks
- Communication to the requestor that provides information on:

    a) the priority and / or scheduling of the requested task
    b) the reason for the priority or schedule (if it is not top priority or scheduled to be addressed immediately)
    c) options for dealing with the problem if the requestor wants a quicker response or solution (e.g., Frequently Asked Questions info, steps to try in the meantime)

The input source could be a paper form, computer application, structured format for an email message, etc. What is important is that the input source has specific questions or fields that the requestor uses to provide the information that is necessary for a decision.

If there is no existing company policy or procedure for assigning priority and / or scheduling tasks, it will be important to ask your boss to provide the decision rules or guidelines.

When asking your boss for these rules, it will be helpful to make the request in a written format (e.g., email, letter), providing a reason for your request. The reason needs to be relevant to the goals of the company and not focused on personal preference.

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Here is an example of such a request:

> "I am receiving a lot of requests for technical support. Sometimes a user will want a higher priority or faster response, even though this might not be the highest priority from a business perspective. I thought it would be best for me to ask for your direction on what criteria should be used to assign a priority."

You should also provide some specific situations or examples where you need guiding rules. You do not want this information to be interpreted as a personal complaint about another group member, so do your best to remove personally identifying information and use general descriptions.

For example, you could use a job role description (e.g., accountant) rather than a person's name. This works best if there are several people in that position; if there is only one person in that role, it is obvious who is being described.

It can also be helpful to write down the reason that the requestor provided, and explain that you did not know whether this reason qualified as a priority request or not.

Managing stress in the workplace

Many Aspies express stress and feel frustrated or angry when their boss or a co-worker does not demonstrate the knowledge and expertise that should reasonably be expected by someone in their position.

Neurotypicals may not respond with corrective action or punitive consequences even though they see that someone is not knowledgeable or competent in their work role. This usually occurs when that person provides a positive social or other contribution to the group. However, there is still a limit to the amount of incompetence that is tolerated.

When a co-worker starts to approach the imaginary boundary of what the group thinks is the maximum amount of incompetence allowed, people in the group will start to communicate non-verbal signals that require the person to self-correct. If the person does not self-correct, group members will start to withdraw their social support by refusing to help that person (usually making excuses for not being able to help).

An Aspie can use this as an opportunity for social observation. It is unlikely that the group will respond positively to an Aspie bringing this fault to other's attention. It will be more useful to imagine that one is a scientist or anthropologist observing a culture.

When the violation of work rules or expectations, or the lack of appropriate knowledge, skills and expertise, has been a source of ongoing mental stress, some Aspies have found it helpful to create a personal and private (not to be shared with others!) "Guinness Book of Incompetence." They record the incidents and then at the end of the year, they can rank the entries for incompetence, and select a 'winner' (or would that be 'the biggest loser'.)

Another possibility would be to look for and record incidents where kindness, competence, collaboration etc. were shown in the workplace. The benefit of looking at a situation this way is a person is now focused on looking for the positive in the workplace, rather than the negative.

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