Unlocked Potential
AN EMPLOYMENT GUIDE FOR PEOPLE WITH AUTISM

AUTISM SOCIETY OF MINNESOTA
In collaboration with Vocational Rehabilitation Services —
A division of Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development
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Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders have unique, remarkable, and sometimes misunderstood qualities. We know that individuals with ASD are frequently misjudged, overlooked and underemployed. Employment options and workforce development have long been among the top priorities for the Autism Society of Minnesota and Vocational Rehabilitation Services. We hope this guide serves as a useful resource for people with ASD who are seeking employment and helps you to unlock your potential, develop and market your abundant talent and skills to employers.
INTRODUCTION

I was a registered professional engineer, now retired, well regarded in the natural gas industry as both an innovator and a fierce competitor. According to my Social Security records, my working career spanned 37 years. Over the entirety of my lifetime, the majority of my job interviews resulted in job offers, and I have never been fired from a job. I also have an autism spectrum disorder (Asperger Syndrome) and ADHD/ADD (inattentive subtype).

I turned my special interests into my careers, and turned my careers into my special interests. I retired at age 50 and my current net worth puts me among the top 1 percent of individuals in the United States. I do not attribute my success to my wanting to succeed, because everyone wants to succeed. Rather I attribute my success to being willing to succeed.

There is a difference. Wanting is passive, sitting back and waiting for something to plop itself in your lap. Willing is active, going out and doing whatever is necessary to achieve your desired goal, one step at a time, over time. Here is a tidbit that may be difficult to understand at first: I didn't get where I am in spite of my ASD and ADD, I got here because of my ASD and ADHD.

I somehow managed to discover and utilize my gifts and talents to create a career, or careers, which were both personally rewarding and rewarding to my employers. I did it the hard way, with very little outside assistance. Now, perhaps through my experiences with success, I hope that you will be able to use the information in this guide to help you understand that you too can succeed as an employee by discovering and utilizing not only your gifts and talents, but by also discovering that you can learn to do the difficult things that are needed to get employed and to stay employed. In addition to my contributions to this guide, a synopsis of my life story of struggle to success is featured in the book: Developing Talents by Temple Grandin and Kate Duffy, the updated 2008 edition, Autism Asperger Publishing Co. pages 162-166.

Larry Moody, P.E., BSCE
YOUR JOB SEARCH: GETTING STARTED

Everyone has skills that are needed by someone

Maybe you’re a computer whiz. Maybe you’re good at cooking or cleaning. You might be a talented photographer, or an artist, or a musician. Maybe you like to keep things organized for others, or you like putting things together, or designing things. If you have ASD, you know you have some unique challenges that are just part of who you are. But remember that you also have unique abilities and talents.

Someone out there wants to hire you — for what you know and what you do well

Work teams and company divisions are made up of all different kinds of people. Everyone comes to a job with a set of skills, ideas, habits, temperaments and knowledge. The trick is learning to work for your own success, for the success of everyone on the team, and for your company or organization.

Find your strengths

It’s not always a clear-cut choice when you’re thinking about what you’d like to do in a job or career, whether or not you have ASD. It takes time and planning — maybe even school or a training program — to be ready for a job.
YOUR JOB SEARCH: SEEK ADVICE

Begin by talking with people who care about you. They want to help you find the best job for you. Your parents, siblings, caregivers, teachers, counselors and friends — anyone who has known you for a while — will probably have some thoughtful observations that may help you recognize your talents, even some you’ve never noticed in yourself.

Talk to the people who care about you, and ask them:

- What do I do well? What do I love doing?
- What do I learn most easily?
- What did I learn easily as a child?
- Can I find a job that uses my expertise?
- What makes me focus and feel organized?
- What makes me anxious or worried?
- When am I happy and calm?
- Who are the people I seem to like best, and why do I like them?
- Would I enjoy a job where I sit at a desk, or use the telephone, or stand, or use my muscles?
- What about teamwork? Am I willing to work with others to get a job done, or would I be better off with a job that I do mostly on my own?

This is a time to ask for help and advice. Working with a coach or a counselor who knows your strengths — and your limitations (everyone has them) — can also help you sort through available jobs, and find ones that might be best for you.
YOUR RESUME TELLS YOUR STORY

Most jobs require an applicant to submit a resume, a concise list of facts about you, including:

- Your name, age and address
- What schools you’ve attended, usually from high school to the present
- What you studied or majored in
- What other jobs you’ve had, including volunteer jobs even if they were unpaid
- Your hobbies and interests

Your resume should be typed and stored on a computer, ready to send by email. Print a copy for your file and plan to provide a printed copy when you have your interview.

You might need to create more than one version of your resume, depending on what different employers want to know about you. One company might want one type of information, and another could want something different. Always highlight the skills the employer is looking for, and always mention your strengths.

Most jobs require you to fill out an application form. Sometimes the applications are online at the company’s website. They may also be pre-printed paper forms that you fill out with a pen. Follow the instructions carefully, and then ask someone who knows you well to look over your resume and application before you submit them.
Create a portfolio

When you go to your interview bring examples of your previous work. This portfolio might contain PowerPoint presentations, Excel spreadsheets, diagrams, and reference letters from educators, previous employers, and volunteer representatives. Make sure that what you bring applies to the job you are seeking. The resource page in this booklet (page 13) includes a link to a free e-portfolio web site.

Volunteering and internships

You might want to ask if you can volunteer or intern with an employer before you apply for a job. Volunteering and interning are great ways to learn how an organization works, and where you might fit in best. Remember to include any volunteer or internship work you’ve done for this company in your resume.

Keep any papers you print or receive in the employment folder. Look at them to remind yourself of your progress. Share the contents with anyone who is helping you look for a job. You can be proud of your efforts and your file or folder will remind you of your gifts and talents.

TOOLS FOR EMPLOYEES

- Use a planner and develop a priority guide
- Practice problem-solving strategies with someone
- Establish a system for good hygiene
PREPARING FOR AN INTERVIEW

Your future employer is going to want to interview you to talk about your skills and your interest in the job you’re applying for. It’s a way for the employer to learn more about you, your talents and your strengths, and about what you said on your resume. Take time to prepare for the interview. It might be the best thing you can do to be sure of a great interview, and you’ll impress your future employer. Here are some important things to remember:

**Learn about the employer.** Visit the company’s website, ask for brochures, and become familiar with the products or services they make or provide.

**Map it out.** Know how to get to your interview and plan your route ahead of time. It might even be good to practice getting there. If you need transportation, arrange for it in advance of your interview day.

**Arrive on time or a little early.** Be sure you know exactly where to meet with your interviewer before you go — which building, floor, office or room.

**Try to plan for distractions ahead of time.** If you’re hungry or thirsty or need to use the bathroom you might be thinking about how you feel instead of what the interviewer is asking.

**Practice possible answers to interview questions** with a job coach or another caring person. Many times, interviewers will ask open-ended questions, and knowing what to say ahead of time may be helpful to you.

For example, if the interviewer asks how you handle it when you or someone else makes a mistake, be prepared with an honest answer.

**Practice eye contact and conversation skills.** Employers expect to be treated politely and they want the same for their employees. Practice your smile, saying hello, shaking hands, nodding, sitting across or beside someone, talking about yourself and asking questions about the job.

**If you have decided to disclose that you have ASD** practice answering questions about it. Be prepared to discuss accommodations that would help you be the best possible employee, like being allowed to wear headphones, or having a place to de-stress.

**Hygiene matters.** Ask for advice from your coach or other supportive person about what to wear. When you keep yourself clean and well-dressed, you’re sending a signal that you respect the person you’re talking to, and that you can show up for work looking just as good.
YOUR INTERVIEW

Interviewing can be exciting, or fun, or difficult, or confusing — or all of those things. If you’re stressed that could help you do your best, or it might make you a little fearful. The good news is that the employer wants to talk to you about a job. Just a few more steps and you could have the job you want. Practice these things and keep them in mind when you go to your interview:

- Greet your interviewer with a smile, and offer your hand to shake.
- Introduce yourself with your first and last name.
- Speak clearly in a strong, confident voice.
- Try to avoid answering questions with “yes” or “no” only. Remember your interview practice and give each question some thought as it is asked. Take a breath before you answer if it helps you think more clearly or calmly. Your answers to simple questions should take about 15 seconds; longer questions might take up to two minutes. For example, the interviewer might say, “I see you went to Central High School. What was the best part of high school?” A short answer could be, “I was good in math.”
- If your interviewer asks for more detail after you’ve answered a question, be ready to provide more. For example, if the question is, “What do you like to do in your free time?” a short answer could be, “I like to read mysteries.” Then the interviewer might ask, “What mystery writers do you like?” Think your answers through.
- Don’t ask about pay. That subject usually is discussed at another time. If the interviewer brings the subject up first, however, it’s fine to discuss it and to ask questions.
- If you concentrate better when taking notes, ask if it is OK to take notes. But be sure to continue to make eye contact so your interviewer can see that you hear and understand what’s being said.
- Before you leave your interview ask when you might hear from the company about whether or not you have the job. Will they call you or should you call them? Get the name and contact information of the interviewer so you can send a thank you note.
- Smile, shake hands again, say “thank you,” and be on your way.

NICE TO MEET YOU

Send a hand-written or typed thank you note to the person who interviewed you. That shows the company that you’re serious about the job, and that you are a polite person. Emailing a thank you note is just fine, too.
STARTING THE NEW JOB

Employers must keep things running smoothly and efficiently, and they take care to hire the right people for their jobs. But abilities and good habits are part of any job, and it’s important that you work on them if they’re not what you do best or easily.

- Always be on time and strive for good attendance.
- Engage in appropriate “small talk.”
- Greet people with a smile, eye contact, and a hand shake.
- Ask questions, and know when to ask them.
- Understand the business culture — how to talk to your boss and how to talk with your co-workers.
- Be aware of others’ nonverbal communication.
- Develop the ability to make and keep eye contact while talking with someone.
- Be aware of your own needs, and ask for what you need in your work environment. For example, fluorescent lights may bother or distract you. It would be important to tell your boss that you’d do better with natural light or lamps.
- Know how to control and regulate your behavior, and be able to spot your triggers before they get the best of you.
- Know how and when to adjust your manners to the situation. For example, lunchroom conversation is different from meeting conversation. Telephone voice must often be quieter than your regular conversation voice to avoid disturbing others.
DISCLOSING YOUR ASD

Disclosing your ASD may be important if and when you need a workplace accommodation to do the job well, and to help you stay calm and focused. Ask your job coach or other advisors what they think about disclosure. If you decide to disclose your ASD, brainstorm with them about how to talk to your employer about your disability. It’s best to plan ahead for the conversation about your ASD:

- Be prepared and organized. A script that you read might help you remain calm as you talk about yourself.
- It’s a great idea to take information or literature about ASD when you talk with your employer. Some people know very little about ASD, or don’t understand what it is.
- Be honest about what you need. When you talk about your needs at a scheduled meeting between you and your employer, you’ll be seen as trustworthy and courageous.
- Be sure to talk about your strengths, reminding the employer of why you were hired in the first place.

THE IDEAL EMPLOYEE

- Must know their strengths
- Must have coping skills
- Must be a self-advocate
- Must be able to develop a communication and organizational system
- Must, with the aid of a mentor, work in a safe, confidential environment

MEMORIZE THIS... AND TELL YOURSELF OFTEN

“I was hired for my ability, not my disability”
WORK THROUGH YOUR ASD SENSITIVITIES

Once you’ve been offered a job and accepted it, your next challenge is to learn the job itself, and to understand what will be required of you when you’re working. This is the time when you might notice your own sensitivities, physical or emotional, within the environment of your work place. Think carefully about what would make it easier for you to work well, and then let your boss (or your on-the-job coach, if you have one) know what changes might be beneficial. Things that other people don’t even notice might feel strange or disturbing to people with ASD. There are often simple ways to remove stress triggers and help you stay calm and focused on your tasks.

● Maybe you’re comfortable getting instructions by email or on paper, but uncomfortable when someone tells you the instructions. If you feel that way, speak directly to the person you work for, like a supervisor or foreman. Or ask a job coach to help you.

● If color-coding file folders or binders would make you feel organized, or help you sort through different types of tasks on your job, that’s a very easy change that will help you feel calm and productive.

IDEAS TO HELP

● **Bright lights**: wear tinted glasses or a hat with a brim; replace fluorescent bulbs with LEDs; use flat screen monitors to avoid flickering

● **Sounds**: wear earplugs; listen to music through headphones; have a fan; turn down the ring tone on your phone

● **Smell**: chew peppermint or cinnamon gum; ask co-workers not to use perfumes

● **Visual distractions**: place your desk facing a wall instead of hallway; create a work space that is not in a high-traffic area; take separate breaks away from your team if necessary
Labeling things may help you. Label your desk drawers, file cabinets, locker, or office supplies. Most companies give people name badges to wear, or name plates on their desks, so you’ll have help remembering co-workers’ names.

You could ask for a map of your area, so you can easily find the copy machine, the printer, files, or whatever your job requires.

If fluorescent lights bother you, ask if you could bring your own lamp to put on your desk or wear sunglasses to reduce light.

If someone is wearing perfume or aftershave, and it distracts you, ask politely that they not wear it in the office. Or ask your supervisor to speak to the person for you. Sometimes chewing gum or having mints or candy can make smells less bothersome and help keep you focused.

It may help you to draw things out for yourself — a kind of picture album about your job tasks.

Some people need to doodle while they listen to someone talk. Go ahead and doodle if it helps you concentrate but be sure to alert your boss so he or she knows you’re paying attention.

Wear comfortable clothing. Cut the tags off so you won’t feel scratching at your neck or waist. If you wear a uniform, try to wash it a couple of times before your first day on the job. Sometimes, people with ASD like to buy their clothes at thrift stores or second-hand stores because they feel softer and more comfortable.

Get some exercise during your work day if you can. Try to get fresh air and build up a little speed as you walk to get your heart beating faster and your blood circulating. This helps everyone concentrate better, even if they don’t have ASD. You could invite a co-worker to walk with you.

Most people get angry from time to time at work. Maybe a co-worker has made an error, or you don’t understand what you’re being told. That happens to everyone. Think about what will help you feel calm. Maybe you’ll just walk away. Maybe you’ll listen to a favorite song through your headphones. Sometimes reading can help. Or maybe it helps you to just be alone and quiet for a short time. Talk to your supervisor or job coach about what’s bothering you and brainstorm with him or her to find solutions. You want this job, you worked hard to get it, and it’s important to you that you do your best.
### Jobs for visual thinkers

- Computer programming
- Drafting
- Commercial Art
- Photography
- Equipment Design
- Veterinary Technician
- Automobile mechanic
- Computer repair
- Small appliance repairs
- Handcrafts
- Laboratory technician
- Web page design
- Video game designer
- Building maintenance
- Computer animation

### Job for nonvisual thinkers

- Accounting
- Library science
- Computer programming
- Engineer
- Journalist
- Copy Editor
- Taxi driver
- Inventory control
- Tuning musical instruments
- Laboratory technician
- Bank Teller
- Clerk / filing jobs
- Telemarketing
- Statistician
- Physicist or Mathematician

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**Doing What You Love, Loving What You Do**

Mike loves extreme wrestling. He knows the statistics inside and out. He can tell you heights, weights, match results, schedules, and the entire history of the sport. No one can stump him with a question about this subject. When Mike started looking for his first job, his mom suggested that he call a local extreme wrestling radio broadcaster. The broadcaster was impressed with Mike’s knowledge and focus. Mike volunteered to help him a couple of times to see what the broadcaster did. There was plenty of interesting work for Mike, and soon, he was employed, doing some radio broadcasts, researching online, and keeping files up-to-date. Because of Mike, the broadcaster’s business is growing, and Mike has a great job for himself — working in a small place, in close contact with the boss, learning even more about his favorite sport, and getting paid for it.
Resources

  Resources for employment through support groups, therapy sessions, adult programs: [651.647.1083](tel:651.647.1083)
- Autism Society of America: [www.autism-society.org](http://www.autism-society.org)
- Vocational Rehabilitation Services: [www.PositivelyMinnesota.com/vrs](http://www.PositivelyMinnesota.com/vrs)
- Job Accommodation Network: [http://askjan.org](http://askjan.org)
- Asperger Syndrome Information & Support: [www.aspergersyndrome.org](http://www.aspergersyndrome.org)
- Asperger Syndrome at Work: [www.coultervideo.com](http://www.coultervideo.com)
- Free e-portfolio website: [www.efoliomn.com](http://www.efoliomn.com)
- Minnesota Jobs.com: [www.minnesotajobs.com](http://www.minnesotajobs.com)
- Minnesota Works.net: [www.minnesotaworks.net](http://www.minnesotaworks.net)
- Disability career guide: [www.iseek.org/guide/disabilities/disabilitiesemployment.html](http://www.iseek.org/guide/disabilities/disabilitiesemployment.html)
- Career Builder: [www.careebuilder.com](http://www.careebuilder.com)
- Employment 911: [www.employment911.com](http://www.employment911.com)
- Simply Hired: [www.simplyhired.com](http://www.simplyhired.com)
- JobDig: [www.jobdig.com](http://www.jobdig.com)
- Partners in Policymaking: [www.partnersinpolicymaking.com/](http://www.partnersinpolicymaking.com/)
- Information on Americans with Disabilities ACT: [www.adamn.mcil-mn.org/ada-information](http://www.adamn.mcil-mn.org/ada-information)

Books and DVDs for job seekers with ASD

- *Creative Job Search*, Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development
- *Developing Talents*, Temple Grandin
- *The Unwritten Rules of Social Relationships*, Temple Grandin
- *The Way I See It*, Temple Grandin
- *Thinking in Pictures*, Temple Grandin
- *Business for Aspies*, Ashley Stanford
- *Asperger Syndrome and Employment*, Sarah Hendricks
- *Asperger’s on the Job*, Rudy Simone
- *How to Find Work that Works for People with Asperger Syndrome*, Gail Hawkins
- *So My Client Has Autism*, Dr. Barbara Luskin
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