Disclosing Asperger’s and NLD in the Workplace

Since my coaching practice is focused on career development for adults with Asperger’s Syndrome and Nonverbal Learning Disorder (NLD), clients often ask me whether they should disclose their disability to an employer. My answer is, “it depends.”

Some people advocate full disclosure from the very first job interview while others advise not mentioning the disability unless you’re about to be fired. My approach is to weigh the many factors that affect employment outcomes and work with each client to create a personalized plan. Together, we look at the individual’s job skills, primary challenges, employment history and career. We also consider the nature of certain industries (fast-paced or slow; deadline or quality-driven; etc.) and the culture of a particular company.

Until the day when organizations promote themselves as “Aspie friendly” * the burden falls on individuals to address their challenges in ways that won’t exclude them from the job pool. In a world where supervisors, colleagues and customers rely heavily on social cues to navigate the workday, a person with Asperger’s or NLD must be proactive about

* The prevalence of Asperger’s Syndrome is estimated to be as high as 1 in every 250 people in the United States, and it is this author’s opinion that in several years, awareness of the Asperger’s profile will be as great as awareness of conditions like ADHD and dyslexia.
I. The Americans with Disabilities Act

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities. In the workplace, this means that an employer must provide equal opportunities to qualified individuals in terms of hiring, firing, promotion, compensation, training and development, benefits and other employment practices. A qualified individual is someone who meets the employer’s requirements for education, skills, experience and performance.

Additionally, the Americans with Disabilities Amendments Act (ADAAA) went into effect on January 1, 2009. It changes the way that disability is defined, so the number of people who will qualify as being disabled in the workplace greatly increases. Further, it shifts the focus from whether the employee is disabled to whether an employer meets its obligation to reasonably accommodate a disabled individual.

Employers are compelled under the ADA to make reasonable accommodations for qualified individuals with disabilities. An accommodation is a modification or adjustment that allows the individual to participate in the interviewing process or to perform the essential functions of his or her job. Examples of reasonable accommodations include providing written instructions, allowing the use of headphones to block office noise, a modified training program, flexible scheduling, etc.

Although disclosing affords protection under the ADA, an individual is under no legal obligation to reveal any medical condition, nor can an employer inquire about one.

Disclosure does not guarantee a job offer or continued employment, and proving discrimination can be a costly and time-consuming process. If you believe that you have been discriminated

1 Employees with Asperger Syndrome, Accommodation & Compliance Series, Job Accommodation Network
Challenge 1:
- **anxiety**
  - **Impact on performance:** panics if tasks are not clear; work does not get done
  - **Accommodation:** written instructions; longer training period

Challenge 2:
- **prioritizing tasks**
  - **Impact on performance:** too much time spent on non-critical tasks; important projects are late
  - **Accommodation:** daily meetings with supervisor to review progress and priorities

Challenge 3:
- **weak fine motor skills**
  - **Impact on performance:** important information from team meetings is missed
  - **Accommodation:** use of laptop for note-taking

II. To Disclose or Not to Disclose: That’s the Important Question!

Disclosure can benefit individuals who are currently employed as well as those who want to be. If your challenges are very noticeable or hard to manage during the work day, disclosing can be much more effective than simply hoping that your social and communication problems or organizational difficulties will go unnoticed.

Sometimes accommodation requests can be made without disclosing a disability. Developing a repertoire of explanatory statements may be enough to “neutralize” unexpected behaviors and smooth over misunderstandings (e.g. “I’m hyper-sensitive to office noise and wearing headphones helps me concentrate” or “I have a learning disorder that makes it hard for me to remember verbal instructions”).

There are 3 steps that I use with my coaching clients to help them decide whether or not to disclose.

- **Step one** is to recognize the areas where you have difficulty and how other people perceive you. Accurate or not, people use their perceptions to draw conclusions about you. For instance, most “neurotypicals” will assume that lack of eye contact indicates disinterest or rudeness on your part. If you understand this erroneous perception you can take steps to correct it in the future.

Write down what you know your limitations to be and solicit feedback from people you trust, such as a friendly co-worker, coach, family member or friend. When approaching others explain why their assistance is being sought. You might say, “I’m working with a job coach and wonder what you think I can do to improve my communication at work.” Or, “What areas do you think I need to work on to make a better impression at interviews?”

- **Step two** is to review your completed list and identify the problem areas that specifically pertain to your job performance or your ability to interview successfully. Remove items that aren’t relevant to work. An employer does not need to know, for example, that you have severe tactile sensitivities if the problem is solved by your wardrobe choices, or that you’re so exhausted from people contact during the day that you spend your evenings home alone.

Write down how each challenge impacts your work performance and what accommodation is needed. Now you will have a list that includes challenges, impact on performance and accommodation needs as in the following examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge 1:</th>
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<th>Accommodation:</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<tr>
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The term “neurotypical” is widely used in the Asperger’s community to refer to people with normal neurological development.
• **Step three** in the disclosure decision process is to review your list and decide whether your accommodation needs can be met with a general request or whether you need to formally disclose your disability.

It is a good idea to get some help with this step because so much can depend on the nature of your job and the particular company you work for. If you sit in front of a computer all day, for example, difficulty making small talk can probably be explained to colleagues as a quirk (“Sometimes I get so focused on work that I don’t notice when people stop by to say hello”). However, if you interact frequently with customers or co-workers, social skills become much more important and disclosing your disability may prevent serious misunderstandings.

### III. Disclose in a Solution-Focused Way

If you make the decision to disclose your disability, it is critical to explain to your employer how you believe that your challenges can be resolved. Saying something like, “I have Asperger’s Syndrome and can’t multi-task” is not a good approach because it puts the burden on the employer to find a solution. If you are proactive in suggesting reasonable accommodations there is a greater likelihood that your employer will implement them.

Keep your disclosure statement short, simple and to the point. Do not go into a long explanation of the history of Asperger’s Syndrome or NLD, current scientific theories about cause, or all of the ways that someone can be affected. Instead, summarize the condition in 1 or 2 sentences, state your challenges and explain how you believe that specific accommodations will address them. If possible, offset personal weaknesses with strengths.

For example, Andy explained, “I have a neurobiological condition called Asperger’s Syndrome that makes it hard for me to remember verbal instructions. I need written instructions to learn the proper procedure.” Kelly, who has Nonverbal Learning Disorder, said, “NLD is like having dyslexia when it comes to remembering times and dates. I need someone to review my appointments with me every morning and help me schedule the week.”

Offer your supervisor and human resources representative a brief article that describes Asperger’s or NLD. Some of my clients have used my **Employer’s Guide to Asperger’s Syndrome** when they disclose (to request a free copy, visit my web site at www.ForwardMotion.info).

Remember that your accommodation request must be “reasonable” which means realistic to implement without causing an employer undo hardship. It is not realistic or reasonable, for example, to expect an employer to teach you basic math or computer skills, overhaul an entire system on your behalf or devote excessive hours to supervision or training.

It is a good idea to disclose to your human resources representative even if you have disclosed to your supervisor. The human resources department is typically responsible for making sure that a company is complying with employment laws, and this way you’re assured that your disability is “on the record.”

### IV. When To Disclose

Timing is another important aspect of your disclosure strategy and there are pros and cons at each stage of the employment cycle.

**Disclosing in your cover letter** when submitting a resume or on a job application is usually not wise because it makes it very easy for your resume to land in the “no” pile. The purpose of a resume is to highlight your skills, experience and qualifications and win you an interview. In some cases, however, your disability offers an advantage so it can work in your favor to mention it right away. An example is if you are applying for a job at an Asperger’s association.

**Disclosing during interviews** is risky because it can focus attention on potential problems before you’ve had the opportunity to demonstrate what you bring to the organization. If your challenges are so noticeable that not offering an explanation will automatically disqualify you, then mentioning your disability may be the best option.

If by the second or third interview you have concerns about your ability to meet performance expectations, disclosing can prevent problems later on. Alternately, you can mention a particular challenge without revealing your Asperger’s or NLD. One client says,
During her interview, Ann addressed forgetting to make eye contact and to smile by saying, “You’ve probably noticed that I don’t show a lot of emotion – that’s because of the Asperger’s Syndrome. However I am very enthusiastic about this position and brought a summary of successful projects to tell you about.” Ann was hired on a 3-month trial basis.

Even though Dan’s technical skills are outstanding, he has a long history of job losses and decided to try a new approach after his latest termination. He identified his problem areas and accommodation needs. Then, after receiving a verbal job offer (but before signing an employment agreement) Dan told his would-be manager that he has Asperger’s Syndrome. He described how Asperger’s affects his ability to pick up on body language and how he can sometimes appear rude to people without meaning to be. Next he mentioned some of his executive function difficulties, pointing out that he has a hard time estimating how long a project will take to complete and needs lots of notes and check lists to manage projects.

Now his supervisor understands not to take his social gaffes personally, and that Dan requires more direction and supervision on certain aspects of his job.

Allan, on the other hand, had been in his job for eight weeks when his supervisor raised several behavior and performance issues. Allan went to his human resources department and disclosed his Asperger’s Syndrome, which obligated the company (under the Americans with Disabilities Act) to work with him on accommodations. Allan also decided to retain me, as his coach, to meet with his employer to answer questions about Asperger’s Syndrome, Allan’s particular challenges and how Allan’s supervisors can best work with him.

Instead of allowing the situation to escalate to a formal disciplinary action, Allan sought assistance early on and now there is a proactive plan in place for addressing his needs and problem areas.

V. Examples of Disclosure Strategies

Following are examples of disclosure strategies used by four of my coaching clients who were in various stages of the employment cycle. They illustrate the importance of a “custom-crafted” approach that factors in an individual’s abilities, work experience, career demands and the company culture. To protect client confidentiality, identifying details have been changed and in one example a composite has been used.

Ann defied conventional wisdom by disclosing her Asperger’s Syndrome in her cover letter. However she was referred to the job by a networking contact who, with Ann’s permission, told the hiring manager that Ann has Asperger’s Syndrome. Ann mentioned her disability briefly and in a positive light. Her cover letter read in part, “Please be assured that my disability would not interfere with my ability to do this job, and in some ways it would actually be an asset. I am very reliable and on-task, and I am driven to do an extremely good job. I urge you to speak with my former supervisor…”

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A final example is Todd who was at a crisis point. Employed in a
director-level job for two years, his literal interpretation of instructions
and difficulty seeing the big picture were frustrating his colleagues.
Furthermore, his supervisor expected him to assume “a leadership role”
which was completely bewildering to Todd. When he initially
contacted me, Todd had been given two weeks to improve his per-
formance, which essentially meant that he was about to be fired.

Todd gave his supervisor and human resources manager a copy of
The Employer’s Guide to Asperger’s Syndrome* in which he noted his
particular problem areas. In his coaching sessions we defined his
accommodation needs which he then submitted to human
resources. Over the next three months, Todd, his manager and
human resources representative worked out accommodations and
clear performance expectations. Then an opportunity arose for
Todd (at his own request) to give up his director role and become
a senior manager instead. The new position allows him to concen-
trate on his considerable technical ability and off-load the trouble-
some “leadership” and people-management duties.

VI. Final Thoughts

A large part of job success depends on choosing a career that is a
good match for your particular talents, interests and skills. The
work environment is also important, especially for people with
Asperger’s and NLD. Sometimes people discover after several job
losses that a particular career or industry simply isn’t suited to
their abilities. Donna, for example, realized that jobs in early child-
hood education required levels of interpersonal communication
and multi-taking that she simply cannot manage. Michael, an
experienced technical professional, discovered that he is not able
to work fast enough to meet deadlines in high pressured start-up
companies, but that he can transfer his skills to more relaxed set-
tings in established corporations.

If you have experienced multiple job losses, or been on lots of
inter-views without receiving any job offers, do not get discour-
aged. Instead, reassess your career path, job skills and job readi-
ness or your interviewing techniques. Be willing to try a different
strategy.

If you disclose your disability and still lose your job, treat it as a
learning experience. Ask the employer for specific feedback on
areas that you need to improve. Inquire about whether there are
other jobs in the company that are a better fit. Research other
industries or professions where you can transfer your skills. For
some individuals, self-employment is the best option and more
than one person with Asperger’s Syndrome has turned a special
interest into a profitable business.

Finally, remember that with determination and practice, virtually
everyone can learn new skills, gain insight into their strengths and
limitations and improve their personal presentation, all of which
increase the odds of finding satisfying employment.

ABOUT BARBARA BISSONNETTE AND
FORWARD MOTION COACHING

Barbara Bissonnette is a certified coach and the Principal of
Forward Motion Coaching. She specializes in career development
coaching and advocacy services for individuals with Asperger’s
Syndrome and Nonverbal Learning Disorder. She also consults
with employers so that they can utilize the skills of individuals
with social, communication and executive function challenges.

Prior to coaching Barbara spent more than 20 in business, most
recently as Vice President of Marketing and Sales for an informa-
tion services firm. In addition to first-hand experience hiring and
managing people at all levels, she understands the challenges of
Asperger’s and NLD and focuses on practical strategies for
employment success.

Barbara is the author of The Employer’s Guide Asperger’s Syndrome;
Workplace Disclosure; Strategies for Individuals with Asperger’s
Syndrome and NLD; Asperger’s Syndrome, NLD and Employment: 10
Strategies for Success; and publishes the monthly Asperger’s & NLD

* You can request a free copy of this guide by visiting the Forward Motion Coaching web
site at www.ForwardMotion.info or sending an email to ForwardMotion@charter.net.
Career Letter. All are available at no charge by visiting the Forward Motion Coaching Web site at www.ForwardMotion.info.

Barbara earned a graduate certificate in Executive Coaching from the Massachusetts School Professional Psychology and is certified by Institute for Professional Empowerment Coaching.

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In-person coaching sessions are available in Central and Eastern Massachusetts, and telephone coaching is available nationwide.

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**SOURCES**


*Developing Talents: Careers for Individuals with Asperger Syndrome and High-Functioning Autism*, by Temple Grandin and Kate Duffy, © 2004 Autism Asperger Publishing Company