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Autism no reason to be jobless

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Too often, people suffering from autism struggle to find their place in society. Despite the stigma many have the skills to be an asset to a work place. In Switzerland this potential is recognised by an IT company that creates a special work environment for autistic employees. (1579 Words) -
By Yvonne Kunz



Photo: Miriam Künzli.

Trams glide smoothly and almost inaudibly on their hard rubber tyres. They are half the size they usually are and you don't have to stand. Before you can get on, you have to switch off your mobile phone; free newspapers and flyers are forbidden, even stops aren't announced through the loudspeaker. There are thick carpets on the floor and the windows are tinted. Advertising billboards are nowhere to be seen; even luminous advertising and glaring company logos are gone. Street lights are dimmed down. Fronts of houses are kept simple and light.

People walking around have something on the soles of the shoes to dim the noise. It's quiet like in winter, when a covering of snow deadens the noise of the city and blankets the small lively areas.

People with autism or Aspergers syndrome would feel at home in a town like this. An environment without glare, unimposing and with top amenities, but of course this world is just a dream. For Susan Conza it is a big challenge just to get from her home to the office. Conza is the founder and executive director of Aspergers Informatics, a company specialising in web design and software testing. For her, using public transport is like standing next to a speaker in a loud disco, while someone's drilling the ground open with a jackhammer and screaming in her ear, as though everything's a constant strobe light. When it comes to sensory overload - another form of torture - people suffering from Aspergers syndrome have to learn how to live, as they call it or even better, learning to live.

Communication according to the book

Selectively searching for logic, they perceive the world differently to "neurotypical people", that's how they refer to people who don't have Aspergers syndrome. Their attention is atomised by details, so that's why Susan can't just get behind the wheel every morning. She explains it with the following analogy: "if a person who doesn't have Aspergers steps out of the house onto the street and a car comes around the corner, this person will see the car coming and jump out of the way. If a person with Aspergers steps out of the house, onto the street and a car comes around the corner, this person will only see the car registration number, the track marks on the ground, the billboard advert on the other side of the street, and will keep standing where they are."

Since 1996, this is the first time that Aspergers syndrome has been internationally certified and diagnosed as an illness by the World Health Organisation (WHO). In Switzerland it has been calculated that an estimated 50,000 people affected by autism make up 50% of disability benefit claims. So far it's inconclusive as to whether the condition is considered an illness or as a normal variant of human data processing.

As well as sensory over sensitivity, people with Aspergers have certain difficulties with social relationships. Interpersonal relationships don't develop intuitively; the social surroundings have to be appropriate for people with Aspergers. Some succeed, others don't at all.

Like most people with Aspergers, as a child, Susan didn't learn how to speak for a long time. That's why she started to internalise methods of communication in non-fiction books very early. Today she's able to skilfully and naturally deal with people who don't have Aspergers, and it doesn't depend on which ability of concentration she's using. The educated economic computer scientist perceives her counterpart's face only if she's asked. Nevertheless, she wouldn't be able to recognise it again on the street. She's learnt which face means what by heart and she's learned when to smile and when best not to.

She's created a sort of mental lexicon from scraps of conversation to be able to make daily small talk. "If the name Blocher comes to mind, then I'll know, politically, he's not my kind of thing, but I find his rhetoric brilliant. She's memorised large selections of sets of information. "In the meantime I've learnt

that people don't like talking about certain topics such as religion or politics" she notes, laughing. She has come a long way in the discipline of communication, because before Susan founded the Asperger informatics company, she worked as an executive consultant in the neurotypical world.

Thinking literally

"That was very difficult", she says looking back, when she decided to found Aspergers informatics in 2008. The web and software company mainly deals with people with Aspergers syndrome, because "here, their weaknesses are turned into strengths" says co-firm owner and person responsible, Isabela Ivankovic. Next to Susan, she's the authorised representative who assists with administration; she's the only person in the group of five who doesn't have Aspergers. "Selective perception is very important when programming as well as attention to detail and the need for perfection, we think literally."

The business reveals the huge potential of people with Aspergers syndrome in suitable environment. In the low sensory office, the staff can sink into their own world, which pleases them. Computer programmes are predictable and are in a closed system, "logic creates security" Susan explains, like computers, people with Aspergers don't understand double meanings and metaphors require a lot of effort. Once, Susan read the headline, "Blocher (Christoph Blocher, Federal Councillor, Swiss politician) shot", "I had to read it for a while until I understood that it was meant in a metaphorical sense." However, if there's no room for interpretation, logic is questioned, people with Aspergers start to play with their intuition paradoxically. People with Aspergers or autism don't just see mistakes in the computer code, they sense them.

Job interview without making eye contact

Asperger informatics provides website building, web design and software testing. The company's area of expertise lies in user-friendly analysis and accessible websites. On this occasion, it's about making websites accessible for people with disabilities of all kinds. Part of the work which is taken into consideration is the sensitivity of the topic, that colour blind people have special requirements or that older people need websites to be displayed in a bigger font, has only been noticed up to now. People with Aspergers who are dependent on definite representations for the purpose of reducing stimuli localise weaknesses like this quickly and contribute to the fact that intelligibility is being improved for everyone.

In the past, in the first year of its operation, the company - the only of its kind in Switzerland- received funds from institutions, generating significant revenue from its own resources. The business is doing well. You can tell that Susan has ambition, but she doesn't want to know about disability bonuses. Unsolicited applications are received almost everyday. Slightly different rules apply to the hiring process than in the neurotypical world, because many people with Aspergers can't provide any vocational qualifications - since they often had academic problems because of their disorder and were assigned to smaller classes despite having normal or even above average intelligence. Similarly, interview technique for people who don't have Aspergers doesn't apply to people with Aspergers because you cannot expect steady eye contact or eloquence from

somebody with Aspergers syndrome. Therefore Asperger informatics focuses on the person, and above all, their professional skills in the centre during the hiring process. To get a general idea of these two things, the candidate is required to complete a trial week.

Typically Aspergers

However, noise absorbing carpets, walls with no pictures on them and neat, tidy office cupboards aren't enough to get maximum efficiency from people with Aspergers. Communication is facilitated only by email from desk to desk, which provides some relief, but it doesn't ensure everything runs like clockwork. Staff meetings take place every week and complex tasks are divided into smaller tasks, lists are created and are then carried out exactly.

What's more, continual social training is being carried out so that everything at this small software company won't seem too strange for people who don't have Aspergers. Susan remembers one particularly curious staff member, who used to rush to the door every time the doorbell rang and yank it open; then all the visitors would stare at him expressionlessly. Remembering funny anecdotes about typical Aspergers behaviour gets the two business partners going, there's still a lot to be told. Conza and Ivankovic giggle and confirm their intent to make a folder and collect everyday episodes like this in the office. Even boss Conza isn't immune from blunders. She explains how she was once supposed to be interviewing an apprentice several months ago but realised she actually had a telecom company representative in front of her. She asked herself with a laugh, what the good man thought of the whole situation.

Conversely, Susan enjoys marvelling at people who don't have Aspergers' behaviour, preferably from in front of the television, where she doesn't have to interact with them. She likes watching talk shows. "It's funny watching these people, what questions and problems they deal with." She even likes casting shows, but she'd rather be in their league, "Autistic superstars" on the British broadcaster, BBC. There, super-talented autistic people step into the field of music and not, as often in the case with people who don't have Aspergers, with particularly pronounced vanity. Her favourite hobby is shared by many people with Aspergers; reading, reading and then reading again, because, "we just can't stop thinking."

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