

Probing Question: Can autistic people succeed at work?

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People with autism or Asperger Syndrome may excel in computer-related tasks.
Credit Brookdale Care Home

The actress Claire Danes, usually so expressive and radiant, looks blank and awkward. The scene is an HBO movie in which Danes plays Temple Grandin, an autistic woman who became an acclaimed animal behavior expert and cattle-chute designer. In real life, Grandin says that autism makes social interactions difficult, but gives her special abilities that make her better at her job.

Can autistic people succeed in the workplace?

Yes, with help, says Kimberly Schreck, an associate professor of psychology at Penn State. She develops educational programs for children with autism, and her goals include teaching them the skills they need for future employment.

At least 1 in 110 American children have an autism disorder, according to the Centers for Disease Control. "The rapidly growing numbers of children diagnosed with an [autism spectrum disorder](#) represent a significant proportion of the future population and work force," says Schreck. Preparing them now means "a large number of these potential workers can successfully contribute to society and the workplace, rather than requiring taxpayer support into adulthood." The key, Schreck notes, is early intervention with a combination of applied behavior analysis, or ABA, and educational and vocational training. ABA teaches autistic children the verbal, motor, and social skills needed to function in society. ABA specialists figure out how an autistic child can learn best by monitoring the child's behavior, eliminating conditions or objects that trigger unwanted behavior, and rewarding desired actions.

The concept of training people with autism to be valued employees is a growing trend in business. Last year, the Chicago non-profit company Aspiritech began training people with autism to be software testers, based on their exceptional ability to perform repetitive tasks without losing focus. "People on the autism spectrum have a variety of skills, depending on the individual," says Schreck. "However, in general, people with Asperger Syndrome have normal to above normal intelligence; are able to communicate; and have strengths in completing concrete, logical tasks. People with more severe autism would probably be more successful with clearly delineated tasks and routines. Many of the autistic adolescents that I have worked with could complete assembly, sorting, and organizational tasks."

Still, getting people with autism to succeed professionally takes care and training, for both the employee and the employer, she explains. The potential employer has to be ready for challenges in communication, as people with autism need especially straightforward instructions, and may have difficulty understanding slang, jokes, and cultural differences. Physically, people with autism may have different ideas about personal

space. "Unusual behaviors such as hand flapping and rocking may cause difficulties in employment involving the public," says Schreck.

But author, speaker, and Colorado State University professor Temple Grandin shows that excelling in demanding careers is possible for those with [autism](#). After portraying Grandin on film, Claire Danes remarked "She has strengths that she really exploits... she's a real success by anyone's standards."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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